THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL FOR CARED FOR CHILDREN: AN EXPLORATION OF ITS CURRENT AND FUTURE ROLE IN RAISING PUPILS' ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT AND PROMOTING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities

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REBECCA JANE SIMPSON

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
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<th>Definition</th>
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<td>CWDC</td>
<td>Children’s Workforce Development Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCSF</td>
<td>Department for Children, Schools and Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECP</td>
<td>Division for Child and Educational Psychologists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfEE</td>
<td>Department for Education and Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoH</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMSO</td>
<td>Her Majesty’s Stationery Office</td>
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</table>
Abstract

The University of Manchester
Rebecca Jane Simpson
Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

The virtual school for cared for children: An exploration of its current and future role in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing

2012

It has long been recognised that cared for children can be at a disadvantage in terms of their educational experiences and outcomes (Comfort, 2007). The Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006) suggested that although educational outcomes for cared for children had improved, there was still a gap between the outcomes for cared for children and those of the wider school population. A number of suggestions to narrow this gap were proposed, including the introduction of a virtual school head who would be responsible for driving up the performance of schools in relation to cared for children (DFES, 2006). In 2009 the role of the designated teacher of cared for children became statutory (DCSF, 2009a) with the aim of promoting the educational achievement of cared for children.

This thesis aimed to explore the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children in one local authority, using a mixed methods research design. The current role was established through semi-structured interviews with members of the virtual school team and surveying designated teachers using a questionnaire. The future role was explored through an appreciative inquiry session involving three members of the virtual school and one designated teacher. Appreciative inquiry seeks out what is already working in an organisation and builds on this success (Carter, 2006). There are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry in educational research regarding vulnerable groups (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b), particularly within a mixed methods approach.

Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The majority of designated teachers suggested that they were confident in their role. Existing support from the virtual school included individual casework, funding, training, support during placement breakdowns and emotional support for the designated teacher. Additional support was requested for post-16 cared for children and adopted children. Virtual school staff reported increased funding, the virtual school head position and virtual school branding, the raised profile of cared for children and relationships as facilitative to their work. Barriers included cared for children’s experiences, staff knowledge and experience and low expectations for cared for children. It was perceived the virtual school model was “working”; advantages over previous models included “sitting” in education, access to senior meetings to raise the profile of cared for children’s needs and being a “bridge” between social care and education. Priorities for the future role of this virtual school included “being bold”, developing early years and post-16 provision, increased enrichment opportunities and widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups such as adopted children, child protection cases and children in need. Implications for educational psychology practice and future research are considered.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, cared for children, designated teacher, educational psychology, looked after children, virtual school.
Declaration

It is declared that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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I would like to express my appreciation towards the educational psychology team within my local authority for both your personal and academic support at every stage of my journey as a trainee educational psychologist; I could not have had a more supportive experience. The support and enthusiasm of my supervisor Timothy Watson, at every stage of my research is greatly appreciated.

It would not have been possible to complete this piece of research without the support and dedication of the virtual school staff and the designated teachers within my local authority. Your dedication and passion in supporting the needs of cared for children and willingness to participate in my research made the process smooth and enjoyable; I hope that the resulting analysis is of use to you as a team and highlights the positive contributions you are making to the lives of cared for children in the local authority.

I would like to thank my family for their constant love, support and encouragement during my journey in training to be an educational psychologist. Special thanks to my Mum, Cheryl, for proof reading my thesis. I would also like to thank my friends for their support during this journey, especially Lindsay Kay, Clare Nuttall and Richard Skelton who have experienced the same journey and provided me with invaluable academic, social and emotional support and encouragement throughout.
1. Introduction

1.1 Thesis Rationale

The researcher completed this thesis as part of their training to become an educational psychologist. Prior to commencing the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology, the researcher was employed as a primary school teacher and a special school teacher. During this time a small number of cared for children were taught, which led to the researcher developing an initial interest in the educational experiences and outcomes of cared for children. Upon being appointed as a trainee educational psychologist in the local authority in which the research took place, the researcher was appointed a supervisor who was the senior specialist educational psychologist for cared for children. As part of the researcher’s induction to the local authority, time was spent with the virtual school team. This fuelled the researcher’s interest in the academic and emotional needs of cared for children, and the researcher proposed carrying out some research around the current and future role of the virtual school in raising the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children, and promoting their emotional wellbeing.

The virtual school head role was proposed in the Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006) with the aim of narrowing the gap between the educational outcomes for cared for children and the wider school population. The role was piloted between 2007 and 2009 in 11 local authorities, and evaluated by Berridge, Henry, Jackson and Turney (2009) who reported “it was generally perceived that the pilot VSHs [virtual school heads] had successfully raised the priority of educating looked after children.” (p.3). A virtual school head was appointed within the researcher’s local authority in September 2010; staff who had previously been working to promote the needs of cared for children in other contexts within the local authority joined the “virtual school team”. Due to the contemporary nature of the virtual school model, there is limited literature regarding the role and functioning of the virtual school. Berridge et al. (2009) sought to establish the range of activities undertaken by virtual school heads, awareness of the role, educational outcomes for cared for children and identify examples of “good practice”. The pilot study focused solely on the role of the virtual school head; the present piece of research sought to explore the functioning of a virtual school staff team, which included educational consultants, a senior educational psychologist, a
personal education plan coordinator and an education liaison officer. In addition, the researcher sought to establish the perceived levels of confidence of designated teachers in supporting the needs of cared for children, support they had received from the virtual school and additional support that would be of benefit. In the evaluative study, Berridge et al. (2009) sought designated teacher’s “awareness” and “experience” of the virtual school head, but no measures of their confidence or support required were taken. As there was a history of good practice in supporting the needs of cared for children in the research local authority, this piece of research sought to establish the advantages of the virtual school model over previous models of service delivery and explore what the future role of the virtual school might entail.

As there was limited knowledge of the functioning of virtual schools, the researcher sought to explore the current and future role of one virtual school in order to build a rich picture of its functioning. Mixed methods research design was employed which enabled the researcher to employ both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Within this design, the researcher employed appreciative inquiry which seeks to explore and actively search out what is good and working in an organisation and then build on this success. The researcher was interested in this affirmative approach and felt that it was congruent with the enthusiasm and experience of the virtual school team. Appreciative inquiry originated within organisational and health care settings and there are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry in educational settings regarding the needs of vulnerable children such as cared for children (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b), particularly within a mixed methods research design.

1.2 Aims of the Research
Following collaborative discussions with the virtual school team, the researcher proposed a piece of research to explore the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children, in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting their emotional wellbeing. The research also aimed to provide an example of the use of appreciative inquiry within mixed methods educational research design, regarding the needs of a vulnerable group, cared for children.
1.3 Research Questions

In order to address these research aims, the following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

1.4 Terminology

Throughout this thesis the term “cared for children” will be used to describe children and young people who are subject to care orders or voluntarily accommodated. The term cared for children is commonly used within the local authority in which the researcher carried out this research. It was introduced following consultation with children and young people in care in the local authority, regarding how they would like to be addressed by the adults they work with. A variety of terms are used to refer to cared for children as described in Appendix A.

1.5 Thesis Overview

An overview of the thesis is presented in table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **One** | **INTRODUCTION** In chapter one the researcher provides an overview of the thesis. This comprises of the rationale for the research, research aims and research questions. The researcher provides an outline of the structure of the thesis and describes the use of the term “cared for children”.
| **Two** | **LITERATURE REVIEW** In chapter two the researcher provides a review of the literature regarding the needs of cared for children and outcomes that may be experienced by cared for children. Reference is made to the role of the designated teacher and the virtual school model for promoting positive outcomes for cared for children.
| **Three** | **METHODOLOGY** In chapter three a mixed methods research design utilising a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry is described. Data analysis methods (descriptive statistics and thematic analysis) are described. Reference is made to participant recruitment, the pilot study and ethical considerations.
| **Four** | **RESULTS** In chapter four the analysis of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session is presented with reference to the four research questions.
| **Five** | **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS** In chapter five the key themes identified in chapter four are discussed and considered in relation to the literature presented in chapter two and the aims of the thesis as detailed in chapter one. Reference to the limitations of the research and the implication of the research for the virtual school and educational psychologists is considered, along with future areas for research.
| **Six** | **REFERENCES** In chapter six references are presented.
| **Seven** | **APPENDICES** In chapter seven Appendices are presented. |
2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the researcher will review and analyse the literature in relation to cared for children. An overview of government policy and initiatives regarding this vulnerable group of children and young people will be presented, including the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004) and the Care Matters agenda (DFES, 2006). Terminology will be defined and statistics regarding the cared for population and outcomes for cared for children will be presented. The gap between cared for children and the wider school population will be discussed, with considerations as to why this gap may exist, and what is being done to narrow the gap.

The Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004) focus on integrated working and the lead professional role will be discussed, alongside the concept of the corporate parent. Specific policies and interventions including the virtual school model, the role of the designated teacher, personal education plans and one-to-one tuition will be explored in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the reviewed literature, the aims of the research, research questions and the expected contribution to knowledge this piece of research will provide.

2.2 Review Strategy

The researcher engaged in a systematic literature review in order to access literature relating to cared for children. A number of data bases with full-text holdings were searched; Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Educational Resource Information Centre (ERIC), Psychinfo, PubMed and Science Direct. An initial full search was carried out in April 2011, with follow up searches in October 2011 and March 2012. Table 2 contains the search terms entered in order to access literature; the Boolean operator “AND” was used to combine search terms. The following terms were also individually input into the databases but did not produce any relevant results; “designated teacher”, “looked after children’s educational service” and “virtual school”.
Table 2: Literature search terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search term one</th>
<th>Boolean operator</th>
<th>Search term two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>looked after children</td>
<td>AND</td>
<td>attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cared for children</td>
<td></td>
<td>achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children in care</td>
<td></td>
<td>education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children in public care</td>
<td></td>
<td>success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foster children</td>
<td></td>
<td>emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corporate parent</td>
<td></td>
<td>wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mental health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mental wellbeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher considered articles if they were from a peer reviewed journal and undertaken in the English language. Studies from 2000 onwards were preferred, but relevant older studies were included to provide a breadth of information. Following the systematic literature review the researcher harvested additional references from the reference sections of the selected documents.

The researcher used the search terms described in table 2 to search the Department for Education’s Publication website in 2011 and 2012. The local authority’s website was searched, as was The National Archive in order to access documents from previous government organisations, such as the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). As suggested by Berridge (2012), these are interesting times for educational researchers due to a recent change in government with the 2010 election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government which led to the formation of the Department for Education (DfE). The researcher recognises that documents produced by governments will reflect political polices and that in such documents researchers can be constrained by the aims of the research project.

The search terms in table 2 were input into the search engines “Google” and “Google Scholar” which provided a number of documents and service protocols from local authorities nationwide. As these documents were not peer reviewed, careful consideration of their quality and accuracy was made before they were included in this
literature review. Members of the virtual school staff and the senior specialist educational psychologist were also able to provide the researcher with unpublished, service protocols which were relevant to the aims of the research.

2.3 The Government Agenda Regarding the Needs of Cared for Children

As early as the 1960s it was indicated that cared for children performed poorly at school compared to the wider school population (Fergusson, 1966; Pringle, 1965). Further research confirmed these findings (DfEE & Department of Health (DoH), 2000; Essen, Lambert & Head, 1976; The Social Services Inspectorate & The Office for Standards in Education (1995); The Utting report (1991) & Wagner, 1988). A highly significant piece of legislation was The Children Act (1989, amended by the Children Act 2004) which strived to ensure that local authorities understood it was their duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who were looked after by them. The Children Act (1989) stated this “included in particular a duty to promote the child’s educational achievement.”(Section 22 (3) (a)). Local authorities are required to avoid disruption to the child’s education or training wherever possible.

In the last 10 to 15 years, cared for children appear to have been the focus of a number of government initiatives. The DfEE (2000) suggested that the needs of cared for children remain at the centre of government initiatives and legislative changes to transform the quality of children’s services. In 2003 the government published their vision for the future of children’s services; The Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004), which was legislated through the Children Act (2004). The proposed Every Child Matters vision suggested that children’s services should be reshaped to help all children and young people achieve the following outcomes in life:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic wellbeing (DfES, 2004)

It was recognised that whilst universal services are sufficient to enable most children and young people to meet the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES,
2004), some vulnerable groups of children and young people may require additional support to help them achieve their potential. Cared for children are considered to be a vulnerable group and it has long been recognised that cared for children are often disadvantaged in terms of their educational experience and outcomes (Comfort, 2007). It has been suggested that the difficulties experienced by cared for children represent the potential difficulties all children experience, but it is easier for cared for children to “fall through the cracks” (personal correspondence with the local authority’s principal manager for cared for children, 2011). This is congruent with Hare and Bullock (2006) who suggest “Many non-looked after children in the UK also have poor outcomes and it may be the case that the visibility of those who are looked after merely highlights the wider problems faced by all deprived children.” (p.29).

Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (DfES, 2006) and the resulting Care Matters: Time for Change (DfES, 2007) were significant pieces of legislation which clearly identified the needs of cared for children. Care Matters (DfES, 2006) set out to establish the best way to care for, cared for children and started with the premise that:

... our goals for children in care should be exactly the same as our goals for our own children; we want their childhoods to be secure, healthy and enjoyable – rich and valuable in themselves as well as providing stable foundations for the rest of their lives. (p. 3).

The Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006) suggested that although outcomes for cared for children had improved, there still remains a significant gap between the outcomes of cared for children and the wider school population. Within this paper the case for reform was set out, along with a proposed package of changes to promote more positive outcomes for cared for children. These changes included developing the role of the corporate parent, increasing the stability of care placements, and ensuring that cared for children are educated in “good” schools and supported to achieve within education. The Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006) made a number of proposals (see pages 8-9 of The Care Matters Green Paper for further details); key to this piece of
research was the proposed introduction of a “virtual head teacher” who would be responsible for driving up the performance of schools in relation to children in care.

Successive governments carried out research and developed guidance regarding promoting positive outcomes for cared for children. It is hoped that these initiative can raise the educational achievement and future prospects of cared for children (DfES, 2007). The DCSF (2010a) stated “Looked after children have a right to expect the outcomes we want for every child – that they should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution to society and achieve economic well-being” (p.3).

Although there have been recent changes in national government leadership, the needs of cared for children have remained at the centre of government initiatives and legislation. In the DfE’s (2011a) “Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability”, it was recognised that cared for children were particularly vulnerable and reported that cared for children are three and a half times more likely to have a special educational need than the wider school population.

The researcher will now provide a definition of cared for children and provide some statistics regarding cared for children, before discussing the academic attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing of cared for children and interventions put in place to support the needs of cared for children.

2.4 Terminology and a Definition of Cared for Children

Throughout this piece of research the term “cared for children” will be used to describe children and young people who are subject to care orders or voluntarily accommodated. As described in section 1.4, the term is commonly used within the local authority in which the researcher carried out this research, following consultation with children and young people. A variety of terms are used in reference to cared for children, as described in Appendix A.

Under the Children Act (1989) a child is looked after by a local authority if they are provided with accommodation for more than 24 hours by the local authority. They include children who are accommodated by voluntary agreement with their parents (Section 20), children who are the subject of a care order (Section 31) or an interim
care order (Section 38) and children who are the subject of an emergency care order for their own protection (Section 44).

2.5 Statistics Regarding Cared for Children

The Statistical First Release (DfE, 2011a) for the year ending 31st March 2011 revealed that there were 65,520 children looked after at this time. This represented an increase of 2% from 2010 and an increase of 9% from 2007. Between 1st April 2010 and 31st March 2011 an astonishing 90,920 children and young people spent at least 24 hours in care. In the local authority in which this research was carried out, 59 in every 10,000 children were in care at 31st March 2011, which is average for all of England (mean = 59) and below average for the local government region office (mean = 77) (DfE, 2011a).

Cared for children come into the care system for a variety of reasons, with neglect and abuse being the largest category (62%). Figure 1 shows the reasons why cared for children were in the care system for the year ending 31st March 2011 (DfE, 2011a).

![Pie chart showing category of need for all children looked after at 31st March 2011](image)

**Figure 1: Pie chart to show category of need**
The legal status of the 65,520 cared for children varied as demonstrated in figure 2. The majority of cared for children were under a full (39%) or interim care order (21%).

![Pie chart showing legal status of cared for children]

**Figure 2: Pie chart to show legal status of cared for children**

Just over half of all cared for children were male (56%, with 44% female). The majority of cared for children were aged between 10 and 15 years of age (36%), with 5% of cared for children being under one year of age. Eighteen percent of cared for children were aged 1 to 4, 18% aged 5 to 9 and 21% of cared for children over 16 years of age.

**2.6 Considerations when Describing Cared for Children as a “Group”**

It is important to note that cared for children are not a homogenous group. Research has suggested that cared for children wish to be recognised for their individuality and want others to avoid attaching generalised stereotypes and labels to all cared for children (Bullock, Courtney, Parker, Sinclair & Thoburn, 2006; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Berridge & Sinclair, 2003). Cared for children in short or long term foster care will have particular needs (Schofield, Beek, Sargent & Thoburn, 2000) which will differ from
those in a residential setting, or due for adoption (Thomas, Beckford, Lowe & Murch, 1999). Hare and Bullock (2006) suggest that looked after children are an administrative group, defined by law and have little in common other than the fact they are “looked after”.

2.7 Outcomes for Cared for Children

A consideration as to the outcomes of cared for children provides an indication as to why they are considered vulnerable and often at the centre of government initiatives. Cared for children are three and a half times more likely to have special educational needs than the wider school population (DfE, 2011b). They are particularly vulnerable in terms of poor health and mental health (Cocker & Scott, 2006) and are over represented in terms of the prison population, rough sleepers (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) and unemployment figures (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001).

Whilst reading about the needs of cared for children, the researcher became aware that a number of writers and researcher advocate the needs of cared for children. Some writers such as McParlin (1996) and Stadler (2007) have had first-hand experience of the care system which will have impacted on their writing and others have devoted their life’s work to researching and reporting on the needs of cared for children. Such experiences should be kept in mind whilst accessing literature regarding the needs of cared for children. Whilst interested in the needs of cared for children, the researcher does not have personal experience of the care system and has completed a typical amount of work with cared for children during practice as a trainee educational psychologist.

2.7.1 Why might cared for children experience low outcomes?

It has been recognised for some time that cared for children can be at a disadvantage in terms of their educational experience and outcomes (Comfort, 2007; Goddard, 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Jackson & Simon, 2005; Selwyn, Sturgess, Quinton & Baxter, 2006). The reasons for lower attainment in cared for children are complex and include family background, pre-care experiences, the care environment, expectations of schools and carers and communication between key adults such as social workers, carers and school staff (Comfort, 2007; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Berridge & Sinclair, 2004; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). The impermanence often experienced by cared for
children can adversely affect the individual’s development (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987) and cared for children’s lives are often characterised by instability (DCSF, 2009b; Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). Heath, Colton and Aldgate (1994) suggest that the trauma of being taken into care can lead to lower attainment. It is suggested that many social workers do not think of education as part of their “core business” which they see as finding placements and maintaining family relationships (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001).

Although it is acknowledged that cared for children experience lowered outcomes and educational professionals strive to support the needs cared for children, the concept of the care system leading to lowered achievement of cared for children is challenged (Berridge, 2007; Mills, 2004). Berridge (2007) suggests that explanations regarding lowered outcomes for cared for children can be too simplistic and “blame” the care system. Socio-economic risk factors such as social class, poverty and social mobility are highlighted and assuming a causal relationship between the care system and lowered attainment is warned against (Berridge, 2007). As described in figure 1, 62% of cared for children enter the care system due to abuse or neglect. Research has suggested that children who are abused at home are more likely to experience mental health difficulties (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) and those who are maltreated are at greater risk of “academic failure” (Mills, 2004). It is suggested that explanations regarding low outcomes for cared for children can often be too simplistic and it is unwise to rely on statistics and outcome indicators for cared for children when considering low achievement (Mills, 2004).

As acknowledged by the DfE (2011b), a higher proportion of cared for children have an identified special educational need which is linked to lower attainment. Reported end of Key Stage and General Certificate in Secondary Education examination results do not always reveal how long a child has been in the care system for. Whilst it is acknowledged that the impact of coming into care is likely to impact upon the individual’s performance, the care system could not be held responsible for lowered attainment of a pupil who had only been in care for a short time (Berridge, 2007). Despite these considerations and the fact that some cared for children make good progress, it is recognised that as a group the educational achievement of cared for children remains “unacceptably low” (DCSF, 2010b). McParlin (1996) suggests that a
lack of unified response between health, social services and education can lead to
cared for children experiencing second-class citizenship. Cared for children face a
number of barriers to their education, such as attending a number of schools and
being absent for prolonged periods of times. This can lead to gaps in learning which in
turn can become a barrier to progress (DCSF, 2009c; DSCF, 2009d).

2.7.2 Educational outcomes for cared for children.
Tim Loughton, Member of Parliament stated “Education is one of the most important
assets we can pass onto our children. And for looked after children it can often provide
the only point of stability in their lives.” (DfE, 2011c, p.4).

2.7.2.1 An understanding of “academic attainment and achievement”.
In this research the term “academic attainment and achievement” is used when
considering the educational outcomes of cared for children. Careful consideration was
made before this phrase was selected. The researcher wanted to avoid the term
“underachievement” as this term has been criticised as “confusing and unhelpful”
(Smith, 2003). A number of government documents refer to “improving the attainment
of looked after young people” (DCSF, 2009c; DCSF, 2009d). It has been suggested that
the term “attainment” is open to debate and that definitions of attainment focusing on
end of Key Stage and General Certificate in Secondary Education examination results
can be too narrow, ignoring potential indicators of progress or success that might be
relevant for young people in care (Bhabra, Ghate & Brazier, 2002). The researcher used
the internet search engine Google to try and establish a definition of attainment and
obtained numerous academic and government documents which included the word
attainment, but could not find any documents where the term was defined; it may be
assumed that the reader would have a lay understanding of the term. The Oxford
English Dictionary (1994) defines “attain” as “succeed in doing or getting” and
“attainment” as “attaining” and “something attained; a personal achievement” (p.47).
The researcher decided to use the broader term of “attainment and achievement”
within the thesis title and research questions with the intention of making reference to
the wider positive outcomes experienced by cared for children such as sporting
achievements, placement stability, remaining in education and community work,
rather than having a narrow focus on examination results, which are not able to reflect
the individual circumstance and life experiences of the young person.
2.7.2.2 Research regarding educational outcomes of cared for children.

It has long been recognised that the educational outcomes of cared for children as a group are “unacceptably low” (DCSF, 2010a). It is suggested that about 60% of cared for children have some marked difficulty with reading, maths or spelling, as assessed by their teacher (Meltzer, Corbin, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2003). 27% of cared for children have a statement of special educational needs compared with 3% of all children (Jackson & McParlin, 2006). The Department for Education (DfE, 2011b) suggested that cared for children are three and a half times more likely to have a special educational need than the wider school population.

Fourteen percent of cared for children attained five A* to C General Certificates of Secondary Education, as opposed to 65% of all school children in Year 11 (DCSF, 2009e). Thirty-seven percent of cared for children achieved no General Certificate of Secondary Education passes compared to 2% of all children (DfES, 2007). A study by Fletcher-Camper and Archer (2003) found that one quarter of the cohort was not entered for any GCSEs. Between 2005 and 2008 the percentage of cared for children achieving five A*-C grade rose by three points from 11% to 14% but this was slower than the national average percentage which rose by nine point from 56% to 65% in the same time period (DCSF, 2009e).

It has been found that the gap between cared for children and all pupils’ attainment widens as the pupils get older (O’Sullivan & Westerman, 2007), as illustrated by DCSF (2010a) data in table 3.
Table 3: Attainment gap between cared for children and the wider population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam</th>
<th>Cared for children</th>
<th>Wider school population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 2 English Standard Attainment Test</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 or above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Stage 2 Maths Standard Attainment Test</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 or above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more General Certificates of Secondary Education A*-C</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five or more General Certificates of Secondary Education A*-G</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Post-16, the educational outcomes for cared for children can remain bleak. Driscoll (2011) suggests that poor performance in Key Stage 4 can create barriers to further and higher education and skilled work for those leaving care. It is reported that fewer than 20% of cared for children go on to further education compared to 68% of all children and fewer than 1 in 100 cared for children go on to university. Up to 70% of cared for children in foster care and 80% of those in residential care are reported to leave school with no qualifications (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001).

Gordon, Parker and Loughran (2000) found that disabilities experienced by cared for children were less severe than those of the wider school population growing up in the family home, yet they were more likely to attend special school. It was also suggested that 30% of cared for children are out of mainstream education due to truancy or exclusion (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001).

Although such statistics provide an illustrative picture of the educational experiences of cared for children, caution should be taken when interpreting statistics. Annual comparisons are not comparing “like with like” and cohorts can be affected by factors such as an influx of asylum seekers who become cared for (Berridge, 2007). The effects
of the arrival or departure of groups with particular characteristics will be more pronounced at an individual school level, but should also be considered when reviewing national statistics.

2.7.2.3 **Expectation of educational outcomes for cared for children.**

It is suggested that cared for children’s ambitions are not often taken seriously (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001): “You don’t hear of a lot of people coming out of care and going on to be nuclear physicists or brain surgeons. And yet there are certainly people in care who are bright enough.” (p.2). Cared for children have been found to complain about the low expectations placed upon them by teachers and social workers, as well as the stigmatising effect of being in care (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). As an academically able pupil, Stadler (2007) writes passionately on the subject of low expectation placed upon children and young people in care:

> All too often children in care live with not only a lack of aspiration and encouragement but also a missing expectation of excellence ... I am one of the one per cent of children in care who went to university and I am here for one reason ... having been adopted in my late teens, my parents expected the best of me. (p.11-12).

Jackson and McParlin (2006) suggested that cared for children can find themselves placed in the “low streams” upon moving schools without any form of assessment. Placement moves are very disruptive for cared for children and of those who were moved more than ten times during their time in care, 60% did not sit any General Certificates of Secondary Education. 34% sat their examinations but achieved no A*-C grades, only 6% achieved any passes at A*-C and none achieved 5 grade A*-C General Certificates of Secondary Education (O’Sullivan & Westerman, 2007). The Who Care? Trust (2004) found that some cared for children had been placed in “remedial” classes, yet had reading ages of 16 years plus. Elliott (2000) surveyed teachers’ expectations of cared for children compared to non-cared for children. A significant difference in teacher expectations was found in terms of handing in homework and the susceptibility of the cared for children to bullying. Jackson, Whitehead and Wigford (2010) found that the cohort of cared for children in their research had higher levels of attainment than the non-cared for children, which highlights the potential for low
expectations being placed upon cared for children. In the following quote the frustrations of a cared for children regarding low expectations are expressed; “It really annoys me that people think that because I’m in care I must be stupid. I try really hard, and I achieve” (DCSF, 2009f, p.8).

The small number of cared for children who attend university is often highlighted; older cared for children were able to reflect that the lack of study space and equipment in children’s homes and difficulties such as universities not providing year round accommodation for care leavers who did not have a home to return to in holiday periods, could make higher education difficult for cared for children (Martin & Jackson, 2002). These young people were asked what three things could be done to improve opportunities for cared for children. Their suggestions included normalisation, freedom and support with finances to allow the cared for children to select hobbies and interests which would help them to socialise and positive encouragement from significant others.

**2.7.3 Emotional wellbeing outcomes for cared for children.**

In addition to reduced academic attainment and achievement outcomes, cared for children are described as particularly vulnerable in terms of poor health and mental health outcomes (Cocker & Scott, 2006).

**2.7.3.1 Understanding of “emotional wellbeing”.**

The researcher’s understanding of emotional wellbeing was based upon The Mental Health Foundation’s (1999) “Bright Futures” report which suggests that mentally healthy children are able to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, initiate, develop and sustain positive relationships, use empathy, develop a sense of right and wrong and face problems and learn from them.

In 2004, the DoH suggested that mental health problems in children and young people involve abnormalities of emotions, behaviours or social relationships which are sufficiently marked or prolonged and can cause suffering or risk to optimal development. Emotional wellbeing is extremely important, as it is suggested that children who are emotionally healthy achieve more at school and are able to better participate with their peers and in school life (DCSF, 2008a).
2.7.3.2 Research regarding the emotional wellbeing of cared for children.

Care Matters (2007) report “Securing the health and wider wellbeing of children and young people in care is of fundamental importance. Good health makes an active and enjoyable life possible, as well as underpinning achievement in school and the workplace.” (p.88).

Cared for children have been recognised to have poor health and mental health outcomes (Cocker & Scott, 2005; DoH, 2002; Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005; Jackson & Simon, 2005; Meltzer et al., 2003 & Roberts, 2000).

Meltzer et al. (2003) reported that 45% of cared for children in England were assessed as having a “mental disorder”, with this figure rising to 68% of cared for children living in residential care. A range of mental health difficulties were reported including anxiety (Meltzer et al., 2003) and depression (McCann, James, Wilson & Dunn, 1996). In the five to 11 age group behaviour and conduct issues which impacted on the cared for children’s school performance, communication and relationships (Lindsey, 2000) were reported most frequently (Brand & Brinich, 1996).

Kelly, Allan, Roscoe and Herrick (2003) suggested that conduct disorder is the most common mental health difficulty in cared for children; this was supported by Meltzer et al. (2003) who found the incident levels reported in table 4.
Table 4: Incidence of mental health difficulties in cared for children and the wider school population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5-10 years</th>
<th>Cared for children</th>
<th>Wider school population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disorders</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct disorders</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperkinetic disorders</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any childhood mental disorder</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>Cared for children</td>
<td>Wider school population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional disorders</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct disorders</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperkinetic disorders</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any childhood mental disorder</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

White and Stancombe (2004) found that whilst carers reported higher level of mental health difficulties and challenging behaviours in cared for children, the young people themselves did not. Similarly Richards, Wood and Ruiz-Calzada (2006) found that children and young people consistently self-reported their difficulties lower than their carers or teachers did, as reported on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1999).

2.7.3.3 Suggestions as to why cared for children may experience more mental health difficulties than the wider school population.

A number of studies have shown links between children’s pre-care experiences and higher incidence of mental health difficulties (Dimigen, Del Priore, Evans, Ferguson & Swan, 1999; McCann et al., 1996 & Meltzer et al., 2003). Many cared for children have
lived in families where there has been mental illness, alcohol or drug misuse or domestic violence (McAuley & Young, 2006). Chambers, Howell, Madge and Ollie (2002) suggested that a period of time “in care” can exacerbate rather than reduce any existing problems for cared for children and can create new dangers.

Instability is suggested as have a negative impact on cared for children’s wellbeing (Berridge, 2007; Sinclair, Barker, Wilson & Gibbs, 2005). Stanley, Riordan and Alaszewski (2005) suggested that children who experienced multiple placements tended to develop elevated emotional and behavioural problems which could trigger placement breakdown. Repeated moves were found to exacerbate feelings of loss, which in turn threatened the cared for children’s sense of security and belonging (Cleaver, 2000). It has been found that the general health of children improved as their placement became more secure; 67% of cared for children who had been in a placement for more than a year were rated as having “very good health” compared to 55% of those who had been in placement for less than a year (Meltzer et al., 2003).

A number of authors discuss attachment issues and cared for children (Fernandez, 2009; Rocco-Briggs, 2008; Gilligan, 2001). Whilst a detailed discussion of the impact of attachment issues on cared for children’s wellbeing is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is recognised that abusive early experiences have a traumatic disruption on children’s early attachments. Rocco-Briggs (2008) suggests that cared for children are constantly testing out who they can trust, as they have learnt to mistrust adults in a caring role. It is suggested that cared for children can face challenges in forging attachments with their foster families or residential setting and Gilligan (2001) suggests that positive relationships are essential to allow the child to be resilient.

Williams et al. (2001) found that cared for children in Wales were far more likely than their peers to suffer from mental health problems, but were much less likely to receive any treatment. It is suggested that there is a history of limited dialogue between social services, health and education agencies (Street & Davies, 2002). Cared for children may only be temporarily registered with a GP (Polnay & Ward, 2000) or the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (Sargent & O’Brien, 2004) due to their transient nature. Young people were not always willing to attend appointments, and in some areas waiting lists were so long that only young people with a defined mental health
issue were offered an appointment (Sargent & O’Brien, 2004). Cared for children may live outside their home authority and it was reported that this could lead to arguments about “medical responsibility” (Sargent & O’Brien, 2004).

2.7.3.4 The implications of mental health and emotional wellbeing difficulties for education.

Cared for children may bring a lot of “emotional baggage” with them to a new school or family (Cairns, 2002; Fahlberg, 1995; Geddes, 2006). The lack of stability and consistency often experienced by cared for children can also have an effect on their emotions, behaviours, attention and their readiness to learn (Archer, 2004). In order to enable cared for children to achieve positive outcomes, it is important for staff working with them to understand the incident, range and potential reasons that cared for children experience mental health difficulties.

Miller and Moran (2005) and Miller and Parker (2005) suggested that teachers frequently misunderstand young people’s emotional health difficulties and mistakenly attribute behaviours and attitudes to socio-cultural reasons. Teachers are also thought to frequently underestimate the cared for children’s abilities to achieve educationally. Cairns (2002) suggests that cared for children who have experienced abuse or neglect may suffer from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder that can lead to “eruptions” in confined situations such as the school classroom. Many cared for children reported themselves as having behavioural problems at school because they felt angry and unhappy, which then became a barrier to their learning (DfE, 2010).

Comfort (2007) suggests that most teachers and far too many social workers believe that once a cared for children is placed in a “good home” they will be able to settle and work well at school. Children bring their history with them to a new placement and this may continue to interfere with their schooling even when they are in a settled placement (Comfort, 2007). Minnis and Del Priore (2001) described some of the difficulties faced by cared for children in school as described in table 5.
Table 5: Difficulties faced by cared for children in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infants and pre-schoolers</th>
<th>Five to 12 year olds</th>
<th>13 to 18 year olds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whining</td>
<td>Social relationships</td>
<td>Lack of concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-sensitivity</td>
<td>Emotional control</td>
<td>Refusal to go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bossiness</td>
<td>Settling down to do things</td>
<td>Social difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of bladder/bowel control</td>
<td>Attention seeking behaviours</td>
<td>Emotional instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech and language difficulties</td>
<td>Quarrels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-compliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of concentration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cared for children who come from a home where there was little praise or encouragement may have low self-esteem. Jackson and Sachdev (2001) found that when cared for children’s achievements are recognised, this boosts their confidence, as does engaging in leisure experiences, part time work and volunteering opportunities. Gilligan (2007) highlighted the importance of “spare time activities” in increasing the motivation and engagement of cared for children. Broh (2002) suggested that interscholastic sport, attendance at music groups and drama clubs led to improved academic performance. It was suggest that these activities may have led to strengthened school ties and increased parental involvement, which then impacted on academic attainment.

2.7.4 Life outcomes for cared for children.

As may be expected, considering the potential educational outcomes and emotional wellbeing difficulties experienced by cared for children, a number of studies have suggested that life outcomes for cared for children are lower than those of the wider population. Cared for children are over-represented in terms of excluded groups (Blythe & Milner, 1996; Chambers et al., 2002; Richardson & Joughin, 2000) and young people who have been in care are two and a half time more likely to be teenage parents (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003). Around a quarter of adults in prison spent some time in care as a child (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003) and 9.6% of cared for children aged 10 or over were cautioned or convicted for an offence in 2007; almost three times the rate for all children this age (DfES, 2007). Further research has shown that 50-80% of
former cared for children are unemployed between 16-25 years of age (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001) and that one quarter to one third of rough sleepers had experience of the care system (Social Exclusion Unit, 2003).

2.8 Supporting the Needs of Cared for Children
Cared for children are found to have similar aspirations to other young people; to have a loving family, a good job or career, financial security and a nice home (DfE, 2010b). These aspirations echo the five outcomes for children and young people set out in the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004). Although the statistics for cared for children can be damning, there are examples of cared for children who have gone on to experience positive life outcomes. Research has suggested a number of policies and initiatives that may have contributed to improved outcomes for cared for children, which will now be discussed.

In section 2.3 an overview of the government agendas and legislation to support the needs of cared for children was provided. The researcher will now expand on the role of the corporate parent, discuss the facilitators and barriers to multi-agency working and the role of the lead professional. The role of the designated teacher will be discussed and the virtual school model, personal education plans and funding will be considered. Reference will also be made to interventions that can be put into place by staff working directly with cared for children through universal children’s services.

2.8.1 Support through corporate parenting.
The role of the corporate parent was introduced by the government in 1996 to safeguard children taken into the care of the local authority. It emphasises the collective responsibility of the local authority to achieve good parenting for cared for children (Local Authority One Minute Corporate Parenting Guide, 2010). The role was devised to ensure that cared for children received the same support as other children would receive from a “good parent”. Bullock et al. (2006) discuss what makes “a parent” and suggest a variety of skills such as physical care, affection, positive regard, emotional security, setting boundaries, allowing room to develop, supporting cognitive development and facilitating social activities.

Corporate parents are required to ensure that care, education, health, leisure, friendships and future planning are considered in a joined up way, to promote positive
outcomes for the young person (DfEE, 2000). Hibbert (2001) suggests that the corporate parent must ensure that it provides effective advocacy for the young people in its care, noting the potential impact of traumatic experiences in care or prior to entering care.

Bradbury (2006) listed some of the individuals who may be involved in the corporate parenting of cared for children including; elected members, senior officers in social services and education departments, teachers, head teachers, school governors, health and social workers, foster carers and residential care staff, educational psychologists, Connexions advisors and birth parents. Bradbury (2006) went on to suggest “Herein lies the challenge – ensuring that all aspects of the parenting role are covered whilst maintaining effective communication between all concerned and also ensuring that the voice of the young person is heard.” (p.143). As suggested by Davis, Day and Bidmead (2002) even with two parents it can be difficult to achieve effective joined-up parenting.

2.8.1.1 The role of the educational psychologist.

The researcher carried out this piece of research during their educational psychology training. The researcher was therefore particularly interested in the role of the educational psychologist as a corporate parent. It is suggested that educational psychologists are well placed to support vulnerable groups such as cared for children (Jackson & McParlin, 2005). Educational psychologists work with cared for children has been reported as positively perceived by both carers and social workers (Sinclair et al., 2005). It is suggested that educational psychologists can provide “psychological services” and “consultation, advice and casework support” (Farrell et al., 2006, p. 37) when working with agencies to support the needs of cared for children.

In 2006 the Division of Educational and Child Psychology investigated educational psychologists’ work with cared for children. This report suggested an increase in educational psychology work with cared for children, particularly at a strategic level. A variety of roles for the educational psychologist were identified, including supporting school attendance, reducing exclusions, enhancing emotional wellbeing, supporting continuity in school placements, promoting attainment, producing advice on
2.8.1.2 Facilitators and Barriers to multi-agency working.

The concept of the corporate parent calls for multi-agency working, which is emphasised in documents such as the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004) and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfES, 2001). Historically the importance of multi-agency working has been highlighted by tragic cases such as the death of Victoria Climbie in 2000 and Baby P in 2007. Following the Baby P case, Lord Laming (2009) was commissioned to provide a report on the progress made to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children. A variety of recommendation were made, such as improved information sharing and a shared language and understanding of local procedures.

Literature regarding multi-agency working suggests a number of advantages including a wider range of services, easier or quicker access to expertise, early identification and intervention and children’s needs being addressed more appropriately (Atkinson, Wilkin, Stott, Doherty & Kinder, 2002). Further advantages which could be accessed by corporate parents and the virtual school include a development of the individual’s skills and the opportunity to work creatively in a wider range of contexts (Atkinson et al., 2002). Gaskell and Leadbetter (2009) suggest that the flexibility of multi-agency working provides opportunities for individuals to work to their strengths.

A number of barriers to multi-agency working have also been identified. Different agencies may consider problems within different contexts or models and are likely to have different priorities, referral and diagnostic procedures, as well as use different language and acronyms (Leadbetter, 2006). Wagner (2008) highlights the importance of considering other agencies’ subtext during multi-agency meetings, suggesting that pressures on social care workers around child protection are likely to conflict with the educational psychologist’s emphasis on preventative working. As discussed in section 2.9.2, (Berridge et al., 2009) suggested that pilot virtual schools were able to reduce such barriers through joint work with education and social care.

Harker et al. (2004) considered individual’s commitment to joint working around cared for children. It was suggested that commitment to joint work at senior leadership
levels does not always permeate down to staff at the operational level. It was suggested that the predominate explanation for this was conflicting priorities within the workload of teachers and social workers. Francis (2000) suggested that the workload of social workers could prevent them from viewing educational issues as a priority over urgent placement issues. Harker et al. (2004) reported an education officer’s remark:

Social workers are carrying too big a caseload and so they are not able to spend as much time doing the preventative work liaising with schools that you need to do to stop things like exclusions, poor attendance, and just falling behind from happening. (p.182).

The pressure on teaching staff to meet performance targets for the wider school population has also been suggested as a barrier to teaching staff being able to establish and maintain regular communication with social workers (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001).

2.8.1.3 The Lead Professional and the team around the child.

As part of the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004) the concept of the lead professional was introduced for children and young people with a number of additional support needs, who may require an integrated response (DfES, 2005). The DfES (2005) suggested that for most children, universal services are sufficient to meet their needs and enable them to achieve the five outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda, but some children and young people may require further support in order to achieve their potential. It was suggested that cared for children were a group whose needs could be considered as “significant” and who may need further support.

In 2005 the DfES set out their vision for the role of the lead professional. Following a pilot study, the Child Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2009) was able to summarise the key purpose of the lead professional to be:

- Act as a single point of contact for the child, young person or family
- Co-ordinate the delivery of the actions agreed
- Reduce overlap and inconsistency in the services received (CWDC, 2009, p.7).
Within integrated working, the lead professional was required to ensure that all practitioners involved in a case regularly met and that appropriate and timely interventions were implemented, reviewed and evaluated. Documentation suggested that a variety of staff within children and young people’s workforce could be the lead professional, depending on the needs of the individual (CWDC, 2009).

The CWDC (2009) describes the “team around the child” as a model of multi-agency service provision. Team around the child brings together a range of practitioners who work together to deliver a package to meet the individual’s needs. Although the lead professional is responsible for coordinating the professionals, each practitioner is responsible to their home agency for the services they deliver to the child or family. It is suggested that team around the child supports professional joined-up working, information sharing (good practice in which is highlighted in DCSF, 2008b) and early intervention (DfE, 2012a).

The importance of a key individual taking an interest in their life was reported as significant by cared for children (DFE, 2010). Seventy-four percent of the young people suggested that staff and carers taking an interest in their education was a significant factor (DFE, 2010b). A positive role model or mentor for cared for children has been suggested as a facilitator to positive outcomes (DFE, 2010b; Martin & Jackson, 2002 & Valios, 2005). The DCSF (2010b) suggest that cared for children are more likely than their peers to value the consistent personal support and attention of an identified adult who is able to understand the issues facing the child and provide advice, support and high expectations over time. Learning mentors were found to be beneficial in tackling underachievement as they were in tune with the child’s needs, respected their privacy, helped with transitions and provided emotional support (Office for Standards in Education, 2008).

2.9 The Virtual School for Cared for Children

Whilst it has long been recognised that cared for children’s educational opportunities can be lowered (Essen et al. 1976); it is only more recently been acknowledged that not enough is known about the educational performance of cared for children (DoH, 2001; Fletcher-Campbell & Archer, 2003; Skuse & Evans, 2001). A lack of reliable data about the educational circumstances of cared for children is one of the major obstacles
to raising their attainments (DfEE, 2000). Fletcher-Campbell and Archer (2003) looked at the achievement of a cohort at the end of Key Stage 4; they found incomplete data records for 93% of cared for children. Sixty-four percent of cared for children’s career aspirations were unknown, which raises the question how can cared for children be encouraged to succeed, take the right exams and seek appropriate work experience opportunities if their aspirations are unknown?

Jacklin, Robinson and Torrance (2006) posed the question “do we really know who our looked-after children are?” (p.4). In a small scale study, their most important finding was a lack of, or incomplete data, meaning agencies were unable to clearly identify the cared for children whom they were responsible for. This research involved accessing local authority databases and pupil files for 59 cared for children; although small in scale, the study highlighted the importance of tracking cared for children and ensuring no pupils are “lost in the system”.

2.9.1 Origins of the virtual school concept.

The concept of the virtual school head role was introduced in the Care Matters Green Paper (DfES, 2006). It was suggested that the virtual school head would be a senior individual, working within the local authority to drive up standards in the education of cared for children. It was within this context that the virtual school head role was piloted between 2007 and 2009 in 11 “trailblazer” local authorities.

Within the virtual school model cared for children attend a range of schools but the virtual school staff monitor the pupils as if they attended one single school. The aim of the virtual school is to narrow the gap between cared for children and the whole school population (Berridge et al., 2009). The core purpose of the virtual school is described as “to be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment of all children looked after” (DCSF, 2010b, p.2).

Key roles of the virtual school include:

- Tracking and monitoring pupil progress
- Ensuring schools know which children are in care
- Ensuring cared for children have effective education plans
- Championing the needs of cared for children at a strategic level
• Supporting designated teachers in ensuring cared for children achieve their academic potential and raise individual attainment
• Supporting designated teachers in promoting the wellbeing of cared for children (DCSF, 2009a; DCSF, 2010b).

2.9.2 Findings of the virtual school pilot.

The virtual school head pilot was evaluated by Berridge et al. (2009) on behalf of the DCSF. As suggested by Berridge (2012), such pilots should be considered with caution as the authors were constrained by the requirements of the commissioners (the DCSF) and the aims of the research which were to:

• map the range of activities undertaken by the virtual school heads;
• examine professionals’ and children’s awareness and experiences of the virtual school heads;
• investigate the educational outcomes for looked after children and the influences on them; and
• identify examples of “good practice” (Berridge et al., 2009, p.1).

Data was gathered from a variety of sources including DCSF statistical information, progress reports and background questionnaires submitted by the virtual school heads, semi-structured interviews with the virtual school heads and group or individual interviews with social workers. Surveys of young people, foster and residential carers, social workers and designated teachers were also completed. As acknowledged by the researcher, these data sources involved small sample sizes so should be treated with caution. It is also worth considering that the virtual schools in the pilot study varied in terms of their size, strategic location and function.

A brief summary of the findings of the virtual school pilot will now be presented; full details can be found in the document “Looked After and Learning An Evaluation of the virtual school head pilot” (Berridge et al., 2009). It was suggested that pilot local authorities performed well compared to the national average and most showed an improvement in General Certificate of Secondary Education results. It is important to acknowledge that many local authorities have been carrying out work to improve
outcomes for cared for children prior to the proposal of the virtual school model, as was the case in the researcher’s local authority.

It was found that having a virtual school head from an education background as opposed to a social care background enabled the individual to exert particular influence and operate more effectively. It was suggested that all virtual school heads recognised the importance of raising attainment of cared for children as their most important task, but were also able to take a broader view of education such as ensuring cared for children had opportunities to engage in enrichment activities. Issues surrounding data management were identified as problematic, which reflect the concerns of Jacklin et al. (2006) and Fletcher-Campbell and Archer (2003) regarding the adequacy of data in regards to cared for children. Good administrative support was seen as essential to facilitate communication with role partners (Berridge et al., 2009).

It was generally perceived that the pilot virtual school heads had successfully raised the priority of cared for children (Berridge et al. 2009) and it was suggested that virtual schools can have a powerful impact on improving behaviour and attendance of cared for children. It was found that stability of school and home placement could be promoted through polices such as school transport and admissions (DCSF, 2009b).

The findings of the virtual school head pilot evaluation (Berridge et al., 2009) suggested that social workers often lacked confidence and knowledge in educational matters and welcomed the support of teams such as the virtual school and looked after children’s education services. The positioning of the virtual school in education or social care varied within the pilot study depending on issues within individual local authorities. A number of respondents felt that education was the correct place to locate the virtual school as it was a school, with one director stating:

Once we’d made that decision it felt absolutely right. That’s been our experience in terms of ownership by schools and heads ...This means that we’ve made it a more formal part of our education structure rather than an add-on to the services to looked after children - a subtle but important difference. (Berridge et al. 2009, p.39).
The importance of developing good working relationships with role partners was highlighted by a number of respondents, as was the role of mediating between education and social care when required. One virtual school head suggested:

...we sit bang slap in between the two, and it’s mediating, it’s being bilingual so that everybody can help to understand each other’s language. You know it’s that constant mediation without a doubt’. (Berridge et al. 2009, p.53).

Berridge et al. (2009) concluded their pilot evaluation by suggesting that the virtual school model should continue, but with a note of caution that the government had already decided to roll out the programme before the evaluation was complete and a note that the pilot was based on a small sample size and it is impossible to say what would have happened if the virtual school model had not been employed. Positives reported included the suggestion that the virtual school head symbolises the corporate responsibility of children’s services to parent cared for children, and promote their educational outcomes and that the virtual school was able to bring together educational and social work professionals to promote the needs of cared for children.

2.9.3 The current position of the virtual school.
All local authorities were expected to have established a virtual school for cared for children by Easter 2010 (DCSF, 2010b). In order to support the virtual school heads, a toolkit was produced (DCSF, 2010c). This toolkit suggested that the core purpose of the virtual school “is to be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment of all children looked after by their authority” (DCSF, 2010c, p.1) and to tack pupil progress as if they were in a single school.

The toolkit (DCSF, 2010c) suggested three key areas of responsibility for the virtual school head:

- To make sure that there is a system to track and monitor the attainment and progress of looked after children
To ensure that all looked after children have a robust and effective personal education plan and access one-to-one support, including personal tuition where appropriate

To champion the educational needs of looked after children across the authority and those placed out-of-authority (p.4).

Although local authorities have a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of cared for children as set out by the Children Act (1989, and updated by the Children Act 2004), the role of the virtual school head is not statutory. However it is suggested that a virtual school head is one of the key ways in which local authorities can demonstrate to inspectors that this duty is being fulfilled (DfE, 2012b).

2.10 The Role of the Designated Teacher

A key role partner of the virtual school is the designated teacher of cared for children. It is suggested that designated teachers should promote a culture in which looked after children believe they can succeed and aspire to further and high education (DCSF, 2009a). From September 2009 the governing bodies of all maintained schools were required to appoint a designated teacher for cared for children under the Children and Young People Act 2008 (the 2008 Act). It is the responsibility of the governing body to ensure the designated teacher is adequately trained (Section 20 (2) of the 2008 Act) and an annual report to the governing body is required (DCSF, 2009a). In the majority of cases the designated teacher will be a qualified teacher or head teacher.

Designated teachers are required to promote the educational achievement of cared for children who are on the school roll, through promoting a whole school culture where “the personalised learning needs of every looked after child matters and their personal, emotional and academic needs are prioritised.” (DCSF, 2009a, p.11). It is

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1 The designated teacher (Looked After Pupils etc) (England) Regulations 2009 (the Regulations) required that the person designated is:

- a qualified teacher …
- a head teacher …
- ‘a person who has had responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of looked after pupils for at least six months immediately before the Regulations came into force and who is training to be a teacher and likely to qualify before 1 September 2012 (regulation 3(4)). (DCSF, 2009a, p6).
recognised that cared for children may have suffered disrupted learning and missed periods of their schooling. These gaps in learning and the emotional impact of their experiences are likely to become barriers to their progress (DCSF, 2009a).

The DCSF (2009a) details a number of responsibilities expected of the designated teacher. Designated teachers should help staff to have high expectations of cared for children and to understand the emotional, psychological and social effects of loss and separation, and how this may make it difficult for some children to build trusting relationships with adults. It is important that staff see cared for children as individuals, rather than a homogenous group, and do not treat them differently to their peers. Sensitivity regarding who else knows about the child’s looked after status should also be considered. The personal education plan (see section 2.11) should be viewed as centrally important in helping to develop a shared understanding between teachers, carers, social workers and the child.

In terms of educational achievement, the designated teacher is responsible for contributing to whole school policies to ensure that cared for children are not disadvantaged. It is important that the designated teacher and other staff consider the child’s needs when they join the school and have high expectations that the individual can achieve and aspire towards higher education. The designated teacher should ensure that the cared for children are involved in their target setting and support the individual in taking responsibility for their own learning. Assessment for learning and differentiated teaching approaches should be used to ensure the child meets their goals. Cared for children should be prioritised for one-to-one tuition and the designated teacher should ensure that communication with carers is strong to allow the carers to support the child’s education (DCSF, 2009a).

Additional roles promoted by the DCSF (2009a) include sharing the personal education plan with other staff in school to ensure that the child receives appropriate support and provision, monitoring progress and updating the personal education plan ahead of the statutory review of the care plan. Designated teachers also have a key role to play in the transition of a cared for children from one setting to another. The designated teacher acts as a central point of initial contact within the school, to assist in joined up
working of professionals such as members of the virtual school, social workers and carers.

2.11 Personal Education Plans
A cared for child’s personal education plan is part of their overall care plan and part of their official school record. If the child moves school the personal education plan should be forwarded to the new school or main contact (usually the social worker) in the local authority, if a school is yet to be named. The DCSF (2009a) describe the personal education plan as a “collective memory” of the cared for child’s education, as many individuals tend to be involved in the child’s education. Communication and shared understanding becomes more challenging when many professionals are involved as the corporate parent.

The aim of the personal education plan is to improve the educational experience of cared for children by helping everyone to have a clear and shared understanding about the needs of the child and the provision that will be necessary to help the child fulfil their potential. When a cared for child joins a school, the designated teacher should ensure that their needs are assessed without delay. If a personal education plan exists it should be updated; if the child has just entered care a personal education plan should be created. The personal education plan identifies strengths and areas for development and sets short and long term goals for the child. Actions such as homework support, tuition and study support can be included in the personal education plan, as well as information about how the child’s progress will be monitored. Wider achievements such as sporting and community involvement should also be included in the personal education plan. The personal education plan should be regularly reviewed; it is a statutory requirement for the personal education plan to be reviewed six weeks after a child becomes cared for, at three months and then at six monthly intervals (DCSF, 2009a).

2.12 Funding
Whilst an in-depth discussion regarding funding and cared for children is beyond the scope of this thesis, the researcher will briefly discuss one-to-one tuition and the pupil premium.
2.12.1 One-to-one tuition.
One-to-one tuition is used to support cared for children in overcoming misconceptions and to help the child apply this learning to their work in class. The scheme was piloted in 10 local authorities as part of the “Making Good Progress Pilot in Key Stages 2 and 3” (DCSF, 2010d). Early evidence suggested that cared for children “make even better progress as a result of one-to-one tuition than their peers both during the tuition period and through sustained gains after the tuition has finished” (DCSF, 2009g, p.4). This progress was measured in term of assessment for learning and teachers reporting greater levels of pupil participation. It was suggested that this may be because cared for children value personalised learning and lessons finely tuned to meet their needs.

2.12.2 Pupil premium.
Pupil premium replaced the personal education allowance in April 2011. Here schools received money for each cared for child on role who has been in care for more than six months. The funding should be spent for the educational benefit of cared for children; typical uses include one-to-one tuition, classroom support and creating wider opportunities for cared for children. This funding can be pooled to provide the most effective support if a number of cared for children in a locality have similar needs. The pupil premium should not be used to replace resources that are already provided for all children and should be accounted in the cared for child’s personal education plan. Pupil premium has the same aims as the personal education allowance, which was used to “help ensure they [cared for children] are making expected levels of progress and promote improved outcomes and life chances and support them to reach their potential” (DCSF, 2010a, p.27).

2.13 Support through Universal Services
As part of corporate parenting, universal services are involved in supporting the needs of cared for children. A number of studies have been carried out to identify good practice with cared for children, which can then be built upon to improve the outcomes for cared for children. The Office for Standards in Education (2008) noted high expectations, recognising strengths, encouraging the child to take responsibility for their learning, monitoring social and personal progress, encouraging involvement in after school activities, swift intervention if problems emerged and good links with parents and carers as feature of school with excellent practice in regards to cared for
children. These schools were also found to offer cared for children tailored support, but in a way that did not make them stand out from their peers. Technology such as the use of laptops was also advantageous as it allowed cared for children to access the curriculum at home and take responsibility for their learning. It was suggested “There is nothing magic about how to support children in care. A good school, which gets to know its pupils and aims to meet their individual needs, will take on the task naturally.” (DCSF, 2010a, p. 4). Figure 3 reiterates and extends upon these findings. Successful schools were found to focus on early intervention and work closely with the local authority to provide alternative such as home tuition to encourage the individual to re-integrate as soon as possible.

![Figure 3: Improving the attainment of looked after children](image-url)
2.13.1 Literacy skills.

Early intervention in terms of developing a love of books has also been noted as a factor in educational success for cared for children (Menmuir, 1989, cited in McParlin, 1996) and Meegan, 1995). Similarly, the DoH (2002) found learning to read fluently by the age of eight to be a facilitative factor in the educational success of cared for children. The Letterbox Club literacy scheme (Booktrust, 2011; Dymoke & Griffiths, 2010) was also found to increase confidence and enjoyment in reading which is likely to lead to reading success in school. Paired reading (Topping, 2001) has also been proven as an effective literacy intervention for cared for children. Here the pupil and partner begin by reading together, then as the pupil increases in confidence and competence, the pupil is given the option of reading alone, with the child receiving as much help as is necessary. Osborne, Alfano and Winn (2010) reported an average of one year’s progress in just four months (with a range of 1 to 31 months progress), when paired reading was trialled with cared for children in a local authority. This suggests that carer support can have a considerable impact on children’s academic abilities, although caution should be taken when considering these findings as they derived from a small sample of 35 children.

2.13.2 Parents valuing education.

The DoH (2002) suggest that having a parent or carer who values education as being important and Lucey and Walkerdine (2000) suggested that the educational background and expectations of carers to be significant. The “By Degrees” study (Jackson & Ajayi, 2007 & Jackson, Ajayi & Quigley, 2005) demonstrated that with a facilitative environment and personal motivation, cared for children can display extraordinary resilience and determination. These children were found to have been placed in foster homes that placed high value on education through providing good study conditions, attending parents evening, offering advice and encouragement and celebrating achievement.

2.13.3 Placement stability.

Placement stability has been recognised as a key factor in helping cared for children to succeed. For children and young people with a single placement, 39% were found to achieve 5 or more grade A* to C General Certificates of Secondary Education. For those who had three or more placement changes, this dropped to 15% (DfE, 2011a). Cared
for children who had been in care for a longer period of time were also found to achieve better academic results with 15% of those who had been in care for six years or long achieve 5 grade A* to C compared to 8% of those who had been in care for 12 to 18 months (DfE, 2011a).

2.13.4 Supporting mental health and emotional wellbeing.
A number of suggestions have been made as to how the emotional wellbeing of cared for children can be improved. Blower, Addo, Hodgson, Lamington and Towlson (2004) and Koprowska and Stein (2000) suggested that knowing what interventions work for this population is important. Chambers et al. (2002) stressed the importance of professionals understanding the effects of institutional care on cared for children. It is also important that the specific needs of cared for children are understood (Callaghan, Young, Richards & Vostanis, 2003). Cocker and Scott (2006) highlight the importance of multi-agency working, as discussed in section 2.8.1.2. A number of researchers also highlight the importance of consulting with the individual cared for child and ensuring any intervention plan fits their needs (Cocker, 2004; Kurtz & James, 2003; Richards & Joughin, 2000; Scott, 2004).

2.14 Summary of the Literature Review
In summary, it is well established that cared for children can be at disadvantage in terms of their educational outcomes and experiences (Jackson & Simon, 2005). Although some cared for children make good progress, as a group their outcomes remain “unacceptably low” (DCSF, 2010a). Cared for children continue to be at the centre of government research and legislation; some key legislation includes the 1989 Education Act, Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004) and Care Matters agenda (DFES, 2006; DFES, 2007). More recently the role of the virtual school has been established with the aim of narrowing the gap between cared for children and the wider population. A pilot by Berridge et al. (2009) stated that some positive findings had emerged from the evaluation study of the virtual school head role, but caution was noted due to the small sample size. It is now statutory for maintained schools to appoint a designated teacher for cared for children (DCSF, 2009a), who should promote a culture in which high expectations are placed on cared for children. Initial indicators suggest that one-to-one tuition can have a positive impact on the
educational experiences of cared for children and a variety of universal interventions to improve the attainment of cared for children are recognised (figure 3).

2.15 Aims of the Research and Expected Contribution to Knowledge
As a result of this literature review and collaborative discussions with the virtual school staff, the researcher aimed to explore the current and future role of the virtual school. Due to its contemporary nature, there is a limited knowledge base; therefore the researcher sought to explore the current and future role of one virtual school for cared for children in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting their emotional wellbeing. The researcher sought to establish the levels of confidence of designated teachers of cared for children, and an understanding of support received by designated teachers from the virtual school. In addition, further support required to help designated teachers promote a culture in which looked after children believe they can succeed and aspire to further and high education was sought (DCSF, 2009a).

The research aimed to provide a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry (which will be described fully in chapter 3; methodology) as an educational research method. It is recognised that there are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry regarding the needs of vulnerable groups such as cared for children (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b), particularly within a mixed methods approach.

2.16 Research Questions
In order to address these research aims the following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?
4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?
3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction
In this chapter the use of a mixed methods research design will be described including participant sampling and recruitment, and the data collection and data analysis methods employed in this piece of research. The researcher’s epistemological, ontological and axiological positions will be described, along with a critique of the chosen methodology. Ethical principles will be considered and the researcher’s timeline, time-budget and risk analysis will be referred to.

3.2 Aims and Research Questions
There is a dearth of research into the virtual school model which was piloted in 2007-2009 and evaluated in 2009 by Berridge et al. Additionally there are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry within a mixed methods design within educational research; specifically research regarding vulnerable groups such as cared for children (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b). This thesis aimed to explore the current and future role of one virtual school, in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting their emotional wellbeing. It also aimed to provide a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry as an educational research method.

In order to address these research aims the following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?
4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

3.3 Overview of the Research Methodology

An overview of the mixed methods research design employed is supplied in table 6 to aid the reader's understanding of chapter 3.

Table 6: Stages of research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Method Employed</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Questionnaire (see Appendix B)</td>
<td>Responding designated teachers (51/149 designated teachers responded providing a 34% response rate which is just above “average” (30%) for an impersonal questionnaire (Gillham, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Individual Semi-structured Interviews (see Appendix C for prompts)</td>
<td>Virtual school Educational consultant A Educational consultant B Personal education plan coordinator Education liaison officer Senior specialist educational psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Appreciative inquiry Session (see Appendix D for PowerPoint and Appendix E for prompts)</td>
<td>Virtual school head Educational consultant A Senior specialist educational psychologist One designated teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Philosophical Considerations

The researcher made a number of philosophical considerations whilst planning and undertaking the research; the epistemological, ontological and axiological position of the researcher will now be discussed.
3.4.1 Epistemology.

Epistemology “asks questions about what knowledge is and how it is understood. It raises issues about how individuals regard truth, what they believe is real and how they develop their understanding of the world they inhabit.” (Frost, 2011, p. 193). Crotty (1998) suggests that there is a relationship between the theoretical stance of the researcher and the methodology they choose to utilise. Epistemological approaches consist of assumptions that can be implicit or explicit, as to the nature of knowledge which the researcher regards as valid in answering their research questions (Oliver, 2008).

This thesis was approached from a critical realist stance; critical realism “provides an alternative to several philosophical and methodological positions which have been found wanting ... realism offered a third way between empiricism and positivism on the one hand and ... relativism” Sayer (2000, p.2). Positivism can be thought of as a “traditional” view of science, with explanation as its central aim. Hypotheses are tested to show constant relationships between events or variables; such experiments nearly always take place within a closed system. Matthews (2010) has questioned whether such an approach is appropriate for educational psychologists who operate in open systems in the real world. Relativism in its extreme form maintains that there is no external reality independent of human consciousness, only different sets of meanings and classifications that people attach to the world (Robson, 2002).

Critical realism can be considered as a post-positivism stand point, with over-arching grand theories being replaced by more local explanations (Matthews, 2010). This appeared to be an appropriate epistemological stand point from which to address the aims and research questions of this research, as the thesis aims to investigate the current and future role of the virtual school in one local authority. It is suggested that critical realism tells us “what it is that is working for some people in some contexts” (Matthews, 2010, p.18).

Critical realism incorporates the perspectives of the participants (Robson, 2002); within this thesis the participants had opportunities to express their perspectives through a questionnaire (designated teachers), semi-structured interviews (virtual school staff) and an appreciative inquiry session (designated teachers and virtual
school staff). Collier (2001, cited in Matthews, 2010) suggests that “interpretations can be explanations” which may then be developed into useful theories which may be able to predict what happens in the future. It was from this standpoint that the research questions were proposed and addressed. The researcher aimed to discover the current reality for this virtual school staff and designated teacher cohort, and to establish their collaborative vision for their future. The vision for the future was established through the use of appreciative inquiry (philosophical considerations regarding appreciative inquiry are discussed in section 3.4.4).

The realist view proposes that the world consists of structures (the virtual school) that give rise to processes or mechanisms (joint work between virtual school staff and designated teachers), which give rise to outcomes (improving academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing). Sayer (2000) highlights the importance of the context in which the research takes place and suggests that several mechanisms are likely to be involved in producing an outcome.

3.4.2 Ontology.
Ontology is a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of being. It relates to “the beliefs and assumptions that individuals hold about what exists in the world they inhabit. It raises issues about what people believe is real and what they believe exists in the world.” (Frost, 2011, p.194).

Traditionally the nature of reality is discussed in terms of realism, relating to truths accepted by society and idealism, relating to the individual’s perspective. Ontology considers whether there is one reality, or several realities. Within this thesis a mixed methods approach was employed, to investigate the experience of virtual school staff and designated teachers in one local authority. Therefore a subjectivist approach was taken, where the knowledge gained in this thesis is the reality for the providers and recipients of the work of the virtual school in one local authority.

3.4.3 Axiology.
Axiology is defined as “the branch of philosophy that studies judgements about values” (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009, p.116). Axiology acknowledges that a researcher’s underlying professional values will impact upon the way in which they select their research topic, carry out their research and interpret and report their findings. For this
reason, Robson (2002) highlights the importance of the researcher ensuring that their research is both systematic, and ethically sound. It is suggested that in order for our research to be credible, we must be aware of how our values can impact on the research process (Saunders et al., 2009). The researcher has a key role in facilitating the production of knowledge and understanding through their own perspectives, therefore it is necessary to state underlying values which may have impacted upon the methodology selected and the way in which findings were interpreted and reported.

As stated in section 2.7, those who write about and work with cared for children tend to be strong advocates for positive outcomes for cared for children. The researcher’s interest in the educational experience of cared for children arose from working as a primary and then special school teacher. During this time, a small number of cared for children were taught, so the researcher developed a basic understanding of the needs and potential educational outcomes for this group. Upon being appointed as a trainee educational psychologist, the researcher was appointed a supervisor who was the specialist senior educational psychologist for cared for children and a member of the virtual school staff. Through shadowing, the researcher was introduced to the virtual school staff and became interested in their work and proposed completing a piece of research around the current and future role of the virtual school. The researcher has had typical contact with cared for children within the trainee educational psychologist role, completing approximately five pieces of casework involving cared for children. The researcher’s interest in cared for children is professional with no personal experience as a cared for child. The researcher believes that cared for children are a vulnerable group and it is important for organisations such as the virtual school to promote their needs and strive for positive academic achievements and positive life experiences for cared for children in line with the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004). A further underlying value held by the researcher was that there is a role for the educational psychologist in working with cared for children, in collaboration with the virtual school, as well as through school casework and wider multi-agency working.

3.4.4 Principles of appreciative inquiry.

As an element of mixed methods research design, the researcher employed an appreciative inquiry approach. Appreciative inquiry will be discussed fully in section 3.7.3 of the thesis. Here a consideration will be given to the philosophical
underpinnings of appreciative inquiry. In brief, appreciative inquiry is an affirmative approach that centres on:

...exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways this can be built on – the emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on problems. (Reed, 2007, p.2).

Appreciative inquiry is aligned with the view that there is no ultimate truth (Gomm, 2009) and that the data gathered should be understood as the reality for the participants within that organisation. As discussed in section 3.4.2, the ontological position of the researcher involved discovering the reality of the experience for the providers and recipients of the work of the virtual school. Cooperrider and Whitney (2007) suggest that we are constantly making sense of our world through relationships and our use of language and questions. It is suggested that all knowledge is social constructed through our interactions with others (Gomm, 2009). Carter (2006) suggests that appreciative inquiry takes a constructionist view that is grounded in “affirmation, appreciation and dialogue” (p.11) and that these can contribute to creating a more affirmative future for the organisations involved.

3.4.5 Positive psychology.

Congruent with the affirmative philosophy of appreciative inquiry, the researcher considered the field of positive psychology whilst carrying out the research. Positive psychology is described as the study of positive emotions, positive character traits and positive institutions. It relates to wellbeing, contentment and satisfaction in the past, flow and happiness in the present and hope and optimism for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Positive psychology is an emerging interest to the researcher and promoted by the educational psychology service in which the researcher is employed. Through the use of appreciative inquiry, the researcher hoped to establish the individual’s collaborative vision for the future and to promote the future good practice of the virtual school. The researcher acknowledges that through the use of a positive psychology and appreciative inquiry approach, positive examples are being sought and problematic
examples overlooked; this is a common criticism of the appreciative inquiry approach and will be explored further in section 3.7.3.5, where appreciative inquiry is critiqued.

3.5 Research Approaches

Historically there have been debates within social science research regarding the superiority of one of the two major paradigms; positivism or constructivism (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest that paradigms can be understood as worldviews or belief systems that guide a researcher. For most of the twentieth century, quantitative methods with a positivist view were dominant. Neutrality was expected of researchers and studies relied strongly on objective measures. As research foci shifted from basic to more applied research, qualitative methods promoting a subjective and culturally bound approach became more popular (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003).

Based on the researcher’s philosophical position described in section 3.4, a piece of research was undertaken which employed a mixed method research design. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) suggest that there are both advantages and disadvantages to positivist and constructivist approaches and that mixed methods research emerged as a “third way” as a results of these discussions. Within the mixed method research design, the researcher employed a questionnaire (Appendix B), carried out semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) and facilitated an appreciative inquiry session (Appendices D & E).

Mixed methods design is defined as “research in which the investigator collects and analyzes (sic) data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry” (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007, p.4). It is suggested that mixed methods designs fall on a continuum from monomethod (single method) designs to fully mixed methods designs (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2004). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) propose that a truly mixed methods approach would incorporate multiple approaches in all stages of the study and would include a transformation of the data and their analysis through another approach. The researcher’s data collection and analysis methods will be described in sections 3.7 and 3.8.
3.5.1 Advantages of mixed methods.

Creswell (2008) suggests that “the overall strength of a study is greater” (p.4) when mixed methods are used. Mixed methods research design is able to employ the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research designs. They are sometimes described as “pragmatic”, as they provide a pragmatic way of using the strengths of both approaches. It is suggested that mixed methods research can be used when one paradigm alone could not answer the research question (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Powell, Mihalas, Onwuegbuzie, Suldo and Daley (2008) advocate that “mixed methods research should be used when the research questions suggests that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches is likely to provide superior research findings and outcomes” (p.292). As there was limited research into the role of the virtual school, the researcher believed that a mixed methods approach would enable them to access a range of complementary data which could be triangulated in order to build a rich picture of the functioning of one virtual school. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) put forward that mixed methods are expansive and creative and allow the researcher to “follow research questions in a way that offers the best chance to obtain useful answers” (pp.17-18).

It is argued that mixed methods design emerged from the notion of triangulating different sources of data (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). Triangulation is described as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomena” (Denzin, 1978, p.291). Plano-Clark and Creswell (2008) suggest that “triangulation can capture a more complete, holistic and contextual portrayal of the unit(s) under study” and “may also uncover some unique variance which otherwise may have been neglected by single methods” (p.109). Within this piece of research the researcher used a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry to gather data to address the four research questions. As later described in table 12, certain methods were selected to primarily address one research question, with the use of triangulation of data between methods in order to develop a holistic picture of the current and future role of the virtual school.

3.5.2 Criticisms of mixed methodology.

Creswell (2011) suggests that the predominant critical comments regarding mixed methods research relate to its meaning and definition. Creswell (2011) describes
debates as to whether “mixed methods” is a “method” a “methodology”, a combination, or a way of seeing things. It has been suggested that mixed methods can be seen as a baffling list of “different types of designs with unusual names” (Creswell, 2011, p.280). It is said that mixed method research is entering its “adolescence” and there are still many unresolved issues. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) suggest that the “plethora” of research designs in relation to mixed methods can be problematic to a researcher who is new to mixed methods. In response to this, Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009, pp.267-268) proposed an integrated topology of mixed methods research design where mixed methods can be considered as a function of three dimensions described in table 7.

**Table 7: Three dimension of mixed methods research design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The level of mixing</td>
<td>Partially mixed versus fully mixed</td>
<td>In fully mixed methods, quantitative and qualitative methods are mixed within one or more stages of the research. In partially mixed methods quantitative and qualitative methods are conducted concurrently or sequentially in their entirety before being mixed at the data interpretation stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time orientation</td>
<td>Concurrent versus sequential</td>
<td>Did the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research take place at approximately the same time (concurrent) or occur one after another (sequential)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on approaches</td>
<td>Equal status versus dominant status</td>
<td>Do the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research have approximate equal emphasis (equal status) or does one component have higher priority (dominant status)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These three dimensions are modelled in figure 4.
Following Leech and Onwuegbuzie’s (2009) topology of mixed research, the researcher used a fully mixed sequential dominant status design. The design was fully mixed as the research design involved mixed quantitative and qualitative methods with one stage of the design (the questionnaire). The research was carried out in sequential stages and there was a greater emphasis on qualitative data produced as a result of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session. The researcher analysed data following each stage and considered the findings whilst planning preparing to carry out the following stage of the design.
3.5.3 Issues of reliability, validity and generalisability.

The emphasis of the researcher’s mixed methods design was largely on qualitative data collected through a “flexible” design. Robson (2002) suggests that the trustworthiness or otherwise of findings from flexible qualitative research is the subject of much debate. All research aims to be valid, reliable and generalisable; in natural science, validity of findings can be established through the replication of a study. This is not possible in real world research, where individuals and organisation have unique circumstances and relationships. As described by Bloor (1997) “Social life contains elements which are generalizable (sic) across settings ...and other elements that are particular to given settings” (p.37).

Within flexible design, reliability relates to the “common transparency and trustworthiness” of an evaluative criteria (Frost, 2011, p.195). Validity is described as “the extent to which research measures or reflects what it claims to.” (Frost, 2011, p.195). Throughout the process the research sought to ensure that their practice could be considered as both reliable and valid. Robson (2002) suggests that reliability of qualitative research can be demonstrated through an “audit trail” of records. The researcher kept raw materials and notes in a file, which could be referred back to and reflected upon throughout the research process. Photographs were taken during the coding and data analysis stages to aid the researcher’s recall of these events (see Appendix F).

Validity was considered and addressed through the use of a Dictaphone which enabled the researcher to listen back to, and check transcriptions for accuracy. Within this thesis, the researcher has described their philosophical position and data collection and analysis process, providing an explanation of how their interpretation of the data came to be. Finally the researcher has considered alternative explanations for their findings and acknowledged existing good practice of the local authority in relation to cared for children. Respondent or researcher bias was considered and triangulation of data sources was carried out during data analysis (section 3.8). Member checking was carried out, with the researcher sharing documents and themes with the respondents who had the opportunity to provide feedback.
As described in section 3.4, the research came from a critical realist stance and sought the reality of one virtual school. Although the findings of this research are specific to the context of one virtual school, the findings could be projected onto other virtual schools in a theoretical generalisation, with an acknowledgment of the importance of context and individual circumstance (Robson, 2002).

3.6 Data Access

The research took place in three stages. In sections 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 the researcher will discuss the data access, collection and analysis for each stage of the research. Critiques of the methodology employed will be made throughout.

3.6.1 The virtual school.

This piece of research made use of a mixed methods research design focusing on the realities for the staff of one virtual school and the views of the designated teachers of cared for children within that local authority. The researcher sought the views of designated teachers as they are a key role partner to the virtual school. The core purpose of both groups centres on raising the educational achievement of cared for children (DCSF, 2009a; DCSF, 2010c).

The researcher focused on the views of one local authority rather than gathering views from a range of virtual schools. As there is a dearth of research into the function of virtual schools, the researcher endeavoured to undertake an exploratory study in order to provide a rich picture of the working of one virtual school. Through the use of appreciative inquiry the researcher hoped to establish the collaborative vision for the future direction for the work of this virtual school.

The virtual school at the centre of this piece of research was established in September 2009. The research took place in a recently formed local authority in the North West of England. It is a largely rural with the majority of the population living in market towns and some of the population living in an industrial town. The local authority has a relatively older population with relatively small numbers of residents from ethnic minority communities. It is suggested that prospects for children and young people in this authority are “good” (Oneplace, 2012).
At the outset of this research, the virtual school consisted of six staff who worked to support the needs of cared for children (a head teacher, two educational consultants, a senior specialist educational psychologist, a personal education plan coordinator and an educational liaison officer). Administrative staff were also part of the team, providing clerical support. Personal correspondence with members of the virtual school team between 2010 and 2012 revealed that there had been groups of professionals working to promote the needs of cared for children prior to the formation of the virtual school. One member of the virtual school team described their experience from 2001 onwards. This had involved the individual working to enhance the educational experience of cared for children in a number of strategic positions within the local authority. Originally their role had been as a seconded teacher working alongside educational psychologists. At various times the role had been funded and managed by education, social care, or jointly by education and social care. The researcher acknowledges that this foundation for work with cared for children is likely to have positively impacted on the introduction of the virtual school model, and that in another local authority with a different history the introduction of the virtual school may have had a different impact.

The researcher was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend a number of meetings with the virtual school staff during the research design stage. During these meetings, the possibility of a piece of research being carried out was proposed. The virtual school staff were enthusiastic and committed to this concept and suggested a number of areas that were of interest to them. The researcher considered the key aims of the virtual school (Appendix G) and the current research literature, before proposing the research questions presented in section 3.2. Research questions were shared with the virtual school staff who agreed that an exploration of their current and future role would be of interest and benefit to the team.

### 3.6.2 Stages of data access.

The research took place in three stages as demonstrated in table 6. The stages involved an initial questionnaire (Appendix B) to gain the views of designated teachers, semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) with six members of the virtual school staff and an appreciative inquiry session (Appendices D & E) which involved the virtual
school head, one of the virtual school educational consultants, the specialist senior educational psychologist and a designated teacher of cared for children.

3.6.3 Stage 1 - Questionnaire to gain the views of designated teachers of cared for children.

In the initial stage of the research a questionnaire (Appendix B) was distributed to the 149 designated teachers of cared for children within the local authority. The questionnaire contained 14 questions in a variety of formats such as tick boxes, Likert type scales and questions requiring an open ended response. At the end of the questionnaire respondents had the option of providing their contact details or remaining anonymous and were asked if they would be willing to take part in further research regarding the role of the virtual school.

The questionnaire was designed to gather some background information, such as the geographical area in which the designated teacher worked and any other roles of responsibility held, alongside being designated teacher of cared for children. Levels of awareness of the virtual school and previous contact with the virtual school were established. The main focus of the questionnaire was to gain an insight to the confidence of designated teachers in supporting cared for children in their academic attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing. The researcher also sought to discover how the virtual school were currently supporting designated teachers and what additional support would be of use to designated teachers. The questionnaire concluded with an opportunity for the designated teacher to provide any information that had not been addressed by the previous questions. The researcher will describe the development and piloting of the questionnaire in sections 3.7.1 and 3.7.1.1.

The questionnaire was initially distributed by the virtual school head via email using the locally devised designated teachers distribution list; this is the typical way in which the virtual school communicates with designated teachers. The questionnaire was accompanied by an information sheet (Appendix H) explaining the purpose and scope of the questionnaire, and informing the designated teachers that completion and return of the questionnaire indicated that they were consenting to take part in this piece of research. The designated teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire electronically and return it via email to the researcher’s university email address, or to
print out the questionnaire and complete it by hand and return it to the researcher via the free local authority internal mail system. Sixteen of the 51 respondents completed the questionnaire electronically and returned it via email.

In addition, the researcher had the opportunity to attend a designated teacher network meeting approximately two weeks after the questionnaires had been electronically distributed. The researcher had the opportunity to draw attention to the questionnaire at this event, and placed questionnaires on the conference tables to enable designated teachers to complete a questionnaire on the day if they wished to. Again, the information sheet (Appendix H) was provided to ensure that the designated teachers understood the implications of completing the questionnaire and to ensure informed consent was achieved. During the meeting the researcher briefly described the purpose of the questionnaire to the designated teachers as a whole group and asked them to consider completing it during the day, making it clear that this was voluntary. The researcher did not wish to individually ask designated teachers to complete the questionnaires to avoid them feeling obliged to complete the questionnaire. A box was provided so that they could submit their responses anonymously if they wished to. Approximately 45 designated teachers attended the network day and 19 responses were placed in the box throughout the day. Approximately eight designated teachers informed the researcher that they had already returned their questionnaire via email. Approximately two weeks later, the virtual school head distributed a reminder email on behalf of the researcher, requesting that any outstanding questionnaires were returned as soon as possible.

In addition to the 16 email responses and 19 responses collected during the designated teacher network meeting, a further 16 responses were received through the internal mail, as a results of either the email distribution or reminder, or attendance at the designated teacher network meeting. At the time of distribution, there were 149 educational settings requiring a designated teacher within the local authority. 51 designated teachers responded, giving a 34% return rate, which is described as “average” for an impersonal questionnaire (Gillham, 2000).

Questionnaires were returned by designated teachers in all educational settings; primary schools, secondary schools, further education settings and special schools. The local authority in which the research took place is large in size, with a number of
contrasting areas in terms of socio-economic status. Questionnaires were returned from all areas, suggesting that the responses are generalisable within the local authority.

The researcher acknowledges that the questionnaire returns represent a self-selecting sample of designated teachers who chose to engage with the research. It is possible that individuals who were motivated to complete the questionnaire, or attend the designated teacher network meeting and complete the questionnaire did so because they were more committed to supporting the needs of cared for children, or more confident in their role. These designated teachers may have had previous positive contact with the virtual school and felt more inclined to complete the questionnaire as a result of this contact. The largest set of response came from the network meeting; the fact these designated teachers were attending the session suggests that they may have been more committed or interested in the needs of cared for children than other designated teachers. The researcher acknowledges that designated teachers who did not respond to the questionnaire may have had different views to the views of the responding designated teachers.

The researcher was surprised to discover that only 16 of the 51 respondents completed the questionnaire electronically, with the increased use of technology within educational settings, the researcher had perceived that this would be a time efficient and low cost method of data gathering. If a similar piece of research were to be carried out in the future the researcher would send a paper copy of the questionnaire through the post simultaneously, as the electronic only approach may have acted as a barrier to some willing participants responding to the questionnaire. It is also possible that the email could have been over looked, or that potential respondents may have intended to reply, but forgot to do so. A paper copy of the questionnaire addressed to the individual may have raised the status of the questionnaire and encouraged participation. Returning the questionnaire via email may have been a barrier to responding due to computer skills or anonymity issues. Although participants were not required to include their contact details, responding via email would have revealed their identity to the researcher. In future research this issue could be overcome by publishing an on-line questionnaire in which the respondent remains anonymous.
3.6.4 Stage 2 – Semi-structured interviews with the virtual school staff team.

Following completion of stage one of the research, the researcher analysed the questionnaire data (see section 3.8 for further details) and provided initial written and verbal feedback to the virtual school staff. The researcher considered this initial feedback whilst re-reading the semi-structured interview prompts (Appendix C) prior to carrying out the interviews and during the interviews. The themes emerging from the questionnaire were congruent with the literature and the researcher did not find it necessary to adapt the prompts.

3.6.4.1 The virtual school staff team.

Figure 5 shows the virtual school staff members when the research commenced.

![Diagram of virtual school staff members](image)

*Figure 5: virtual school staff members employed when the research commenced*

These six members of staff were invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview, to explore the current role of the virtual school (see Appendix C for prompts). All six members of staff consented to taking part in an individual semi-structured interview (see Appendix I for the consent form).

During the research period the team expanded to include a specialist teaching assistant. Due to the time constraints of the thesis, there was not an opportunity to go back and carry out a semi-structured interview with the specialist teaching assistant. The specialist teaching assistant may have been limited in their ability to comment on the current role of the service as a new member; the researcher acknowledges that the specialist teaching assistant will have held valid views on the work of the virtual school, and if there had been more time, it would have been interesting to gain the views of a new member of the staff team. There were also two members of administrative staff working for the virtual school; however their role was to provide clerical and organisational support to the staff detailed in figure 5, rather than to
support the educational outcomes of cared for children, therefore the researcher did not feel it was appropriate to gain their views on this occasion.

3.6.5 Stage 3 – Appreciative inquiry session.
Following the semi-structured interviews, the gathered data was analysed as described in section 3.8. The themes emerging from the interviews were considered when the researcher was preparing the PowerPoint (Appendix D) and prompts sheets (Appendix E) that were used to facilitate the appreciative inquiry session. Appreciative inquiry was selected as a methodology to address research question four, which sought to establish the collaborative visions of designated teachers and the virtual school staff as to the future role of the virtual school, building on existing good practice (for further details about appreciative inquiry please refer to section 3.7.3).

3.6.5.1 Appreciative inquiry group members – virtual school staff.
The six virtual school staff members were invited to take part in an appreciative inquiry session and all six agreed to take part in the session. On the day the following members were present (figure 6):

![Virtual school head](image1)

![Educational consultant A](image2)

![Senior specialist educational psychologist](image3)

*Figure 6: Virtual school appreciative inquiry group members*

During the research period educational consultant B broke a bone and was absent from work during the appreciative inquiry data collection period, making it impossible for them to attend the session. The personal education plan and educational liaison officer were not able to attend the appreciative inquiry session due to other emergency work commitments on the front line with cared for children. The researcher acknowledges that only three out of the six interviewed members of the virtual school were able to attend the appreciative inquiry session, which could be considered a limitation. It is possible that members who were unable to attend may have different priorities for the future work of the virtual school. Although analysis of the semi-structured interviews suggested similarities between the views of virtual
school staff members, individuals placed emphasis on certain issues depending on the core function of their role. The researcher considered changing the date of the appreciative inquiry session, but decided against it for logistical reasons (discussed further in section 3.6.5.3). As suggested by Robson (2002) real world research is rarely problem free, and the unavailability of virtual school staff members reflects the complexities of working within a busy local authority within different system, with conflicting priorities.

3.6.5.2 Appreciative inquiry group members: Selection of designated teachers.
In the final question of the questionnaire, the researcher asked if the responding designated teacher was willing to be contacted to take part in further research regarding their work with cared for children. Forty two of the 51 respondents were willing to be contacted to take part in the later stages of research. The researcher required approximately six designated teachers to take part in the appreciative inquiry session which would create an equal balance between virtual school staff members and designated teachers. In the appreciative inquiry literature there is no indication as to the number of individuals who should take part in an appreciative inquiry session. Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003) suggest “an important criterion in selecting participants is their ability to bring viewpoints and experiences from many different levels of and from many different perspectives about the organization” (p.35). With this in mind, eight designated teachers were selected through purposive sampling and approached to take part in the appreciative inquiry session. These designated teachers were selected to provide a purposive sample, of designated teachers from various geographical locations within the local authority and representing each school type (primary, secondary, further education and special). Designated teachers were provided with information about the appreciative inquiry session (Appendix J) and asked to indicate whether they would be interested in attending the day. Six of the eight designated teachers indicated that they were willing to attend the day and a date was agreed by all potential participants via email communication.

3.6.5.3 Unforeseen difficulties in coordinating the appreciative inquiry group.
Communication between the researcher and group members was continued via email, and the researcher sent out an agenda the week before the appreciative inquiry session took place; at this time all designated teachers responded and indicated that
they would be able to attend the session. Unfortunately the night before the appreciative inquiry session, all but one of the designated teachers emailed or telephoned to inform the researcher that they were not able to attend the session. Valid reasons were provided, typically involving front line work with a cared for child or another vulnerable pupil, such as attending an emergency personal education plan meeting or a child protection meeting.

A number of the designated teachers indicated that they would be willing to take part in the research if the day could be rescheduled. The researcher discussed this possibility with their local authority supervisor and university staff; it was agreed that the appreciative inquiry session should go ahead with the three virtual school staff members and one designated teacher who were able to attend the session. The date of the appreciative inquiry session had already been changed once as the original date fell on a day of national strike action. The second date was selected following correspondence from all parties and the researcher was concerned about being able to collect the data in time to complete the thesis within the time requirements set out by The University of Manchester. Upon reflection, the second date was close to Christmas; a busy time in schools in terms of celebrations and meetings regarding vulnerable pupils before the school break. However the date had been established over two months before hand, and it was difficult to co-ordinate the diaries of the virtual school staff, designated teachers and researcher to select a new date. In addition, a new date would not negate the potential for participants needing to attend emergency meetings or being unwell in the future. The researcher again reflected on the real world nature of research and the competing demands on individual’s time (Robson, 2002).

It was decided that the appreciative inquiry session should go ahead with the following four participants:

Virtual school head  Senior specialist educational psychologist  Educational consultant A  Designated teacher 1

Figure 7: Appreciative inquiry group members
3.7 Data Collection Methods

Table 8 provides an overview of the data collection methods used within this piece of mixed methods design research:

**Table 8: Data collection methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?</td>
<td>Questionnaire (Appendix B) distributed to all 149 designated teachers in the local authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?</td>
<td>Individual semi-structured interviews carried out with six staff members from the virtual school for cared for children (see Appendix C for question prompts). Facilitators and barriers themes were also gained from the designated teacher questionnaire and appreciative inquiry session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?</td>
<td>Individual semi-structured interviews carried out with six staff members from the virtual school for cared for children. Suggestions made during the appreciative inquiry session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?</td>
<td>Appreciative inquiry Session with three members of the virtual school staff and one designated teacher (see Appendix D for PowerPoint and Appendix E for prompts used to facilitate the appreciative inquiry session). Suggestions were also made during the semi-structured interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher will now discuss the selection of the data collection methods described in table 8.
3.7.1 Stage One – Questionnaire.

A questionnaire (Appendix B) was distributed to gather data to address the research question:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

This questionnaire was produced by the researcher, following a thorough review of the literature presented in chapter two. The questionnaire in the present research focused on designated teachers’ levels of confidence in supporting the academic and emotional needs of cared for children. Questions sought to establish support gained from the virtual school and areas of further support required by designated teachers. In Berridge et al.’s (2009) evaluation of the virtual school pilot, a questionnaire was employed. The researcher therefore considered the questions carefully, to ensure that the questionnaire within this piece of research was distinct and different. The focus of Berridge et al.’s (2009) questionnaire was on how the cared for children were progressing at school, information sharing and awareness of the work of the virtual school. Levels of confidence of designated teachers or support offered by the virtual school were not addressed.

There are a number of advantages and disadvantages of employing a questionnaire (presented in table 9, as summarised by Edwards and Talbot, 1999 (pp.85-86) which were considered by the researcher.)
### Table 9: Advantages and disadvantages of questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of using a questionnaire</th>
<th>Disadvantages of using a questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They give useful background information</td>
<td>Recipients don’t like them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They can be administered by post to a lot of people at the same time in one setting</td>
<td>The descriptive data they produce rarely allow you fully to demonstrate your skills of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are reliable and can be administered before and after an intervention</td>
<td>You often need to chase up non-returns to ensure that your sample is appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They give only quite superficial information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When designing the questionnaire, the researcher referred to the guidance provided by Edwards and Talbot (1999, pp.86-90) and Robson (2002, pp. 241-251) with the aim of ensuring that the questions asked would provide answers to the research questions and meet the aims of the thesis. Robson (2002) describes the usefulness of Czaja and Blair’s (1996) model (figure 8) in ensuring that questions fit into the overall research process and address the research questions. This model considers the data collection process at the level of the researcher, interviewer and respondent. The requirements placed on the respondent to interpret the questions, recall the relevant information and report that information to the researcher is highlighted and was considered by the researcher whilst designing the questionnaire.
In this piece of research an interviewer was not employed, as the designated teachers self-completed the questionnaires. This model was also considered when designing the semi-structured interview prompts (Appendix C).

Robson (2002) suggests that:

...a major part in the art and craft of producing a survey questionnaire is in writing it in such a way that respondents understand what you want from them, and are happy to give it to you, while the questions at the same time remain faithful to the research task. (p.242)

The researcher referred to information from Edwards and Talbot (1999, pp. 86-87) presented in table 10 when designing the questionnaire.
Table 10: Producing a questionnaire

1. Take a blank piece of paper and write your research question in the middle of it.
2. Brainstorm the types of information needed to answer your research questions.
3. Group the brainstormed ideas into areas.
4. Look at them again – do you really need all that information? Is there any overlap?
5. Start to write questions avoiding negatives and double negatives. Have only one idea in each question. Consider whether you want the question to be open or closed.
6. Consider your analysis – will the question require a written response, tick box, ranking etc.
7. Try to avoid response sets which include a long run of yes/ no questions.
8. Check there is a logical progression in the order of the questions.
9. Try to keep the questionnaire reasonably short.

Consideration was given to ensuring that language was understandable and unambiguous, yet true to the research aims and questions. Robson (2002) provides detailed advice regarding the wording of questions, based on the work of de Vaus (1991, pp. 83-86). Table 11 summarises some considerations that were relevant to the current research, please see Robson (2002, pp. 245-246 for a comprehensive list).

Table 11: Considering the wording of questions

1. Keep the language simple and avoid jargon.
2. Keep questions short.
3. Avoid double barrelled or leading questions.
4. Avoid negative questions.
5. Ask questions the respondents are likely to have the knowledge needed to answer.
6. Remove ambiguity.
7. Avoid direct questions on sensitive topics.
8. Avoid creating opinions.
9. Avoid unnecessary or objectionable detail e.g. income or age.
10. Avoid producing response sets.

3.7.1.1 Piloting the questionnaire.

The researcher piloted the questionnaire before it was distributed to designated teachers within the local authority. A pilot study gives the opportunity for a questionnaire to be examined closely before the main study is undertake (Edwards and Talbot, 1999). Pilot studies allow for modifications to take place such as changes to the instructions, sample, question content and sequence in which the questions are presented. Bell (2006) suggests that piloting an instrument such as a questionnaire
gives you clues as to which information is likely to be of interest and allows you to make adjustments to your data-collecting instrument.

Throughout the design stage, the questionnaire was discussed with the specialist senior educational psychologist, university supervisor and fellow trainee educational psychologists. Recommendations from the University of Manchester Doctorate Thesis Panel to reduce the length of the questionnaire, with the intention of increasing the response rate were also acted upon. Following these discussions, the questionnaire was piloted with four teachers personally known to the researcher, who worked in a neighbouring local authority with a similar demographic to the authority in which the research was carried out. One of these teachers was a designated teacher in their local authority, two were special educational needs coordinators and one was on the senior leadership team within their school. In personal correspondence all reported that they had taught a cared for children at some point in their career, although none of them felt they were particularly knowledgeable regarding the needs of cared for children and none reported a personal interest in the needs of cared for children.

Following discussion and the pilot, the following adaptations were made to the questionnaire:

Following advice from the thesis panel:

- The length of the questionnaire (Appendix B) was reduced from eight sides of A4 paper to four sides, with the aim of increasing the response rate.
- An estimated completion time of 20 minutes was added to the questionnaire information sheet (Appendix H) to encourage responses.
- The number of open ended questions was reduced with the aim of increasing the response rate.
- Any questions which were duplicates or over lapped were removed or combined into one question.
Following discussions with the senior specialist educational psychologist and pilot teachers:

- The wording of scaling questions was adapted from the traditional ‘strongly agree ... strongly disagree’ to reflect the focus of research question one. E.g. ‘how confident ...’ was answerable by selecting an option from very confident, quite confident, neutral, not very confident and not at all confident.

- Personal details such as age bracket and gender were removed as it was decided that this information was not relevant to the research questions.

### 3.7.2 Semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of addressing research questions two and three:

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

The researcher pre-determined the questions to be included in the semi-structured interview (Appendix C), following a review of the current literature, the initial analysis of the questionnaire data and a consideration of the research questions and aims of the thesis. The researcher had the flexibility to ask the questions in an alternate order, omit questions that did not appear appropriate and add questions based on the participant’s responses to questions. The researcher found the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews helpful, as the staff all had a slightly different focus, depending on their role.

Edwards and Talbot (1999) stated a number of advantages and disadvantages of the use of semi-structured interviews, as presented in table 12.
### Table 12: Advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of using a semi-structured interview</th>
<th>Disadvantages of using a semi-structured interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A good response rate</td>
<td>They are time consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further questions can be asked to clarify answers</td>
<td>They can be intrusive for the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They provide rich data</td>
<td>Analysis is time consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants usually enjoy them</td>
<td>Organising the interviews can be difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-structured interviews were carried out by the researcher over a period of approximately two weeks. Each semi-structured interview was carried out individually, and recorded on a digital Dictaphone with the interviewee’s permission (Appendix I). This recording was then transcribed in order for thematic analysis to take place. A number of advantages and disadvantages of making use of a digital tape recorder are detailed in table 13 (taken from Robson, 2002):

### Table 13: Advantages and disadvantages of using a tape recorder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of using a tape recorder</th>
<th>Disadvantages of using a tape recorder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The tape can be replayed to check wording and to aid coding</td>
<td>A tape running can inhibit honest responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tape can be played back to participants</td>
<td>Permission must be sought and clients informed of how and for how long the tape recording will be kept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It allows the facilitator to maintain eye contact with the participant which may help the session to flow</td>
<td>Transcription is very time consuming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher developed positive relationships with the virtual school staff members during the research process. It is acknowledged that this positive relationship could have both advantages and disadvantages. The researcher believes that this positive
relationship encouraged the staff members to make time to participate in the interviews. Virtual school staff members were given the opportunity to provide informed consent and withdraw from the research at any time. It is possible that because good relationships had been built between the researcher and the staff and the fact that their line manager, the virtual school head was involved in the research, may have made it more difficult for the staff members to decline to participate or withdraw from the research if they wished to do so. It is also possible that the relationship established between the researcher and the staff may have affected their responses to interview questions; staff may have tailored their responses to fit the perceived needs of the researcher.

The researcher considered using a focus group methodology in place of the semi-structured interviews. Focus groups are an efficient method of data collection and participants can be stimulated by comments and thoughts from others (Robson, 2002). Despite these advantages the researcher opted to use a semi-structured interview; the researcher wanted to gain the individual views of each member of the virtual school and was aware that strong personalities can take over in group situations making it difficult for less assertive members to speak (Bell, 2005). Group members may also moderate their views or keep quiet if they are contrary to the prevailing opinion (Denscombe, 1998). The researcher acknowledges that a group approach was used within the appreciative inquiry session which is critiqued in section 3.7.3.6.

Although all members of the virtual school and designated teachers have been anonymised in this report, as has the name of the local authority, the research will be identifiable to a small number of people, including the participants and those who are aware of the name of the local authority in which the trainee educational psychologist was based. These factors may have influenced the participants’ responses to some questions. The participants were asked to comment on their own practice, it is possible that they may wish to focus on the positives of their practice rather than the negatives; individuals bring their own values and agendas to a piece of research which can be explicit or implicit. The researcher was able to negate these issues to some extent through the triangulation of data from a number of sources.
3.7.2.1 Piloting the semi-structured interview prompts.

The researcher had used semi-structured interview methods in previous pieces of research, so did not feel it was necessary to pilot this stage of the research, although the prompt questions (Appendix C) were discussed and revised with the senior specialist educational psychologist and university supervisor. This enabled the researcher to consider the links between the research questions and the semi-structured interview prompts and combine any duplicate questions and remove any unnecessary questions.

3.7.3 Stage Three – Appreciative inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry was used to address research question four:

4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

3.7.3.1 What is Appreciative inquiry?

Appreciative inquiry is a tool of organisational development that was introduced by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). It originates from an organisational and health care background and there are limited examples of appreciative inquiry being used within the education sector (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins & Hetherington, 2009), especially in research regarding vulnerable groups (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b) and within a mixed methods approach. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) commence their introductory text by providing definitions of the terms “appreciative” and “inquire”:

**Appreciative** – Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (healthy, vitality, excellence) to living systems. 2. To increase in value, e.g., the economy has appreciated in value. Synonyms: value, prize, esteem, and honour.

**Inquire** – 1. The act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities. Synonyms: discover, search, systematically explore, and study. (p.7).
Appreciative inquiry actively seeks out the best of what is already working well within an organisation (Carter, Ruhe, Weyer, Litaker, Fry & Stange, 2006). It is described as:

...a simple but radical approach to understanding the social world...

Appreciative inquiry concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then tries to work out ways in which this can be built on – the emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems. (Reed, 2007, p.2)

Appreciative inquiry is based on eight assumptions (Hammond, 1996):

1) In every society, organisation or group, something works
2) What we focus on becomes our reality
3) Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
4) The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way
5) People have more confidence to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
6) If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
7) It is important to value differences
8) The language we use creates our reality (p.20).

There are also five core principles of appreciative inquiry methodology, as described by Mohr and Watkins (2002, p.5) and summarised in table 14:
Table 14: Core principles of appreciative inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Constructionist Principle</td>
<td>Our organizations evolve in the direction of the images we create based on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the questions we ask as we strive to understand the systems at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Principle of Simultaneity</td>
<td>Change begins the moment we ask questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Anticipatory Principle</td>
<td>Our behaviour in the present is influenced by the future we anticipate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Poetic Principle</td>
<td>Just as poets have no constraints on what they can write about, we have no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>boundaries on what we can inquire and learn from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Positive Principle</td>
<td>The more positive the questions used to guide a change process, the more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>long-lasting and effective that process will be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7.3.2 The use of appreciative inquiry within educational research.

Appreciative inquiry was selected to develop the collaborative vision of the future role of the virtual school by seeking out what was already working well and building upon this success. The method was selected as the virtual school were very experienced and enthusiastic individuals. The researcher felt that an approach which celebrates positives and builds upon strengths would be well received by this group. Carter et al. (2006) suggest that “In contrast to traditional change approaches that emphasize problems ... the crucial insight in appreciative inquiry is that meaningful and fundamental change occurs through discovering and valuing the strengths, assets, vision, and ideals of individuals in an organisation." (p.195). It is recognised that Appreciate Inquiry would not have been an appropriate method to use if there had not been a history of good practice within the local authority, or around a problematic social issue (Shuayb et al, 2009).
3.7.3.3 The appreciative inquiry process.

Appreciative inquiry is structured by a “4D” cycle which comprises of discovery, dreaming, design and destiny to create a shared vision for the future work of an organisation. This 4D cycle can be found in figure 9 (taken from Carter, 2006, p.54).

![Diagram of the 4D cycle]

*Figure 9: The 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry*

The researcher will now describe the implementation of the 4D cycle within this piece of research.

3.7.3.4 Piloting appreciative inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry was a new method to the researcher; therefore the researcher was particularly keen to pilot the method before carrying it out as part of the main research. Appreciative inquiry was trialled twice, initially with the educational psychology team who discussed best practice when using the group consultation approach employed within the authority. The second pilot took place with a group of special educational needs coordinators who work in a cluster of schools where the
researcher is the link educational psychologist. Here best practice in working with children with dyslexic type difficulties was discussed.

A number of issues arose as a result of the appreciative inquiry pilot:

- The researcher was able to consider issues of timing and discuss whether to have three individual appreciative inquiry sessions or one longer session covering the first three Ds (the latter was chosen).
- The pros and cons of presenting information via a PowerPoint presentation were considered as opposed to a flip chart approach. The researcher used both resources during the thesis appreciative inquiry session.
- Participants were initially reluctant to talk about their peak experiences, although with encouragement they did so. This is likely to be because as a society we are not usually encouraged to “boast” about our achievements. In the virtual school appreciative inquiry session this was pointed out to the participants as an area that some participants can find uncomfortable and the virtual school were reminded of the positive nature of appreciative inquiry.
- The educational psychology team asked further questions about the “provocative proposals” stage of appreciative inquiry; this allowed the researcher to further consult the literature around this issue and feel more confident in their understanding of the purpose of provocative proposals for the research appreciative inquiry session.

3.7.3.6 The use of appreciative inquiry within this piece of research.

Three members of the virtual school staff and a designated teacher took part in the appreciative inquiry session. The session was digitally recorded with the permission of the participants (Appendices I & J) to allow it to be transcribed for thematic analysis. Photographs were also taken of the flip chart paper used within the session to be appended in the thesis (Appendix K); the researcher acted as both facilitator and scribe during the appreciative inquiry session. The researcher felt that they were able to maintain eye contact and the flow of the session whilst scribing with the small group size. In the future the researcher would consider the use of a scribe, to enable them to solely focus on facilitation.
Within this piece of research the first three stages of the 4D model (discovery, dreaming and design) were carried out in one session. It was a challenge to get participants to attend one session and the researcher, virtual school head and senior specialist educational psychologist felt that participants would be more likely to attend for one long session, than three short sessions, particularly in light of the difficulties in coordinating a mutually convenient date (see section 3.6.5.3). The fourth D (destiny) was beyond the scope of this thesis, as time restrictions meant it was not possible to complete this stage; the implications of this are considered in section 3.7.3.5.5.

The researcher facilitated the appreciative inquiry session and used a PowerPoint (Appendix D) and prompt sheets (Appendix E). The questions asked were based on the work of Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2003) who describe how to pose appreciative inquiry questions in order to elicit a “peak experience” or “high point” and create an atmosphere of positive change. It was suggested that appreciative inquiry questions encourage participants to move forward by asking them to describe “three concrete wishes” for a preferred future.

3.7.3.5.1 Discovery.
In the discovery stage of the cycle, participants were required to “appreciate what gives life” to the organisation. Here questions were asked to find out about the organisation and what was already working well. The participants were directed to describe a peak experience and consider what made this possible (see slides 8 & 9 from the PowerPoint – Appendix D).

The researcher had planned for the participants to work in pairs and share a peak experience describing their high point in working with cared for children. These were then intended to be fed back to the whole group to create a “‘buzz’ of energy in the room” (Carter et al. 2006, p. 196). As there were only four participants, the participants shared their peak experiences with all other members in the first instance on this occasion. Despite the small group size, the researcher believes that a buzz was still created. Personal correspondence with the specialist senior educational psychologist suggested that this was experienced by group members.
3.7.3.5.2 Dreaming.

In the dreaming stage the participants were asked to envisage “what might be” and what their organisation would look like in the future if the peak experience were able to happen more often. Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) describe the dream stage as “a vision of a better world, a powerful purpose and a compelling statement of strategic intent.” (p. 325) During the dream stage participants were asked to consider what would practice might look like if the peak experience happened more often and to describe three concrete wishes for the future of the virtual school (see slides 12 & 13, Appendix D). Individuals came up with their dream independently and then shared them with the whole group.

3.7.3.5.3 Design.

In the design phase the participants determine “what will be”. Here participants work together to plan the future of their organisation, based on the examples that emerged in the discover stage regarding existing good practice. Carter (2006) suggests “it is precisely because it is grounded within existing organisational achievements that the ideal that emerges is not completely unrealistic or unachievable.” (p.56). At this stage the participants were asked to prioritise which steps are to be taken first, considering what is the smallest change that would make the biggest difference to the organisation (slide 17, Appendix D).

3.7.3.5.4 Provocative Proposals.

Provocative Proposals are described as statements that sum up “what could be” (Carter, 2006). The power of provocative proposals lies with the fact that they are constructed by the participants, based on their own experiences and values, and their knowledge of resources within the organisation. Hammond (1998) suggests that this can make them both aspirational and transformative. The group members were asked to develop provocative proposals (slide 18, Appendix D).

The participants produced an action plan at this stage (Appendix L), which was shared with the group members following the appreciative inquiry session. The virtual school reported that they planned to incorporate the action plan into their future planning for the work of the virtual school.
3.7.3.5 Destiny.
The final stage of the 4D cycle is “destiny” where participants comes together to review, communicate and celebrate their accomplishments. Carter et al. (2006) suggest that the destiny phase ensures that planned actions are carried out, although its purpose is to be reflective and allow participants to share successes and skills learnt throughout the process, which can then be applied in the future.

Unfortunately time restrictions meant that there has not been an opportunity to carry out the destiny phases to date. The researcher acknowledges that it would have been desirable to complete the appreciative inquiry cycle; literature regarding the implications of not completing the cycle was searched for, but the researcher was not able to locate such literature. As destiny seeks to “sustain the envisioned future(s) or ‘what will be’ through supporing (sic) [supporting] the ongoing learning and innovation” (Carter, 2006, p.11) the researcher suggests that there is a risk of the envisioned future not being carried out, if the destiny stage is not completed. It is hoped that the actions will be carried out as the group members appeared to be passionate supporters of cared for children. A written action plan was created by the appreciative inquiry group members; as it was based on their perceived areas of need, and they invested time and energy in developing the action plan, it is hoped that this will help to sustain change. The workload of educational professionals is well recognised (Francis, 2000; Harker et al. 2004) so could serve as a barrier to carrying out the actions.

3.7.3.5 Advantages and disadvantages of appreciative inquiry.
There are a number of criticism and questions around the use of appreciative inquiry. Reed (2007) suggests that appreciative inquiry has been accused of being “naive and idealistic in the way that it concentrates on positive experiences ... focusing on positive aspects to the extent that it can ignore or suppress accounts of negative experiences.” (p.39). It is suggested that as appreciative inquiry focuses solely on the positives, problems could be overlooked (Espinosa, Roebuck and Rohe, 2002). It is also suggested that appreciative inquiry is not appropriate for use with problematic social phenomena, such as racism or bullying or if the participants have limited experience of the topic in question (Shuayb et al., 2009). In the current piece of research the group members were experienced in the topic, with their everyday work being based in the
virtual school. Concerns have been raised about the use of “evangelical” terminology such as “destiny and dreaming” arguing that this may reduce perceived scientific rigour. The researcher introduced the terminology to the group members, but did not experience any resistance to it.

Advantages of appreciative inquiry include that problems and weakness are often much easier to address when evaluation takes an appreciative stance (McNamee, 2003); it is suggested that difficulties can be discussed, but within an appreciative context. Ward, Wright and Baker (2005) reported that appreciative inquiry can prevent people becoming “scapegoats” during difficult periods of change and noted high levels of group participation associated with the approach. It is suggested that the main strengths of appreciative inquiry within an educational context are it provides a new outlook, avoids stereotypical answers, empowers participants and identifies good practice. In this piece of research the participants had a wealth of experience in supporting the need of cared for children, so the researcher felt it was an appropriate methodology.

3.8 Data Analysis Methods

Table 15 provides an overview of the data analysis methods used within this piece of research.
Table 15: Data analysis methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Data analysis method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?</td>
<td>Questionnaire (Appendix B) distributed to all designated teachers in the local authority.</td>
<td>Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis following Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke, (2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?</td>
<td>Individual semi-structured interviews carried out with six staff members from the virtual school for cared for children (see Appendix C for question prompts). Facilitators and barriers themes gained from the designated teacher questionnaire and appreciative inquiry session.</td>
<td>Thematic analysis following Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke, (2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?</td>
<td>Individual semi-structured interviews carried out with six staff members from the virtual school for cared for children. Suggestions made during the appreciative inquiry session.</td>
<td>Thematic analysis following Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke, (2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils</td>
<td>Appreciative inquiry Session with three members of the virtual school staff and one designated teacher (see Appendix D for PowerPoint and Appendix E for prompts used to facilitate the appreciative inquiry session).</td>
<td>Thematic analysis following Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke, (2006).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.8.1 Descriptive statistics.

Descriptive statistics are a way of representing an important aspect of a set of data by a single number (Robson, 2002). For the purposes of this thesis, descriptive statistics will be used to analyse responses to closed questions in the questionnaire relating to awareness of the work of the virtual school, contact with the virtual school and
confidence in supporting cared for children in their academic needs and emotional needs. The researcher will comment on the percentages of respondents answering these questions with a certain responses, such as “37% of respondents suggested that they know a lot about the support provided by the virtual school for cared for children.”

3.8.2 Transcription.
The digitally recorded semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session were transcribed in order to enable the researcher to engage in thematic analysis. It is suggested that “while it may seem time consuming, frustrating, and at times boring” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87) the process of transcription is an excellent way to familiarise yourself with the data (Riessman, 1993). Bird (2005) argues that transcription should be seen as a “key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” (p.227) and Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) suggest that transcription is an interpretative act where meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting words onto paper.

The researcher was guided by the writings of McLellan, MacQueen and Neidig (2003) whilst completing transcription. McLellan et al. (2003) produced a transcription protocol in response to the increased use of qualitative methods of data collection and the impact of inadequate transcription on data analysis (MacQueen and Milstein, 1999). McLellan et al. (2003) highlighted that transforming speech into words is challenging, as the transcriber must make decisions regarding issues such as incomplete sentences, overlapping sentences and the positioning of punctuation to ensure that intent or emphasis is not changed. It is suggested that what to include should be driven by the research questions the analysis attempts to answer (McLellan et al. 2003). To address the research questions, the researcher transcribed all whole words and utterances. The researcher used an ellipse to indicate a short pause in speech. Upon completion of the transcription, the researcher listened to the audio and read through the transcripts to ensure that the transcripts were accurate.

3.8.3 Thematic analysis.
Thematic analysis is described as a foundational method for qualitative analysis and involves the identifying, analysing and reporting of themes (patterns) within data
Thematic analysis is independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of approaches from realist methods to essentialist and social constructionist approaches (Aronson, 1994; Roulston, 2001). Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest “Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p.78).

A key advantage of thematic analysis is its flexibility; there are no “set” ways of carrying out thematic analysis, although guidance is given by authors such as Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Although thematic analysis is “flexible” it is acknowledged that clear guidelines are required to avoid an “anything goes” criticism that has been applied to qualitative research in the past. The researcher based their thematic analysis on the work of Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure that the thematic analysis was undertaken in a structured way; a pictorial representation of the researcher’s approach to thematic analysis is presented in Appendix M.

Thematic analysis is described as the process of the analyst noticing and looking for patterns of meaning within the data, and reporting the content and meaning of these themes in the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis is not a linear process, but a recursive one requiring the analyst to move back and forth as required throughout the six phases detailed in figure 10:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 10: Phases of thematic analysis*
Following transcription initial codes were generated; coding is described as a helpful method of data reduction (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The researcher created codes based upon established criteria (specific topics and words related to the research questions) and on recurrent issues in the text. The creation of codes based around recurrent issues led to the researcher revising their research questions, to include key issues of interest such as the perceived advantages of the virtual school model over previous models of service delivery (addressed in research question three).

Once established, codes were put into a coloured font and numbered, to aid the research in locating the transcript and location in which the code was originally presented. Additionally the use of coloured fonts enabled the researcher to establish at a glance whether an issue was triangulated amongst members of the virtual school or specific to the role of an individual. Codes were then organised into basic, organisational and global themes, following Attride-Stirling (2001) and described in table 16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Basic themes</strong></td>
<td>A statement of belief anchored around a central notion. Basic themes need to be read within the context of other basic themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organising themes</strong></td>
<td>Organising themes organise basic themes into clusters of similar issues. They enhance the meaning and significance of a broader theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Global themes</strong></td>
<td>Global themes are super-ordinate themes that encompass the principal metaphors in the data as a whole. Global themes group sets of organising themes to present an argument, position or assertion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attride-Stirling (2001) presents basic, organising and global themes in thematic networks, as demonstrated in figure 11:
Figure 11: Attride-Stirling’s presentation of themes

In the results section of this piece of research, themes will be presented as in figure 12, due to availability of appropriate software:

Figure 12: Presentation of themes in the current piece of research
Once generated, themes were checked with the participants to ensure that they were an accurate reflection of the opinions expressed during the semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session. The researcher did not find it necessary to make any changes to the themes after sharing them with the participants.

3.9 Ethical Principles and Considerations

Prior to commencing this piece of research the researcher presented a research proposal to the University of Manchester’s School of Education Thesis Panel. Recommendations were made by the panel on 23rd February 2011 which were considered by the researcher, discussed with the university supervisor and acted upon. An application was subsequently made to The University of Manchester’s Committee on the Ethics of Research on Human Beings, where the researcher attended a committee meeting and clarified points of the thesis to the panel. Ethical approval was achieved on 3rd May 2011. On 3rd August 2011, an application was made to the panel to make minor changes to the methodology; these were approved on 29th September 2011.

This research was completed in accordance with The University of Manchester’s Ethical Good Practice guidelines as well as within the Health Professions Council’s “guidance on conduct and ethics for students” (2009) and the British Psychological Society’s “Code of Ethics and Conduct” (2009). The researcher’s Ethical Good Practice Statement can be viewed in Appendix N.

3.9.1 Informed Consent.

The researcher ensured that informed consent was given by each participant; this was achieved through and information sheet. The information sheet (Appendix H) accompanying the questionnaire informed the designated teacher that by returning the questionnaire they were providing consent for their response to be used within the research. Information sheets were produced and provided to participants who took part in the semi-structured interviews and the appreciative inquiry session (Appendices I & J).

3.9.2 Confidentiality and data storage.

Ethical considerations were made and the researcher was keen to protect the anonymity of participants in this write up of this thesis. The local authority has not
been identified beyond being described as an authority in the North West of England. Throughout this thesis the virtual school staff have been identified as virtual school 1, virtual school 2 and so on. As there is only one virtual school head teacher, personal education plan coordinator, education liaison officer and senior specialist educational psychologist and two educational consultants, placing their job titles alongside quotes could make the individual identifiable to readers of the thesis. The researcher decided to number the staff members in the order they engaged in the semi-structured interview, which is known only to the researcher. The researcher was keen to be able to demonstrate that the quotes presented in this thesis represent the views of all six individuals.

The designated teacher who took part in the appreciative inquiry session is referred to as designated teacher 1; although this makes the individual’s quotes identifiable to the members of the virtual school who took part in the appreciative inquiry session, they heard the designated teachers views during the session, and it is not possible to identify which of the 149 schools in the local authority designated teacher 1 represented. Before carrying out the semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session the researcher informed the participants that any identifying details such as individual names, schools and cared for children’s names would be anonymised.

All paper documentation produced as a result of this thesis has been securely stored in a locked cabinet within the local authority in which the researcher is employed. All digital files produced during analysis and as a result of the use of a Dictaphone were password protected and stored on an encrypted laptop, with a second copy being stored on an encrypted memory stick, locked in a secure cabinet. All documentation will be stored in this way until December 2017 when they will be destroyed, following the guidance of the University of Manchester.

3.9.3 Opportunity to withdraw from the research.
Participants were frequently reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without the need to provide an explanation; this was also stated in consent forms (Appendices H, I & J).
3.9.4 Avoidance of Deception.
There was no intentional deception of participants at any time during the research. The aims of the research were made clear through the use of information sheet. Researcher contact details were provided to all participants to enable them to ask the researcher any questions if they wished to.

3.9.5 Researcher Competence.
Throughout the research, the researcher ensured that they always operated within the limits of their knowledge, skills, training and experience. Although no ethical dilemmas arose, supervision was received from the fieldwork supervisor and University, and any such issues could have been discussed at these times.

3.9.6 Debriefing and feeding back key findings.
The designated teachers were provided with the researcher’s contact details at the end of the questionnaire and encouraged to get in touch if they had any questions; none of the designated teachers chose to do so. The virtual school staff were also encouraged to get in touch with the researcher if they wished to debrief, but none requested this opportunity. It is possible that within the context of a busy local authority individuals would be less likely to seek out a debriefing opportunity. A debrief form may have facilitated this process, or debriefing may not have been deemed necessary as the data collection covered issues which would be typically covered within the staff’s working day.

Following completion and examination of this piece of research, the researcher will provide feedback to all designated teachers in the local authority regarding the findings of the questionnaire. This will be done verbally at a designated teacher network meeting. The researcher will also produce a short summary of the findings and post it, addressed to each designated teacher.

The researcher will attend a virtual school staff meeting and provide a verbal summary of the main findings of the thesis; the researcher will also produce an “executive summary” of the research for the virtual school staff.
3.10 Time Line and Budget and Risk Analysis
At the planning stage, the researcher designed a time line, budget, risk analysis and contingency plan. Some changes in time frames were necessary due to the real world nature of the research; these changes can be observed in the right most column of Appendix O. Some “risk” issues arose and these can be observed in the right most column of Appendix P.

3.11 Summary of the Methodology
In this chapter the researcher has described the use of a mixed methods research design and their philosophical stance. Participant sampling and recruitment, data collection and data analysis have been described, along with a critique of the methodology employed and ethical considerations. In chapter four the researcher will present an analysis of the findings of this research.
4. Results

In this chapter the findings of the research will be presented. The quantitative and qualitative findings will be presented following the analysis of the questionnaires, along with the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the results.

This piece of research aimed to explore the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing. In addition, it aimed to provide a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry within a mixed methods research design regarding a vulnerable group within educational research; as identified by Woollam (2010a; Woollam, 2010b), there are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry in this context.

In order to explore the current and future role, the researcher employed a mixed methods research design. A questionnaire (Appendix B, section 3.6.3), semi-structured interviews (Appendix C, section 3.6.4) and appreciative inquiry (Appendices D & E, section 3.6.5) were utilised within this mixed methods approach. Data from these sources was triangulated in order to develop an understanding of the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children, as described in sections 3.7 and 3.8.

A review of the literature presented in chapter two, suggested that whilst there was existing knowledge base around promoting positive outcomes for cared for children, there was limited knowledge regarding the functioning of the virtual school model, due to it being a contemporary model which was piloted between 2007 and 2009. The pilot of the role of the virtual school head was evaluated by Berridge et al. in 2009; but there was a lack of wider literature discussing the functioning of the virtual school. There was also a lack of knowledge regarding the levels of confidence of designated teachers in supporting the needs of cared for children and the types of support they found useful.
4.1 Research Questions

Four research questions were proposed following a systematic literature review and collaborative discussion with the virtual school; research question three was adapted to include the perceived advantages of the virtual school model, following initial reading of the transcribed semi-structured interview data, prior to the development of codes:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

4.2 Thematic Analysis

In order to explore the current and future role of the virtual school in raising academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing, the researcher carried out thematic analysis following the recommendations of Attride-Stirling (2001) and Braun and Clarke (2006) (see section 3.8.3 for further details). The questionnaire, semi-structured interview transcripts and appreciative inquiry transcript were coded and organised into basic, organising and global themes (see Appendix M for further details). The basic data codes were triangulated in order to explore the current and future role of the virtual school. Data which did not address the research questions; or single instances of information which could not be triangulated were excluded from
the results section. Themes are described in the following sections to address each research question.

4.3 Protecting Participant Anonymity
Ethical considerations were made as described in section 3.9 and the researcher was keen to protect the anonymity of participants in this thesis. Throughout the results chapter, the virtual school staff have been identified as virtual school 1, virtual school 2 and so on (see 3.9.2 for a rationale). The researcher wished to maintain the anonymity of each respondent, yet demonstrate that the quote used within this chapter represent the views of all six members of the virtual school staff. The designated teacher who took part in the appreciative inquiry session is referred to as designated teacher 1; although this makes the individual’s quotes identifiable, it is not possible to identify which of the schools within the local authority the designated teacher was employed by.

4.4 Research Question 1

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

4.4.1 Purpose of the questionnaire.
In order to explore the current role of the virtual school for cared for children in raising academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing, the researcher designed a questionnaire (Appendix B, development discussed in section 3.6.3 & 3.7.1.) which was distributed to all designated teachers of cared for children within the local authority.

Designated teachers are a key role partner of the virtual school and there is a statutory requirement (DCFS, 2009a) for each school to appoint a designated teacher of cared for children. The key responsibilities of the designated teachers are congruent with the key aims of the virtual school (Appendix G); to ensure that staff have high expectations of cared for children, to help staff understand the emotional, psychological and social effects of loss and separation and to ensure that individuals have high academic expectations of cared for children (see section 2.10).
In order for designated teachers of cared for children to fulfil their role, it is necessary for the virtual school to support the designated teachers in their work. As both the designated teacher role (statutory from 2009) and the virtual school model (September 2010 within the local authority) were relatively new, the researcher was interested to see how confident and well supported the designated teachers currently felt. The information obtained from this questionnaire was fed back to the virtual school in May 2011 to enable the information to be considered when planning for the future work of the virtual school.

4.4.2 The profile of respondents.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was distributed to the designated teacher of cared for children in 149 educational settings within the local authority (see 3.6.3 for further information). Fifty one responses (all of which were usable) were received, giving a response rate of 34%; an average response rate to an impersonal questionnaire, Gillham (2000). Of these 51 responses, 16 were completed and returned via email, 19 were completed at the designated teacher network meeting and 16 were returned via the internal post system as a result of the email distribution or the network meeting.

The respondents were a self-selecting sample who agreed to respond to the questionnaire (see section 3.6.3). Of the 51 respondents, 61% had had some previous contact with the virtual school. It is possible that the respondents were designated teachers who had a greater interest in promoting the needs of cared for children, or individuals who had positive working relationships or experiences of the virtual school. Some designated teachers may have had personal experience of being a child in care or being an adoptive or foster parent. The researcher was aware that designated teachers may have been working in a school with no cared for children, so not feel that their contributions were of value. The researcher therefore pointed out that all responses were of value in the information sheet (Appendix H) that accompanied the questionnaire (Appendix B).

The research local authority was based in a large county in the North West of England, made up of a number of market and industrial towns with varying populations and socio-economic needs. The researcher asked the designated teachers to state the town in which they worked; these towns were then categorised as being “north”,...
“mid” or “south” of the county. There was an even spread of responses from each area (north = 18, mid = 15, south = 20) suggesting that the responses provided represent views from across the local authority. Although detailed analysis based on geographical location did not take place, the researcher did not notice any striking differences in the confidence or requests for support from designated teachers in the different areas of the local authority. All areas of the local authority have equal access to the support of the virtual school, driven by the needs of cared for children.

4.4.3 Findings from the questionnaire.

The virtual school has a statutory role with children and young people aged 5-19 years of age. It was interesting to note that although the majority of responses came from primary settings (36 respondents) this only represented 28% of primary settings in the local authority. Thirteen of the secondary and further education settings responded (62% of all settings) and two of the four special education setting completed the questionnaire (50% of all settings). Figure 13 provides a visual representation of the educational setting of the 51 respondents:

![Educational Setting Pie Chart]

**Figure 13: Educational settings of responding designated teachers**

---

2 The percentages for figure 13 total 101% due to percentages being rounded to the nearest whole number.
The questionnaire asked designated teachers to name any additional responsibility roles they held alongside being a designated teacher. Nineteen of the respondents were also the school’s head teacher and 14 of the respondents were also the special educational needs coordinator; two respondents were both the head teacher and special educational needs coordinator. Other roles included welfare worker, head of student services, lead behaviour professional and director of inclusion and Intervention. This information was of interest to the researcher and the virtual school. For example, as a number of designated teachers are also the special educational needs coordinator, the virtual school may target training regarding the needs of cared for children at a special educational needs coordinator event. Figure 14 shows the range of roles that were held by respondents alongside that of designated teacher:

![Figure 14: Roles held alongside that of designated teacher](image)

Question four of the questionnaire sought to establish how aware the designated teachers were of the support provided by the virtual school within the local authority. The respondents were asked to select from the choices presented in figure 15, by circling an answer:
Figure 15: Choices presented to designated teachers

There was a high level of awareness of the support provided. As discussed in section 3.6.3, the fact the respondents were self-selecting and this is likely to have impacted on these figures. It is possible that designated teachers who were not aware of the virtual school were not motivated to complete the questionnaire, or did not feel that their responses would be useful. Figure 16 demonstrates levels of awareness of the support of the virtual school.
The questionnaire sought to establish what forms of contact with the virtual school designated teachers had experienced. A variety of contact types were reported, with contact regarding a personal education plan being the most common. Other reasons for contact included seeking advice from an educational consultant, attending training or a meeting with a member of the virtual school present. Five “Other” sources of contact were reported including the launch of Letterbox Club³, support for school governors and three instances of funding issues. Figure 17 shows the form of contact experienced by designated teachers:

³ Letterbox Club focuses on improving educational outcomes for cared for children by providing them with parcels or books and educational materials once a month for six months, directly addressed to them at their home. [http://www.letterboxclub.org.uk/](http://www.letterboxclub.org.uk/)
Twenty-six of the designated teachers types of contact and support they had found useful. The researcher coded these responses and carried out thematic analysis on the designated teachers answers (see section 3.8.3 & Appendix M). The identified themes are presented in figure 18.

Figure 17: Form of contact with the virtual school

Figure 18: Forms of support that designated teachers found useful
There was commonality between the forms of support that designated teachers suggested as being useful and facilitators to supporting the needs of cared for children as identified by the virtual school and presented in section 4.6.

The researcher will now illustrated some of these themes with data extracts from designated teachers answering the question:

Which forms of support from the virtual school for cared for children have you found most useful to help you support the academic attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing of cared for children? (Appendix B, question 7).

Practical advice was appreciated, such as support in completing and updating Personal Educational Plans:

Advice and expertise when dealing with children with particular needs. Support in completing and updating personal education plans. (Designated teacher)

Support during personal education plan meetings and follow up discussions with social workers and foster carers. (Designated teacher)

Educational consultants and personal education plan coordination have been brilliant!!!! (Designated teacher)

Timely access to funding was specifically mentioned by some designated teachers:

Speed of emergency funding and support... (Designated teacher)

The emotional support provided by the virtual school was reported as useful to designated teachers in promoting positive outcomes for cared for children. Emotional support related to support for the designated teacher:

Personal support as a designated teacher. (Designated teacher)

As well as support for the cared for children during placement breakdown:

---

4 “Designated teacher” is used to indicate a response from one of the 51 individuals who completed the questionnaire. Later, “designated teacher 1” is used to indicate a response from the designated teacher who attended the appreciative inquiry session.
...support from the Learning Support staff such as [name] - providing hands-on support for children with placement breakdowns. Support from the Educational Consultants – [name] providing advice on suitable alternative provisions. (Designated teacher)

Crisis interventions - easy to access support. (Designated teacher)

4.4.4 Levels of confidence reported by designated teachers.
Analysis of responses to question nine of the questionnaire indicated that the majority of designated teachers felt “very confident” (40%) or “confident” (50%) in supporting the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children in their setting. With a self-selecting sample it is possible that those who were more confident in their ability to support cared for children chose to complete the questionnaire. Figure 19 indicates reported levels of confidence among designated teachers:

Designated teachers' levels of confidence in supporting the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children

- Very confident (40%)
- Quite confident (50%)
- Neutral (6%)
- Not very confident (4%)

Figure 19: Confidence amongst designated teachers supporting academic attainment & achievement

The researcher considered a number of psychological factors which may be able to explain the high levels of confidence reported by the designated teachers. Potential factors include the designated teachers’ level of self-efficacy, sense of control and resilience.
Self-efficacy refers to the individual’s perception of their ability to perform a task or bring about the desired outcome (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Our past experiences can affect our future motivation; experiences of failure can reduce self-efficacy, where success can lead to higher expectations, a positive self concept and increased motivation towards a task. The researcher suggests that the responding designated teachers may have experienced previous success in their task (supporting the academic attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing needs of cared for children), which made them feel more motivated and confident in their ability to complete the task in the future, hence the high levels of confidence reported.

In future research it would be interesting to introduce a measure such as the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) to further investigate a potential link between levels of self-efficacy and reported levels of confidence. The researcher suspects that those who reported high levels of confidence would be likely to also have high levels of self-efficacy as research has shown that teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to be more open to new ideas and are more willing to experiment with new methods to meet the needs of their students (Guskey, 1998; Stein & Wang, 1988).

It is also possible that the attribution style of the designated teachers may have impacted on the high levels of confidence reported in the present piece of research. Rotter (1966) discussed the concept of an internal and external locus of control. It was suggested that individuals with an internal locus of control believe that their actions determine outcomes and that they are responsible for their success. Those with an external locus of control believe that their own actions have little impact and life outcomes are largely to do with external factors such as “fate” and “luck”. The researcher suggests that it is possible that designated teachers reporting confidence in their role may have an internal locus of control and believe that they are responsible for their success, where those reporting lower levels of confidence may experience a more external locus of control. Again, further research into attribution styles would be of value in understanding the reported high levels of confidence.

A further concept considered by the researcher as a possible explanation of the high levels of confidence reported is that of the resiliency of the designated teachers.
Resilience can be defined as the “capacity to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental stressors, to be able to ‘bounce back’ in the face of potential risks, and to maintain well-being” (Oswald, Johnson & Howard, 2003). A number of potential risk factors and supportive factors were identified by Beltman, Mansfield and Price (2011) who carried out a review of research on teacher resilience. Risk factors included professional contextual challenges, meeting the needs of disadvantaged students, lack of resources and equipment, heavy work load, lack of time and professional work challenges. There is commonality between such risk factors and the barriers highlighted and discussed in section 4.7 and further support required illustrated in figures 20 and 22. Protective factors included a sense of vocation, tenacity, a positive attitude, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy (which increases with experience), a sense of competency, interpersonal skills, pride and confidence and an internal locus of control. Again, such concepts were noted as facilitators (section 4.6) and forms of support from the virtual school that designated teachers found useful (figure 18).

The researcher suggests that the designated teachers reporting high levels of confidence may have been more resilient than those who were less confident. They may have been able to “bounce back” despite risk factors being present and feel more confident in their role. Self-efficacy and an internal locus of control are noted as protective factors of a teacher’s resilience and therefore it is possible that these factors all impact on teachers’ levels of confidence.

Designated teachers were able to suggest a number of ways in which the virtual school could support them in feeling more confident in promoting the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children (Appendix B, question 10). This information was fed back to the virtual school staff to enable them to use the information when planning for the future work of the virtual school. Members of the virtual school did not express surprise in the areas reported and indicated that they were already aware of need in areas such as supporting cared for children post-16.

Thematic analysis was carried out on these responses and the key themes presented in figure 20 were identified.
Further information regarding supporting post-16 cared for children was identified as an area for development; personal correspondence with members of the virtual school staff (2011) suggested that they shared this concern and were hoping to develop their post-16 service.

*I am unsure as to what support I could request in the further education setting but would like to discuss further. (Designated teacher)*

Designated teachers suggested that funding had facilitated positive change for cared for children and indicated that they hoped this could be continued:
Continued funding to be able to support cared for children with key workers to support these children both in their learning and emotionally. (Designated teacher)

Our cared for children have benefitted from funding provided to support achievement by ensuring children had individual attention and time given just to them. I feel the one-to-one tuition has truly supported our cared for children. I would hope this will continue next year. (Designated teacher)

Some designated teachers suggested that they did not require support at present, but it was helpful to have a named point of contact, should support be required in the future:

Currently we don’t require support. Having a named contact is helpful and knowing that support is there when needed is what schools need most. (Designated teacher)

In addition designated teachers suggested that the current support of the virtual school was appreciated, and the same level of support in the future would be helpful.

More of the same please as the support has been crucial with the success that we have so far achieved with our pupils. (Designated teacher)

Fantastic support - no criticisms. (Designated teacher)

In question 11, the designated teachers were also asked to comment how confident they felt in supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children. Similar levels of confidence were reported, as illustrated in figure 21.
Designated teachers' levels of confidence in supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children

Very confident (34%)
Quite confident (50%)
Neutral (14%)
Not very confident (2%)

Figure 21: Levels of confidence amongst designated teachers supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children

Designated teachers were able to identify a number of ways in which the virtual school could help them to develop this confidence, illustrated in figure 22.
Designated teachers suggested that resources to be used with cared for children would be of benefit:

*Possibly some resources that can be used for different situations; games, cards, activities, etc... (Designated teacher)*

It was suggested that information regarding the impact of cared for children’s experiences on their schooling would be of benefit:

*Figure 22: Additional support requested to promote emotional wellbeing*
How the student’s wellbeing affects their ability to learn, sometimes their emotional needs need to be addressed before they can even consider learning as a priority. (Designated teacher)

This is an area that I feel more support is required. To increase our knowledge of the varying emotions felt by our cared for children, so that we will be able to support them more fully.

As would continued training, due to the changing nature of individual cases:

Do feel confident - but parameters often change with these children and knowing the support is available is reassuring. (Designated teacher)

Specific training for all staff that have regular contact with cared for children. (Designated teacher)

Guidance and advice when we seek it. (Designated teacher)

Designated teachers were able to identify a number of role partners who support their work in promoting positive outcomes for cared for children. There was commonality between role partners suggested by designated teachers and role partners identified as facilitators of positive outcomes by the virtual school (see 4.6). Role partners identified by the designated teachers are presented in figure 23.
Designated teachers were given the opportunity to add “any other comments” in question 14. These comments highlighted positive views of the work of the virtual school:

*I am very happy with the level of support that I have received from [name] and the team. The care of our cared for pupils is so much easier because of this.* (Designated teacher)

*Currently the school has no cared for children but regular training and updates are always extremely useful.* (Designated teacher)

*It’s about getting the support from others professionals when you need it.* (Designated teacher)
Two issues which the virtual school may like to consider in their future role were highlighted; the development of post-16 provision and supporting cared for children once they become adopted children:

*For further education college information transferred is patchy. It would be great if the virtual school could provide more information at the start of the academic year.* (Designated teacher)

*I think the support for children who are adopted needs to be improved as in my experience children and carers are generally well supported when children are cared for but once the child is adopted the same level of support is not there. Also the new adoptive parents can be reluctant to ask for this support as once the child is adopted there can be the perception that everything is now sorted, which it clearly isn’t!* (Designated teacher)

### 4.5 Research Question 2

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

Research question two was primarily addressed through semi-structured interviews (Appendix C) which took place with six members of the virtual school. There was some triangulation of relevant data from the questionnaire (Appendix B) and the appreciative inquiry session (Appendices D and E).

### 4.6 Facilitators

Virtual school staff members were able to identify a number of facilitators to their work in raising academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of C4. A number of important role partners were identified (see Appendix Q) and tools and interventions used to facilitate this work were named (see Appendix R). Facilitators are presented in figure 24.
4.6.1 Strategic issues.

The virtual school suggested a number of strategic facilitators to their work including raising the profile of the needs of cared for children and securing funding which could be used to support the needs of cared for children. In addition, it was perceived that being branded as “the virtual school” was a facilitator to the work carried out by the virtual school and their role partners:

*Figure 24: Facilitators to the role of the virtual school*
... I think the fact that I’m in the virtual school – I don’t know, the sense I get is that some things happen quicker. (Virtual school 4)

I think fundamentally by existing. I think the fact there is a virtual school for cared for children in itself is a means of us being able to promote it because if we didn’t exist there wouldn’t be anyone to do that. (Virtual school 1)

...the virtual school model and being a team, separate from any other team as it were, although working very closely. I think it has helped in some areas, to raise the profile in the local authority. (Virtual school 3)

4.6.2 Practical facilitators.

There were a number of examples of practical support offered by the virtual school, which were considered as facilitators in achieving their main aims of promoting academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children. Themes regarding supporting cared for children at times of transition, providing early intervention and a flexible approach were identified.

It was recognised that transition can be a difficult time for a wide range of children and that for cared for children; times of transition can encompass a lot of change, such as moving into care, being separated from parents and siblings, moving house and moving school. It was felt that the support the virtual school are able to offer designated teachers during times of transition can prevent situations becoming problematic, enabling the children to continue achieving academically and maintaining their emotional wellbeing:

...for me the key points have been transition for the children where I feel my biggest impact has been. And I mean by that transition in foster placement, transition in their natural parent’s home to foster care and transition from school to school. (Designated teacher 1)

...the transition for him from moving from primary to high school was a very traumatic experience... But I think the input we gave him around that transition
point ... enabled him to make educational progress from level one to level four by the time he left. (Designated teacher 1)

It was perceived that the raised profile of the needs of cared for children and increased funding opportunities had helped the virtual school to deliver a flexible approach and provide early intervention, therefore promoting positive outcomes for cared for children. It was recognised that each cared for child has a different set of circumstance, and that a flexible approach to allow for positive learning experiences is beneficial.

...he’s actually had two hours a day in a children’s centre ... it wasn’t part of the plan initially, but might actually be the best thing for him, he’s got a really positive learning experience to go into the school. (Virtual school 4)

I’ve got youngsters who don’t like going out of lessons, and the one-to-one tuition necessitates them going out. Even if you say “lots of other children have that”, they don’t want to be singled out. So if they’re willing to engage, we could introduce a private tutor in the evenings. (Virtual school 1)

...it’s only now that early intervention is really being picked up on... Without the support of the virtual school putting funding in to have support in school and eventually a reduced timetable where he was having peaks and plains and all that sort of thing, horse riding, oh goodness knows, all sorts ... we wouldn’t have got him through. (Designated teacher 1)

4.6.3 Child focused issues.

In order to facilitate the work of the virtual school, it was felt that stability both in the home placement and school placement were of benefit. Members of the virtual school reported that they were constantly surprised by how resilient cared for children could be, and that this resilience enabled the virtual school to work to promote positive outcomes for cared for children. Stability was considered a key facilitator to positive outcomes for cared for children. Staff were able to draw on a number of personal experiences where they had worked with cared for children who were experiencing
instability and had consequently experienced difficulties in their academic achievement and emotional wellbeing:

...if we can get placement stability right, then a lot flows from that... if you’re going through foster placements, there is no way that you’re going to be able to settle to school to achieve your potential....(Virtual school 3)

...you can have children who go along quite happily because they’re in the right placement and need little input, apart from keeping an eye on them. And you can have children where, I think the placement is absolutely key for me, and the changes in these children – that’s where you see these things changing very rapidly when things are breaking down. (Designated teacher 1)

Members of the virtual school also commented that they were constantly surprised by the levels of resilience demonstrated by cared for children and that the resiliency of cared for children was a great facilitator to the work of the virtual school and designated teachers:

I think the more we work with schools and the more information we give them about cared for children’s resilience. That actually they realise that it really helps to challenge them and if you can give them realistic yet challenging targets it’s just amazing how much progress these children make. (Virtual school 2)

I’m proud of our children and the resilience they have – the fact that they get up and go to school no matter what has happened to them. (Virtual school 2)

4.6.4 Interpersonal issues.

It was recognised that interpersonal facilitators within the virtual school staff team were important, including the knowledge, experience and support within the team. The importance of strong relationships and clear communication both within the team and between the team and staff working directly with cared for children was acknowledged. It was also recognised that the dedication of staff in the virtual school and those working directly with cared for children, facilitated the positive outcomes experienced by cared for children.
It was strongly felt that communication and relationships were facilitators to the work of the virtual school with one member stating:

... *to be honest, I would go to my death saying it’s about the relationships that you establish with people.* (Virtual school 1)

It was felt that positive relationships encouraged trust and respect and facilitated the work of the virtual school as staff “believed” things were going to happen:

... *the relationships I’ve built up with the foster carers and the trust that they have in me and what I say and the respect for that and vice versa really... it is a trust thing, and relationships, and they take time, because you have to test out – can I trust this person? Will this person follow through with what they say?* (Virtual school 4)

*I’m a strong believer that it’s the relationships and the trust you develop and once you’ve got that, you’re ok.* (Virtual school 1)

_They know you, you know them, you know what they’re going to do and it works. The problems we have is when you don’t know who you’re talking to and they’re not listening to what you’re saying because they don’t know you – so absolutely – relationships._ (Designated teacher 1)

A further facilitator of the work of the virtual school was the experience and knowledge of the virtual school staff team and their role partners. Virtual school staff had largely been teachers, with virtual school 6 having a residential background:

*I’ve come from a residential background and worked with kids in the care system so it’s quite important for me that one ‘cos the way I see that they’ve got to be in a good place to achieve in the school setting._ (Virtual school 6)

_Well I’m a trained teacher – I worked as a teacher for 18 years mostly in a school for emotional and behavioural difficulties... So yeah, I’ve worked with children with a lot of difficulties over the years._ (Virtual school 5)

The final facilitator discussed was the dedication of those working with cared for children, both within the virtual school team and those working directly with cared for
children in settings. It was felt that this dedication and team work enabled the positive work of the virtual school and that no amount of funding would be helpful if the right people were not in place:

...the team’s times and skills and commitment is vital ... there’s very much a “can do” attitude around the team. (Virtual school 3)

So much as it’s been a very very difficult experience, the fact that we stuck with him and had the tenacity to stay with him and not give up on him. And I think that’s the key working with these children, I think it’s too easy for people to give up on them and not to appreciate how their behaviours are a way of expressing how truly shocking their life has been. (Designated teacher 1)

I also think when things are very difficult, it’s very easy to feel like you can’t do anything and the strength comes from – it sounds like a cliché, but from the team. (Virtual school 1)

4.7 Barriers

Member of the virtual school staff were able to identify a number of barriers to supporting the academic achievement and emotional wellbeing of its pupils. Barriers related to child focused, expectations, practical and financial issues and staff focused issues are presented in figure 25.
4.7.1 Young person focused issues.

Members of the virtual school noted a number of young person focused issues which were considered as barriers to supporting the academic achievement and emotional wellbeing of its pupils. These related to the young people’s previous experiences and academic and emotional factors which impacted on their ability to access the curriculum. The young person’s experiences before entering the care system were identified by all members of the virtual school as barriers to their work. These experiences included negative early life experiences such as neglect, loss, bereavement and unwanted change, being let down by adults and services and developing a lack of trust in adults. Members of the virtual school felt that early life and past experiences were one of the most harmful things for cared for children:
I’d love to wipe the memories of some of these children and young people because obviously the thing that causes them the most harm and hold them back the most and causes them the most pain in their lives is their early life experiences. And sometimes that isn’t just with their birth families, it can be with foster carers or in the residential sectors and schools as well, schools which have let them down. (Virtual school 3)

I’ve got a youngster who’s struggling with all sorts of elements of what’s happened to her in the past. She’s a gifted and talented youngster but is not engaged in school in a way that we would feel would be beneficial to her. (Virtual school 1)

It was recognised that early experiences, significant life events such as loss and bereavement and being in care can have an impact on the young person’s emotional wellbeing and at times, can act as a barrier to accessing learning opportunities or experiencing emotional wellbeing. The virtual school were aware of the importance of addressing any emotional or wellbeing issues before a child was expected to access educational opportunities.

...the way I see it they’ve got to be in a good place to achieve in the school setting. (Virtual school 6)

I’ve got a case at the minute where he’s suffered huge bereavement, death within his family, it hasn’t been addressed. He’s also got all the attachment issues around becoming a cared for child then placement breakdowns. (Virtual school 1)

Sometimes these children and young people are in a place where they’re not ready. To do the achieving well bit, first they need to regress and spend some time in play and do some more therapeutic things. (Virtual school 3)

Members of the virtual school reported that at times, it was necessary to remind setting staff to be mindful of the young person’s emotional needs:
I will ask school to ensure that they’re promoting the emotional wellbeing by ensuring that the child meets with a learning mentor or someone else on a one-to-one that they can talk through their issues with. (Virtual school 5)

... he clearly needs somebody independent from the learning side and somebody independent from the social care side to actually embrace him; to get to know him and be there to befriend him. (Virtual school 1)

In addition, the continuous nature of change was highlighted as a barrier to raising academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing:

... you might have a youngster who has been in a high school for three years ... in a long term placement doing really well, loving school, engaging with it, meeting their Fisher Family Trust predictions and so on. But then say they have a long term placement disruption; that can really emotionally destabilise a youngster. I know of youngster that when that happens, they just absolutely disengage from everything, and it can happen very very suddenly. (Virtual school 1)

4.7.2 Expectations.

A further barrier identified by staff was that of expectations. It was acknowledged that expectations regarding outcomes for cared for children had greatly improved in recent years:

In the past there have been lower expectations on the part of schools who have looked at all the history these children have gone through and the experiences they may have had, and made allowances which actually necessarily haven’t been helpful. I think the more we work with schools and the more information we give them about cared for children’s resilience. That actually they realise that it really helps to challenge them and if you can give them realistic yet challenging targets it’s just amazing how much progress these children make. (Virtual school 2)

Despite this progress the virtual school were still able to cite examples where lowered expectations regarding the outcomes for cared for children were acting as barriers to raising attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing. These
expectations could be placement or school based or regarding children who had been adopted as discussed in the following sections.

The importance of a stable placement was identified as a facilitator when promoting the outcomes for cared for children. Even when the placement was stable, lowered expectations could act as a barrier. Virtual school staff members acknowledged that these lowered expectations were often misplaced kindness of the part of foster carers and school staff who felt that the young person had experienced a “tough time” and “deserved a break”. Virtual school staff member two raised the following point:

\[\text{Sometimes the children are traumatised and the carers are very tempted to take them away but actually the government talk about cared for children having a first class education. Well there is no point in having a first class education if the children aren’t there to receive it. (Virtual school 2)}\]

Further points related to the importance of high aspirations for cared for children and the importance of further changing attitudes regarding outcomes for cared for children:

\[\text{... you can’t use their care status as an excuse to not set high aspirations... they may look like they can’t achieve very well, but when they have stability and security in their life, they can actually level off and start to make progress ... even if Fisher Family Trust says one thing about their potential, it might be the reality is they’ve got much higher potential so there is a danger if you just use the Fisher Family Trust. (Virtual school 1)}\]

\[\text{I mean a lot of people write cared for children off and say and say that they’re not great – it’s changing attitudes really to them. But also I think understanding their needs goes a long towards helping to raise expectations. (Virtual school 5)}\]

Attendance was identified as a further barrier to promoting positive outcomes. The virtual school have worked hard to improve attendance figures and were able to report an overall increase in attendance from 84.3% in 2008-2009 to 94.3% in 2010-2011 (see Appendix S for further information).
We’ve also done quite a bit of work around attendance with foster carers and supervising social workers to get them to try to not allow foster carers to take youngsters on holiday outside of school holiday time. (Virtual school 1)

4.7.3 Practical and financial issues.
A further set of barriers to supporting the needs of cared for children was practical and financial issues. The virtual school are a small team who support educational settings in meeting the needs of four to five hundred cared for children. The data collection for this thesis also took place during a difficult time for local authorities, where austerity measures were being introduced nationwide.

“Facilities” were identified as a barrier from virtual school 6; although there was limited triangulation from other members of the virtual school, the research has included it as a theme as it was the overriding message of virtual school 6’s semi-structured interview. Facilities related to buildings or outdoor space in which alternative provisions could be carried out to support academic and emotional development. In personal correspondence between the researcher and members of the virtual school (2011-2012), other staff agreed that a lack of facilities could be a barrier to their work. The importance placed upon facilities by virtual school 6 is likely to reflect their role in the virtual school. It was recognised that geography can be a barrier to cared for children who may be placed in a home setting that is some distance away from their peers and school, making socialising and extracurricular activities difficult to engage in:

The problem for a lot of cared for children is that they might live some distance away from the school they attend, so that can impact on what you can discover for them. (Virtual school 1)

Virtual school 6 suggested that the lack of facilities to offer young people alternative education packages was the biggest barrier to their work.

[Local Authority Name] have got no facilities. You know sometimes I have to kind of beg, bribe and borrow facilities which I can use for these young people...
I have to in the job I’m doing, keep my eyes and ears open for everything that
can be used and abused for our benefit and the young person’s benefit. (Virtual school 6)

Frustration was expressed from virtual school 6 regarding an awareness of facilities and buildings that had been shut down due to the economic climate, reducing opportunities for virtual school 6 to support cared for children in accessing alternative provisions:

And it’s frustrating when you know places have been shut down and could be still open and are not used. Why? We’re struggling for place; that’s one of our biggest hang ups – facilities because we haven’t got anything. (Virtual school 6)

Funding was identified as both a facilitator and a barrier to the work of the virtual school. Although funding opportunities had allowed the virtual school to engage in certain work, the data for this thesis was gathered during a difficult time for local authorities in England, where austerity measures were in place. Funding issues largely fell into the remit of the virtual school head due to their strategic position, but funding was raised as a barrier by all members of the virtual school team. It was recognised that the progress made to date could not be continued without the same level of funding:

...we’d want a guarantee of funding going forward ‘cos I think we can see the impact that we’re making; I suppose it’s up to us to ensure that we demonstrate the impact to get the funding going forward. But I suppose that’s our worry that you know you put a lot of things in place that aren’t sustainable without the funding that we’ve got. (Virtual school 3)

Although successful, the pressure and time of having to put forward a case for funding to be continued was identified as a barrier to supporting cared for children:

...in a time when budgets are being squeezed and we are all being asked to cut things and it looked like we weren’t going to get any funding other than just staffing, we were able to make a persuasive case back to senior managers in the local authority and also to borough councillors to say the work that we do is vital, the funding that we’ve had in the past has been massively important for
individual children and young people for keeping them in education, and enabling them to have the best educational experience that they can have.

(Virtual school 3)

In addition, virtual school 6 identified the impact of job uncertainty and experienced colleagues losing their posts as a further barrier to supporting cared for children:

Not sure if you’ll have a job at the end of it; all this kind of stuff – seeing colleagues being made redundant, taking early retirement, but continuing to do what we do. And you’re talking people with twenty odd years of experience – how do you replace that? (Virtual school 6)

4.7.4 Staff focused issues.

The final barrier related to staff focused issues; these included issues within the virtual school team and amongst designated teachers and wider staff who work to support the needs of cared for children. The importance of supporting the emotional wellbeing needs of the staff working on the front line with cared for children was identified by a number of the virtual school team. This support could be in terms of training, supervision or debriefing. Traumatising events in settings were identified as a potential barrier to promoting the needs of cared for children. It was suggested that without support from the virtual school, such issues could lead to setting staff experiencing personal emotional wellbeing issues. One member of the virtual school team suggested:

I mean I do a lot - consultations, trainings, debriefings after some quite traumatising and significant events with the teams - I was just at one this morning and they seem to be well received. (Virtual school 4)

It was acknowledge that setting staff are “only human” and one virtual school team member discussed the importance of giving staff a “breather” so that they were able to continue their work with cared for children day to day, when members of the virtual school were not present:

It’s quite full on sometimes, you know, we’re only human and you need that breather and fatigue and stuff. If the young person is going to get the best out of everything then the person that’s dealing with them has got to be refreshed
and I’ll make sure that that happens. I’ll do that; I’ll go in for a couple of hours. You take that time back and whatever you need to catch up on, catch up on it and they find it quite useful sometimes. (Virtual school 6)

Sometimes the tutors can be left isolated so I try and it depends on the circumstances but sometimes the tutors are doing it on their own and it’s a regular thing. Sometimes on the really difficult ones I get involved in them ‘cos if they don’t feel supported even though they’re getting paid for it, you know, I try and live in the real world, it does affect them you know. (Virtual school 6)

Staffing levels and expertise were reported as barriers; both within the virtual school team and within educational settings. It was suggested that a small expansions in the size of the virtual school team would enable the virtual school to better support the needs of a wider range of cared for children:

I’d like us to develop more; I’d like us to have a wider staff. I think we could do more. I don’t think we’d need to be much bigger to be honest with you. But I think my magic wand would be that we have a couple of staff more ... someone dedicated solely to the post-16. (Virtual school 1)

If there were more of us we could become more involved with individual children because you do worry that a lot of time is spent with the high end children who are really struggling and it’d be lovely to spend some time with those children who actually aren’t struggling but who with a little bit more support could do even better. (Virtual school 2)

It was recognised that presently, virtual school staff are only able to spend a small amount of time with each young person (if any time at all) and that the young person has to gain a sense of trust in the adult very quickly, which can be more problematic for cared for children than other children due to their backgrounds:

I’m very conscious of the fact that when I go into a meeting with a youngster, they might not know me, or they may only meet me once or twice or three or four times a year. So if they’re in care for a long time they know I’m around, but
they might not know me, but actually have to develop a sense of trust in me fairly quickly! (Virtual school 1)

Levels of confidence and expertise amongst staff in settings is a concern for the virtual school, who are aware that staff can be expected to deal with complex situations with limited training or skills:

>We’ve got to be really careful that we don’t expect staff from schools to end up having to deal with some of the more intimate issues that the youngsters have. They may not have the training or the skills... the learning support assistants could end up having to take on stuff emotionally that wouldn’t be right for them to have to deal with. (Virtual school 1)

A further barrier was the perceived attitude amongst some schools that they didn’t have any cared for children on role, so did not need to attend training or seek support from the virtual school. The virtual school are keen for all schools to access training and support, as situations can change very quickly and it is hoped that if a cared for children was enrolled in a new school the staff would have some knowledge regarding how best to support the needs of cared for children and an awareness of the virtual school and the support it is able to offer:

>One of the other ones would be that every designated teacher and every foster carer came to our training ‘cos we know the impact that the training has. The take up particularly among designated teachers is very good, but there seems to be the attitude from one of two schools of ‘oh we haven’t got very many cared for children so we don’t need to go on the training’ - well you do! (Virtual school 3)

In summary, a number of barriers to raising pupils’ attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing were identified by members of the virtual school. It was recognised that all of these barriers cannot be addressed at once, but some were discussed as possible next steps for the virtual school’s development, as discussed in section 4.10.
4.8 Research Question 3

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

4.8.1 Development of research question 3.

Research question three originally intended to explore the perceived key functions of the virtual school model. Whilst transcribing and reading through the transcriptions of the semi-structured interview data, the researcher became aware of a number of comments regarding the advantages of the virtual school model over previous models of service delivery. The question was therefore developed to address this important issue. The findings presented in relation to research question three predominantly come from analysis of the semi-structured interviews and are supported by data from the discovery section of the appreciative inquiry session.

There has been a service for cared for children within the local authority in some form for a number of years, with the majority of the virtual school staff working for these services in the past. It was therefore interesting to hear that the virtual school staff perceived that this model was “working” and having “impact” and to explore what it was about the virtual school model that was leading to more successful outcomes for cared for children.

4.8.2 Perceived key functions.

Throughout the semi-structured interviews and during the appreciative inquiry session, the virtual school mentioned a number of roles which they perceive to be the “key functions” of the work of the virtual school:

...it all comes down to narrowing the gap really between children in the care system and their peers. (Virtual school 2)

It was acknowledged that in order to narrow the gap between cared for children and the wider school population it was important to address emotional wellbeing issues as they impacts upon educational outcomes:

We do a lot of events and stuff around wellbeing as well. We’ve got a strongly held belief that you’ve got to get that stuff right before the academic progress comes around. And the two are inter-linked obviously; if you’re achieving well it
helps your self-esteem and hopefully leads to further achievement. (Virtual school 3)

In order to narrow the gap between cared for children and their peers, raise academic attainment and achievement and promote emotional wellbeing, the virtual school felt that their key roles related to raising the profile of cared for children, training staff, creating opportunities for cared for children and tracking and monitoring cared for children, as presented in figure 26.

Raising the profile of cared for children
- The needs of cared for children at a strategic and school based level
- The virtual school and its work

Training staff
- Designated teachers
- Wider school staff

Opportunities for cared for children
- Equivalent to experiences of peers
- Access to education
- Promoting emotional wellbeing
- Enrichment activities
- One-to-one tuition

Tracking and monitoring cared for children
- Attendance
- Exclusions
- Exam results
- Placements

**Figure 26: Perceived key functions of the virtual school**

4.8.2.1 Raising the profile.

It was perceived that through raising the profile of cared for children, the virtual school were able to promote their needs and raise expectations regarding outcomes and secure funding to increase opportunities for cared for children. The virtual school felt that it was important for the needs of cared for children to be promoted at a senior leadership level, within schools, and within the wider community.

Raising awareness really as well, like the corporate parenting training I’ve just been doing. Also other publicity and events that we do around raising awareness for the rest of the local authority and for schools as well and foster carers – what we do and the need to support the children and young people. (Virtual school 3)

Well the whole sort of aspect of corporate responsibility for our children. Improving the voice and the representation of cared for children; I suppose that’s a strong part of it [the work of the virtual school]. (Virtual school 5)
The virtual school were proud of their “celebrating and recognising excellence” event which serves to award cared for children for outstanding achievements and also raises the profile of cared for children.

The recognising and celebrating event for our cared for children, which is an event once a year... for me it is a very proud day. ‘Cos I feel very proud of those youngsters and I see how proud they feel of themselves and that’s quite profound really. (Virtual school 1)

4.8.2.2 Training.
Through training the virtual school hoped to support schools and settings in understanding the needs of cared for children, raise expectations, promote positive outcomes and increase the knowledge and confidence of designated teachers and wider school staff to support cared for children:

...we already participate in training foster carers and schools around the emotional needs – both of cared for children and the people who work with them. We’re doing that, so I think anything we can do to make sure that we’ve got staff who understand the needs – dedicated staff. (Virtual school 5)

I think the more we work with schools and the more information we give them about cared for children’s resilience. That actually they realise that it really helps to challenge them and if you can give them realistic yet challenging targets it’s just amazing how much progress these children make. (Virtual school 2)

I think the key is empowering schools and giving them the knowledge...I think a lot of promoting the mental health of cared for children is empowering the schools and letting them know the behaviours, feelings and difficulties that cared for children might have and making sure that their schools are very inclusive and they get opportunities to get support, to have key people in school. (Virtual school 2)

4.8.2.3 Opportunities for cared for children.
Responses from the virtual school staff suggested that they were passionate advocates of the rights and needs of cared for children and that a key part of their work was in
ensuring that cared for children had access to opportunities that their peers were likely to have. These opportunities were both academic and wider life opportunities:

So I suppose our main thrust is to ensure that our cared for young people aren’t missing out on the opportunities that their peers have because of funding or because of other barriers. (Virtual school 3)

In terms of emotional wellbeing and helping with attainment, being involved in extra-curricular activities and things at home does help attainment. So I think that’s something that we’re developing even more. (Virtual school 1)

Staff raised the point that cared for children may have gaps in their learning due to issues such as loss and bereavement and emotional trauma, coupled with missing chunks of schooling, either due to placement or school changes, or not experiencing emotional wellbeing that is conductive to learning. The personal education plan was discussed as a useful tool to assess the child’s academic and emotional needs, to plan for these needs and monitor outcomes for cared for children:

...through the personal education plan process if there are issues identified with the youngsters’ attainment and progress, and if it’s felt that some additional support would help then obviously we look at funding streams and whether the school know of anybody extra who could come in to give that support. (Virtual school 1)

I need to make sure that the child is being educated and getting what they’re entitled to. So if there are special needs, that they have been met or if they haven’t been met that plans are in place to make sure that those special needs are met. Also if a child is on or around the expected targets for their age and stage, looking at what school is doing to support or enhance their education to help them achieve their target or exceed their target if possible. (Virtual school 5)
One-to-one tuition was highlighted as a particularly useful tool in raising academic standards and the confidence of cared for children. It was suggested that one-to-one tutoring was successful as it allowed the pupil to develop a positive relationship with an adult in school and could address any gaps the individual had in their learning, without any peer pressure:

*The opportunity to be on a one-to-one basis with a teacher has been a really opportunity for them to flag up the things that they don’t understand without the humiliation of having to do it in front of their peers.* (Virtual school 2)

*Most of our children like to develop a good relationship with at least one adult in school and it can really help them to promote that and it just encourages confidence and they get a sense of their own achievement and it develops from there really. So it [one-to-one tuition] has worked really well.* (Virtual school 5)

*Data has shown that cared for children are a group that statistically really embrace this kind of support [one-to-one tuition]. Often they have missed large chunks of school or have been in a state of anxiety where it has been difficult for them to learn.* (Virtual school 2)

Virtual school 2 was able to quote a designated teacher’s opinion of one-one tuition following a telephone conversation:

*...this is what the support [one-to-one tuition] has done, this has just proved that for this particular child to make this much progress, this exemplifies the good practice of the virtual school and the school in conjunction’.* (Virtual school 2)

### 4.8.2.4 Tracking and monitoring cared for children.

The virtual school gathered data including attendance figures, exclusion rates, post-16 destinations and end of Key Stage and General Certificate of Secondary Education results. The virtual school acknowledged that data only shows part of the picture regarding outcomes for cared for children. Through tracking, they felt that they were able to flag up children who were not meeting targets and develop a picture of the
cohort in order to target support and raise issues such as attendance with schools and foster carers.

First of all we monitor and track all the pupils in our cohort so that we know where they are, how they’re performing at the moment and the targets that school have set for them. (Virtual school 2)

...stringent and focused on tracking; through the personal education plans and also end of year results – Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3, General Certificate of Secondary Education ... (Virtual school 4)

The virtual school were able to report improvements in attendance, examination results and exclusion rates. Attendance figures rose from 90.5% in 2009-2010 to 94.3% in 2010-2011. In 2011 95% of cared for children were entered for their General Certificate of Secondary Education exams, compared to 62% in 2010; of these entrants 92% obtained at least one General Certificate of Secondary Education, 67% obtained five or more A*-G results and 33% achieved five or more A* - C results, a 5% improvement from 2010 (see Appendix S for further details). A reduction in the number of day of exclusion of cared for children was reported; dropping from 236.5 days (2009-2010) to 232.5 days (2010-2011). Further analysis of Appendix S shows that positive trends were identifiable prior to the formation of the virtual school (September 2010). In some cases improvements were greater between 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, such as an increase in overall attendance of 6.2% (84.3 % to 90.5%) compared to an increase of 3.8% (90.5% to 94.3%) between 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. This suggests that there was a foundation for good work with cared for children in this local authority.
Funding was used to purchase the services a company called “Welfare Call” who telephone schools to check cared for children’s attendance. The virtual school perceived that this had made schools more aware of the importance of attendance and the fact it was being monitored. Issues were more likely to be followed up by the school the child attended, often negating the need for involvement from the virtual school:

Welfare Call ... ring up the school daily to check that the child is attending...They provide us with daily data; they provide us with summary reports and any information that we need from them about the attendance. That has actually improved the attendance quite considerably. Although schools initially found it very challenging; it has alerted people to the fact that we are monitoring the attendance. (Virtual school 1)

The importance of attendance has also been raised with foster carers:

We’ve seen a steady increase in the attendance of our cared for children. We’ve done quite a big piece of work about trying to get carers not to take the children on holiday or out of school during term time. Sometimes the children are traumatised and the carers are very tempted to take them away but actually the government talk about cared for children having a first class education. Well there is no point in having a first class education if the children aren’t there to receive it. (Virtual school 2)

The virtual school acknowledged that it is difficult to measure the “success” and “impact” of their organisation. Whilst data such as General Certificate in Secondary Education results, exclusion figures and attendance figures provide a flavour of the

5 Welfare Call is a limited company that works alongside local authorities to monitor the attendance of cared for children. School are called to establish the child’s mark for the day and if absent, the carer or social worker may be called depending on the local authority’s preference. Reports are provided to local authorities on a daily, weekly or monthly basis and include details such as continuous absence (more than three days) and exclusion notifications. Further information can be obtained from:

http://welfarecall.com/lac
impact of the work of the virtual school, they are not able to reflect the complexity of individual cases. The research local authority experienced Local Government Reorganisation in 2009; this must be considered when year on year data is compared, as the context of the authority has changed. The virtual school were keen to point out that staying in school, or home placement stability can be an achievement for a child in care, and that whilst data such as the Fisher Family Trust data and exam results can be useful, they are not able to reflect changes in life circumstances which can often be very sudden:

...it might be that they’re a child who was at severe risk of exclusion and now they’re not and they’ve settled in and they’re doing much better. That’s less tangible in terms of their overall data. (Virtual school 3)

...it’s kids who aren’t going to get 5 A-C’s, but what we’ve done is that by our support we’ve maintained them in education and turned them around from a difficult time, supported the school and made sure the school has done everything it’s supposed to do and kept them safe really. (Virtual school 3)

...if a youngster is having massive issues within the home... the Fisher Family Trust data might be skewed by their prior attainment... So even if Fisher Family Trust says one thing about their potential, it might be the reality is they’ve got much higher potential so there is a danger if you just use the Fisher Family Trust. (Virtual school 1)

4.9 Perceived Advantages of the Virtual School Model

Part two of research question three asked:

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

Data to inform this part of the question was gained from the semi-structured interviews with the virtual school staff and the discovery section of the appreciative inquiry session. The virtual school model is perceived by the virtual school staff to be “working” in promoting and improving the outcomes of cared for children.
I recognise that there was impact going on before the virtual school came into place but I think what we’ve done is enhanced and improved... (Virtual school 3)

Thematic analysis suggested the following advantages of the virtual school model (figure 27):

**Figure 27: Perceived advantages of the virtual school model**

**4.9.1 Strategic advantages.**

A number of the perceived advantages of the virtual school model were at the strategic level. Strategic factors included the role of the virtual school head, which enabled access to meetings at senior levels within the local authority. The virtual school felt that this representation has raised the profile of the needs of cared for children and allowed further funding to be accessed. It was perceived that “sitting in
education” as opposed to being under the “social care umbrella” was an advantage of the virtual school model.

Members of the virtual school suggested that having a “virtual school head” had got the team “noticed” and enabled strategic work to be carried out that was beyond the capacity of the team in previous models. Although staff felt they were already well known for their work at the individual school level, it was felt that the virtual school head had raised the profile of the team at more senior levels within the local authority.

I think having [name] as the virtual school head has definitely got us noticed... on a strategic level ... because he’s able to attend a lot of meetings I think he has got us noticed really. The schools knew us, the social workers knew us on the ground, but within the local authority we weren’t as well known. I think he’s definitely raised our profile in that area and that’s got to be good really. (Virtual school 2)

Previously it was just educational consultant A and educational consultant B bashing away in the corner you know, it’s just become a much more accepted part of the local authority’s work and social care’s work since the virtual school. I think at first people couldn’t understand the concept, but I think now they’ve worked it out. (Virtual school 5)

The virtual school suggested that the virtual school head role and virtual school model had enabled the team to be represented at more senior levels within the local authority. It was perceived that this representation had helped to keep the needs of cared for children at the front of senior leaders’ minds when decisions were being made, and had enabled the virtual school head to keep the importance of the education of cared for children “on the table”.

... with the nature of my role I sit down in the local authority with lots of managers both within children’s and families and social care and other areas of the local authority. And my role has been key in keeping care for children on the table at all times... (Virtual school 3)

It’s the corporate parenting bit; so you know I’ve just been out doing a corporate parenting bit with new employees and I sit on the corporate
parenting board. So I try to make sure that education is one of the key things that is discussed there. (Virtual school 3)

We’re there having that education voice if you like, and advocating for those cared for young people to make sure that they are put in the right place. Not just in terms of their placement, foster care or whatever, which is vastly important. But also the education side is really taken strong consideration of. (Virtual school 3)

It was perceived that the virtual school model had further raised the profile of the needs of cared for children. It was suggested that the work of individuals regarding children in care was appreciated by the individual schools and families before the virtual school model existed, but that the needs of cared for children were wider known across the authority as a result of the virtual school:

... it’s not just social care colleagues but it’s also education welfare officers, housing, leisure and various other groups. They’re saying ‘the virtual school, we aware of them and we know what they do, it’s good work that they’re doing’. (Virtual school 3)

I think fundamentally by existing. I think the fact there is a virtual school for cared for children in itself is a means of us being able to promote it because if we didn’t exist there wouldn’t be anyone to do that. (Virtual school 1)

I think raising the profile as well from my own personal point of view. Not that the profile wasn’t there and not that there wasn’t good work going on, but I think schools and teams and other people had no idea about the needs of this particular group have a much better idea now. In terms of the corporate parenting side of things, that is much more embedded than it was nine months ago. (Virtual school 3)

Between 2010 and 2012 the team had been able to expand and access funding to meet the needs of cared for children, despite the economic difficulties experienced nationwide. Prior to the virtual school head role, the educational consultants had
largely been engaged in work with individual young people. The strategic nature of the virtual school head role has enabled the virtual school head to spend time with senior managers, making a case for further funding for the virtual school and individual cared for children.

…it looked like we weren’t going to get any funding other than just staffing, we were able to make a persuasive case back to senior managers in the local authority and also to borough councillors to say the work that we do it vital, the funding that we’ve had in the past has been massively important for individual children and young people for keeping them in education, and enabling them to have the best educational experience that they can have. (Virtual school 3)

During appreciative inquiry, the designated teacher was able to reflect on the importance of funding from the school’s point of view:

Without the support of the virtual school putting funding in to have support in school and eventually a reduced timetable where he was having … horse riding, oh goodness knows, all sorts … we wouldn’t have got him through. (Designated teacher 1)

It was acknowledged that the virtual school were in a fortunate position to receive funding and that this funding enabled them to be creative in their work:

… the only team that I know that has actually got a funding pot. “ed psychs” haven’t got a funding pot. This team, ed psychs and educational welfare officers are the only teams on the ground now frankly… so you know as a virtual school … we are unique with that, that does have a power that you can be creative…(Virtual school 4)

The virtual school felt that sitting in education rather than social care was a key advantage of the virtual school model. It was felt that this enabled them to focus on educational issues, use “educational speak” and draw on their background as teachers, psychologists and residential workers. It was felt that schools better understood the work of the virtual school in this context:
...focus more on the education where as we used to be under a social care umbrella. So the notion of having an education team that sits within social care is what I’ve always wanted. And now we can talk education speak within that world. I think that’s helped, trying to get people to understand what we need to do was part of our battle... Now we can just really focus on education within the context of social care and emotional wellbeing whereas before we were in social care and trying to introduce the educational stuff so we felt like we weren’t really moving as fast as we can now. (Virtual school 1)

I just think the system has improved so much and I think that schools take on board who we are and are much more ready to communicate with us and get involved especially where personal education plans are concerned. Previously I think it was something that went by the wayside quite a lot because social workers didn’t have the time to promote it where as now I’ve taken responsibility for it and schools work with us much better. (Virtual school 5)

### 4.9.2 Communication.

Sitting in education appeared to have enabled improved conversations between the virtual school and other professionals promoting the needs of cared for children. It was suggested that relationships had developed as the virtual school understood the viewpoint of schools and were able to act as a “bridge” between social care and education.

Relationships with school staff were seen as an advantage of the virtual school model. It was felt that the virtual school model had enabled the professionals to become more organised and able to develop relationships with designated teachers and school staff through network meetings, training, face to face meetings, telephone conversations and on-line resources.

...I think a lot of the support comes from the personal relationships we have with them and that we are accessible, they know we’re on the end of the phone. Even if we don’t answer when they ring, we’ll get back to them. So it’s the relationships and I think that’s been really important. (Virtual school 1)
We have regular designated teacher training which has been successful. We’ve just launched the virtual school website. The intention is to start forums on there and put lots of the paperwork and information on that website so they can ask a question on the forum and obtain necessary documentation on the website. (Virtual school 2)

It’s a completely different ball game the interaction between social care and education. As the government are on board with initiatives, we work closely with our schools and make relationships with them. I think that they value and trust us and show a real commitment. I think that we as a team are so passionate that the schools feel that. (Virtual school 2)

The virtual school perceived that they acted as a bridge between social care and education. Most of the virtual school staff came from educational background but had worked under social care settings meaning that they were uniquely placed in being able to understand the issues of each group:

...I actually feel that we kind of bridge that gap. ‘Cos actually if someone rings social care and they can’t get the support they need and it’s a school that’s ringing. If there’s an educational person, they will understand the issues for the school. (Virtual school 1)

The virtual school felt that they had a role in “translating” or “interpreting” issues for social care and schools, and explaining the other agency’s thinking if issues arose.

So we have a role in trying to encourage social workers to develop their relationships with the schools to help them feel more confident about going to schools. (Virtual school 1)

I was able to act as a translator...I think we act as an interface for them to interpret their world. (Virtual school 1)
It was acknowledged that some designated teachers and schools are more knowledgeable and experienced in supporting the needs of cared for children and that support is often required when cared for children move between schools:

Now whenever there were issues when he was at [name’s] school, because we all understood each other’s language and issues and whatever, there were never any issues. Now he’s gone to another mainstream school and I’ve been the interpreter of the social care issues if you like. (Virtual school 1)

4.10 Research Question 4

4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice for cared for children, in relation to promoting the academic achievement and emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

4.10.1 Data sources.

Suggestions regarding the future role of the virtual school were made in the questionnaire and during the semi-structured interviews. The collaborative vision for the future of the virtual school was specifically addressed during the appreciative inquiry session, which aimed to promote positive change based upon current best practice.

4.10.2 The future role of the virtual school.

Data from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and the discovery part of the appreciate inquiry session was triangulated, in order to build a rich picture of the collective vision of responding designated teachers and virtual school staff members as to the future role of the virtual school. The key themes are presented in figure 28. Findings from the dreaming and design stages of appreciative inquiry will be discussed in section 4.10.3.
Early Years and post-16 provision were both identified as areas of provision that the virtual school would like to develop in the future. The virtual school suggested that support in the Early Years was important to allow early intervention to take place and to provide cared for children with “the best possible start in life”, with the hope that there would be less need for their involvement in the future and that the young person would be able to achieve positive outcomes:

... we support early years by writing personal education plans so that we can anticipate the support that is needed as soon as a child starts school. (Virtual school 5)

...there is a particular thrust at the early years end of things and it’s good now that we’ve got [name] on board in the early years team who’s got that particular area of responsibility. She’s already been doing the work around gathering the data and putting support in. That early intervention bit is key. (Virtual school 3)
The virtual school were also eager to develop their post-16 provision to support young people to stay in college or training, or to seek employment. It was recognised that a number of cared for children are “ok” whilst in school with structure and routine and being “told what to do”, but once they leave school it can be more difficult for these youngsters to make decisions:

I think we’d like to see more better outcomes for our older age groups because whilst they’re in school they’re pretty much doing what they’re told but when they come out of school and they have more choices to make, I think it becomes much harder for these kids to make the right choices, so it’d be really nice to see better longer term outcomes for some of them. (Virtual school 3)

In the questionnaire, designated teachers requested further support regarding post-16 provision; one designated teacher said:

Further education college information transferred is patchy. It would be great if the virtual school could provide more info at the start of the academic year i.e. a list of names? (Designated teacher6)

A difficulty for the virtual school is that the young person may not wish for their care status to be identified at college due to lowered expectations and negative stereotypes of cared for children from some individuals. Further comments from the virtual school included:

... we’re developing the 16y+ work; we’ve got a worker about to be appointed who initially will do some direct work with youngsters. Then hopefully if they’ve got the skills will do some strategic work, helping them to stay in college or in training. (Virtual school 1)

...we’re supporting now at 16+ so we’re participating in many more personal education plans after school to make sure that young people are staying in education employment and training for longer and supporting that process if we can. (Virtual school 5)

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6 Questionnaire response
4.10.2.2 Supporting adopted children.
The virtual school were committed to developing their work regarding adopted children. It was strongly felt that adoption was not a “magic wand” and identified that issues regarding traumatic histories were not wiped away when a child was adopted and that unfortunately without support, adopted children can come back into the care system:

And there’s that naive assumptions isn’t there – you’ve been adopted therefore you’re fine, when obviously we know that that’d not the case in a lot of cases. (Virtual school 3)

...educational psychologists met last week about post-adoption and I’ve now set up a meeting with [name] to enquire about any ways in which we can support – I mean capacity is a big issue, so we’re going to get education psychologists and the post-adoption support team together to see what we can do. (Virtual school 4)

One of the things I think would be that we could support children who are placed for adoption more intensively in the transition time and when they’re up to the order going through and also after the order has gone through... being adopted doesn’t solve all the problems. (Virtual school 1)

Post-adoption support was also acknowledged as an area of need by respondents in the questionnaire:

I think the support for children who are adopted needs to be improved as in my experience children and carers are generally well supported when children are cared for but once the child is adopted the same level of support is not there. (Designated teacher7)

4.10.2.3 Extending the remit to include other vulnerable groups.
During the semi-structured interviews there were suggestions as to extending the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups. This was particularly advocated by designated teacher 1 during the appreciative inquiry session, who had

7 Questionnaire response
experience of interacting with social care regarding cared for children, children in need and child protection cases. Designated teacher 1 felt that the virtual school model would be appropriate for supporting children in need and child protection as they had some negative experiences of contacting social care regarding child protection and children in need:

*I just wish we had the same for child protection and children in need... ‘Cos I think those children are equally vulnerable... child protection, there is a good chance that at some point, or a potential that they will come into the cared for remit anyway ... I think what schools find very difficult more so than with cared for children, the trials around children in need and child protection are much harder to get a handle on ‘cos you don’t know the caseworkers as well.*  
*(Designated teacher 1)*

The virtual school felt that their model was working and that the remit could be widened in the future:

*I think if you put a bid in to say to the local authority, given the success of the virtual school model, we want to widen it to include children in need, child protection and adoption, I actually think a lot of people would get on board with that, wouldn’t they?*  
*(Virtual school 3)*

*So would we be the post common assessment framework (CAF) team? If a child has been “CAF-ed” and it hasn’t worked and they’ve then ended up with social care involvement, in the same way that they have their thresholds. We could be the social care-education interface.*  
*(Virtual school 1)*

### 4.10.2.4 Expanding the staff team.

In order to develop the future role of the virtual school to increase support in the early years, post-16, post-adoption and with other vulnerable children, it was felt that the staff team needed to be expanded:

*I’d like us to have a wider staff. I think we could do more. I don’t think we’d need to be much bigger to be honest with you. ... It’s capacity isn’t it, and workload.*  
*(Virtual school 1)*
It was felt that increased senior specialist educational psychologist time would be beneficial in order to offer psychological support to cared for children, families and setting staff:

\textit{Having the specialist educational psychologist on the team is a real bonus to us really and a real addition. In a perfect world we’d have more time, more of the senior specialist educational psychologist. (Virtual school 2)}

\textit{I’d like to have even more psychology time \ldots just to kind of nip some things in the bud really or just a talking place so people feel they can be listen to or valued and for things not to get out of hand. (Virtual school 4)}

\textbf{4.10.2.5 Reorganise work distribution.}

In addition it was felt that some changes could be made as to the way in which the service was delivered. Suggestions included working on a school by school basis, splitting the cohort geographical and opportunities to spend time with children who were less “high-end”:

\textit{If there were more of us we could become more involved with individual children because you do worry that a lot of time is spent with the high-end children who are really struggling and it’d be lovely to spend some time with those children who actually aren’t struggling but who with a little bit more support could do even better. (Virtual school 2)}

\textit{I work on a case by case basis \ldots it’d be much better if I was to work on a school by school basis. Like if I was to go into a school and work on all the children in their cared for population \ldots the designated teacher could take a lot more responsibility \ldots that would be my way forward for my particular role. (Virtual school 5)}

\textbf{4.10.3 Appreciative inquiry.}

Appreciative inquiry employs a 4D cycle (see section 3.7.3 for further details). Data gained during the discovery stage of the cycle has been discussed throughout section 4.10.2. Dreaming will be discussed in section 4.10.3.1, and design in section 4.10.3.5. There was not an opportunity to carry out the destiny stage of the cycle, the implications of which will be discussed in section 4.10.3.6.
4.10.3.1 A description of “dreaming”.
Carter (2006) describes dreaming as being “focused on the affirmative exploration of ‘what might be’ through thinking outside of the usual boundaries and by envisioning positive futures.” (p.54). During the dreaming stage, participants were asked to think about their peak experiences generated during the discovery stage and imagine that they were happening on a regular basis. Prompts were provided (Appendix E) to support the participants in developing three concrete wishes or dreams for the future work of the virtual school. The group members were instructed to ensure that the wishes evoked personal experiences and envisaged the best possibilities for the future.

Group members were asked to take it in turns to share their dreams as the researcher scribed the key points. Photographs of the scribed flip charts can be viewed in Appendix K. Following thematic analysis (section 3.8.3) the group’s dreams were organised into the themes presented in figure 29.
4.10.3.2 Strategic dreams.

When focusing on “what might be” members of the virtual school and the designated teacher suggested strategic dreams regarding funding and public relations. A group member suggested that the team needed to “be bold”; this concept struck a chord.
with the other group members, who felt that being bold was essential to promote the needs of cared for children. Dreams included:

*Funding does not limit possibilities – and by that I don’t necessarily mean that we have an endless pot of money, but that we’re able to do the things that we need to do to support the young people without thinking “oh my goodness we can’t spend that*. (Virtual school 3)

*I would like us to be able to do a lot more around PR – promotions and publicity and involve industries, local businesses, supporting us and sponsoring us. A bit like the academy type thing where we’d get someone to sponsor us so actually that would help us financially, but also spread the word to members of the public.* (Virtual school 1)

And then I’ve written down “be bold”... In a lot of our situations, what we have to do is prove something doesn’t work before we can move on to what will work, and actually, I know and a lot of people around that child know ... if we try that it’s not going to work, but we need to fail before we can move onto the next step... I would have loved to have said from the outset – this is what he needs let’s go straight to it. (Virtual school 1)

*Do you know what, you’ve absolutely hit the nail on the head for so many things ... You have to let the children fail ... even though we know what they need, we have to let them fail first and then you’re dealing with a far worse situation. And that’s fundamentally wrong isn’t it.* (Designated teacher 1)

**4.10.3.3 Staffing dreams.**

Staffing dreams related to improving the functioning of the virtual school team and developing the skills, knowledge and confidence of role partners. It was hoped that this in turn, would lead to further positive outcomes for cared for children:

...all schools, teams, social care and foster carers to have the same high level of knowledge and skills around cared for children... I want consistency for all of our kids. (Virtual school 3)
I think on training purposes, schools need to understand what attachment disorder actually means and I don’t think they do. And I don’t think people truly understand the depths to which it can affect children. (Virtual school 3)

...key staff who would come and work in school more with the vulnerable children on a delivery basis. ... who were highly trained to deal with these children and make a difference very quickly. (Designated teacher 1)

I would also like for me to set up more “plan, do, review” which sounds very educationally and “school” ... I would like that to be actually much more structured, for them to then come back to me and meet with them again – how’s that working, what else do we need to do? (Virtual school 4)

It’s probably 10% of our kids that take up 85% of our time in lots of cases. There are good reasons for that, but I want us to be able to make sure that all the other kids are getting exactly the same level of support from us. I don’t think we can do that without more staff. (Virtual school 3)

4.10.3.4 Child focused dreams.
Child focused dreams included widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups, developing the early years and post-16 provision and promoting wider life opportunities for cared for children:

I would like to see the work that the virtual school does linking to other vulnerable children. To extend the remit so it’s dealing with children protection, adoption, and children in need level. I think that would be really useful. (Designated teacher 1)

...to give [cared for children] wider opportunities in their locality, that develop their experiences. ... Not waiting for the moment when it becomes a problem but giving them the opportunity to experience things that other children do on a regular basis. (Designated teacher 1)

... I’m a firm believer in helping kids to raise their self esteem through doing extracurricular things ... I mean a lot of my virtual school requests are for guitar
I actually believe that it’s those things that engage kids. (Virtual school 1)

I’d like to have more involvement with post-16, early years and disability. There is just certain strands and teams that I think I would like to have more involvement with really.... And post-adoption ...the adoption break down stuff that we pick up ... is tragic really. The levels of rejection in that is phenomenal... (Virtual school 4)

... 16-22 is horrendous, it’s horrendous for youngsters anyway [for the wider school population or settled cared for children], but it’s horrendous for youngsters with unsettled periods and so on. And I think I’d really like to see a massive development in that. I think we’ve put our toe in it – we’ve got a 16 plus team now which specialise in that, but there is so much more that needs to be done for them. (Virtual school 1)

4.10.3.5 Findings from the “design” stage.

Following dreaming, group members took part in the design phase of appreciative inquiry. Group members were asked to consider the collective dreams and think about which one(s) should be addressed first. It was suggested that the group might like to pick the “smallest change that would make the biggest difference”, select a dream that was achievable due to existing work, or based on the strongest interests of the group. The group elected to address three dreams in this time, as they felt this was a realistic and achievable goal. The selected dreams were to develop enrichment opportunities, to “be bold” and to extend the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups of young people.

During the design phase, the dreams were turned into provocative proposals; statements that sum up “what could be” (Carter, 2006). Figure 30 contains the provocative proposals formed during the appreciative inquiry session.
The issues of being bold and widening the remit of the virtual school were discussed during the appreciative inquiry session, whilst transcribing the session, the researcher became aware that firm provocative proposals had not been agreed upon. The research formed provocative proposals illustrated in figure 31, based on the transcript of the data and sent them to the group members to check.

An action plan was developed by the group members, which detailed the dreams of the group, the provocative proposals, any resources required and actions to be taken (Appendix L). This action plan was shared with the virtual school and designated teacher 1 following the appreciative inquiry session with the intention that it could contribute to the future planning of the virtual school’s work.
**4.10.3.6 Implications of not carrying out the “destiny” stage.**

Carter (2006) describes destiny as being “focused on sustaining the envisioned future(s) or ‘what will be’ through supporting the ongoing learning and innovation.” (p.54). Within the time restrictions of this thesis it was not possible to carry out the destiny stage of appreciative inquiry. It would have been preferable to carry out the destiny stage of the research and completing the 4D cycle. The researcher hopes that by providing the virtual school with feedback from the appreciative inquiry day, they will be able to act upon their action plan to promote positive change for cared for children. The researcher is encouraged by the fact the virtual school selected the dreams that they felt strongly about and selected a small number of areas for development making the plan manageable. It is suggested that one of the main risks when carrying out an appreciative inquiry is that managers may be unable or unwilling to respond to the wishes of the participants (Oakes, 2010). As the virtual school head was a member of the appreciative inquiry group, the researcher suggests that this is likely to support positive change and sustained envisioned futures.

**4.11 Summary of the Results Chapter**

In chapter four the researcher presented the key findings from the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session. In chapter five the researcher will discuss these findings in relation to the literature and a contribution to knowledge. The implications of these results for practice and future research will be also be considered.
5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction
In chapter five the researcher will begin by reiterating the research aims and questions. Key findings from chapter four will be discussed and considered in relation to the research questions, literature review and previous research findings. The researcher will discuss the use of a mixed methods research design, with emphasis on the use of appreciative inquiry and its perceived impact on the research findings. The distinct contribution of this piece of research will be highlighted, alternative explanations considered and limitations acknowledged. Chapter five will conclude with a consideration of the potential implications of this research for practice, along with recommendations regarding future research.

5.2 Aims and Research Questions
This thesis aimed to explore the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children, in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting their emotional wellbeing, as well as providing a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry with a vulnerable group within educational research. It is recognised that there is a limited research base regarding the use of appreciative inquiry within educational research (Shuayb et al., 2009); particularly regarding vulnerable groups such as cared for children (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b) and within a mixed methods research design.

In order to address these research aims, the following research questions were proposed:

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?
3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

5.3 Research Question 1

1. To what extent do designated teachers of cared for children currently feel confident in their role and supported by the virtual school for cared for children?

5.3.1 Purpose of research question one.

Research question one sought to explore to what extent designated teachers of cared for children felt confident in their role, the support currently received from the virtual school and additional support that would be of benefit to the designated teachers. The views of designated teachers were gathered (see section 3.6.3 and 3.7.1) as they are a key educational role partner of the virtual school and co-ordinate much of the direct work carried out to support cared for children within schools. It is suggested that designated teachers have “lead responsibility for helping school staff understand the things which affect how looked after children learn and achieve” (DCSF, 2009a, p.4).

5.3.2 Responding designated teachers.

The questionnaire was distributed to 149 educational settings and 51 responses were returned, providing a response rate of 34% which is “average” for an impersonal questionnaire (Gillham, 2000). Analysis suggested that 100% of respondents had heard of the virtual school, with 75% of the respondents reporting that they knew “a lot” (37.5%) or “a little” (37.5%) about the support provided by the virtual school for cared for children. The remaining 25% suggested that they had heard of the term, but were not aware of the support provided by the virtual school. None of the responding designated teachers reported not having heard of the virtual school. The researcher acknowledges that it is not possible to comment on the levels of awareness of the work of staff supporting the needs of cared for children before the introduction of the
virtual school model. The questionnaire responses suggest that current levels of awareness of the work of the virtual school are high, and it was perceived by members of the virtual school that the profile of the needs of cared for children had been raised since the introduction of the virtual school model.

The researcher recognises that the respondents were self-selecting and accessed via an information distribution list or through attending a designated teacher’s Network Meeting, which may have impacted on the level of awareness reported. It is possible that some of the non-responding designated teachers may not have heard of the virtual school, and chose not to respond to the questionnaire on this basis.

There is limited existing literature regarding the collaboration of designated teachers and the virtual school and levels of awareness of the virtual school, therefore the researcher is limited to comparing these findings with the evaluation of the virtual school head pilot (Berridge et al. 2009) which surveyed respondents across 11 local authorities with an “intensive sample” of five local authorities.

In the pilot evaluation, 21 designated teachers (a 35% response rate) were surveyed; 17 of which responded to the question “Have you heard of a ‘virtual school head’” (Berridge et al., 2009, p.79). Eighty-eight percent (15 out of 17) of the pilot designated teachers had heard of the virtual school head. In the present research, 100% of responding designated teachers reported that they had heard of the virtual school. The researcher is not able to comment on the context of the local authorities in which the pilot study took place, as they were anonymised by the researchers (Berridge et al., 2009, see p.7). It is possible that the strong foundations for work with cared for children which existed within the researcher’s local authority impacted on the increased levels of awareness in the present study. In the pilot evaluation there had been around 18 months for the model to become embedded; in this study the virtual school model had been in place for eight months. It is possible that existing positive foundations may be a prerequisite for awareness and acceptance of the virtual school model. The researcher would be interested to learn about the introduction of the virtual school model in local authorities with little existing work around supporting the needs of cared for children. The researcher acknowledges the small sample size and
self-selecting nature of respondents in both the present study and the pilot study (Berridge et al., 2009).

5.3.3 Reported levels of confidence amongst designated teachers.

The researcher sought to establish the existing levels of confidence of responding designated teachers and to discover what additional support would increase their confidence when working to support the needs of cared for children. The responding designated teachers reported positive perceptions of confidence when supporting academic attainment and achievement (question 9, Appendix B); with 90% reporting that they felt “very confident” (40%) or “quite confident” (50%); 6% responded “neutral” and 4% reported they were “not very confident”.

Respondents also reported positive perceptions of their confidence in promoting emotional wellbeing (question 11, Appendix B), with 84% reporting that they felt “very confident” (34%) or “quite confident” (50%); here 14% responded “neutral” and 2% of respondents suggested that they were “not very confident”. As discussed in section 4.4.4, the researcher considered a number of psychological factors which may explain the high levels of confidence reported in this study. It would be interesting to establish the designated teachers’ levels of self-efficacy, feelings of control and resilience; as such factors are likely to have impacted on the high levels of confidence reported.

The researcher acknowledges that the individual’s decisions to complete the questionnaire may have been affected by their confidence in their role, which could have contributed to the largely positive responses obtained. The researcher triangulated the responses to questions nine and 11 with responses throughout the questionnaire. Responses suggested that the support of the virtual school had had an impact on the designated teacher’s confidence in supporting cared for children, suggesting that the high levels of confidence suggested in the present research are indicative of the supportive function of this virtual school.

I am very happy with the level of support that I have received from [name] and the team. The care of our cared for pupils is so much easier because of this.

(Designated teacher)
The researcher was not able to locate any literature that specifically focused on the levels of confidence of teachers holding the role of designated teacher for cared for children. The DCSF (2009c) guidance “Improving the attainment of looked after children in primary school” suggested that the guide aimed to support schools in being able to “feel more confident in facing any challenges these children present, and fulfilling the potential each child has.” (p.4), suggesting that concerns regarding confidence have been raised in the past in some form. Teacher confidence was not a focus of the Berridge et al. (2009) evaluative pilot which sought to establish designated teacher’s “experiences” of the virtual school head, but did not specifically look at their levels of confidence. The researcher therefore suggests that an understanding of the levels of confidence experienced by designated teachers working to support the needs of cared for children, as supported by the virtual school is a unique contribution of this research. In future research it would be interesting to investigate the levels of confidence amongst a wider sample of designated teachers from contrasting local authorities in order to further understand factors contributing to levels of confidence. It would also be interesting to investigate the levels of resilience, control and self-efficacy experienced by designated teachers in this local authority and beyond.

Previous research (Francis, 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001) has suggested that workload can be a barrier to supporting cared for children. It is possible that the status of “designated teacher of cared for children” enabled staff to seek management time to develop their understanding of the needs of cared for children and to dedicate time to supporting cared for children, which then impacted on their levels of confidence.

5.3.4 Perceptions of existing support offered by the virtual school for cared for children.

Twenty-six of the 51 designated teachers reported ways in which the virtual school had already supported them; some responses reflected the fact that support had not yet been needed, but they would feel confident in accessing the team if and when required. As presented and discussed in section 4.4.3, a combination of practical advice (regarding personal education plans, funding and cases) and emotional support

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8 Interestingly the level of confidence of Social Workers was assessed and 50% of Social Workers agreed that “I now feel more confident than I did in dealing with educational matters” (Berridge et al., 2009, p.78) with a further 30% being unsure.
(of the designated teacher and cared for children during placement breakdowns) was reported as beneficial. Examples of how the virtual school had supported designated teachers included:

*Advice and expertise when dealing with children with particular needs.*
*(Designated teacher)*

*Fantastic support. Professional mentoring. Specific training events.* *(Designated teacher)*

*Being able to contact and discuss concerns especially emotional wellbeing.* *(Designated teacher)*

Assistance in completing personal education plans was identified as supportive by twenty-three respondents. Harker et al. (2004) suggested that the statutory requirement for personal education plans to be completed within a timescale had promoted joint work between social workers and teachers. The personal education plan coordinator reported that the number of personal education plan being completed on time since the formation of the virtual school had risen from 83% to 95%. As personal education plans were statutory prior to the formation of the virtual school, the researcher suggests that the increase is likely to be due to the support offered by the virtual school. The importance of supporting designated teachers in completing personal education plans is highlighted in the virtual school head toolkit *(DCSF, 2010c).*

It was perceived that access to funding has been supportive and enabled a range of opportunities for cared for children, such as one-to-one tuition and enrichment activities. In the virtual school head toolkit *(DCSF, 2010c)* it is suggested that the virtual school should be seen as “core activity” with operational and strategic funding (as was the case for this virtual school) rather than being perceived as a “project”. Other key roles identified by the toolkit included a role in training, information sharing and supporting professionals; these were reported as supportive by respondents in the present research.

Responses to the questionnaire suggested that the support of the virtual school was particularly valued during placement breakdown. The importance of placement
stability is highlighted within documentation (Berridge et al., 2009; DCSF, 2010c). Designated teachers felt that the virtual school were able to support them in ensuring that the young person’s education and emotional wellbeing was supported at such times:

_Speed of emergency funding and support from [name] ... for children with placement breakdowns. (Designated teacher)_

5.3.5 Areas where support could be developed.

Despite the high levels of confidence reported, additional training was requested by respondents. Similar findings were reported by Berridge et al. (2009), who reported that designated teachers were “not complacent” and around two-thirds would welcome further training around their role. As illustrated in figures 20 and 22, a range of suggestions were made. The researcher will now focus on additional support for cared for children post-16, post-adoption and training regarding emotional wellbeing, as these were the most commonly sought areas of support and there is a dearth of literature regarding the role of the virtual school in providing such support.

5.3.5.1 Supporting post-16.

Responding designated teachers suggested additional support post-16 as an area for development. This was also highlighted by members of the appreciative inquiry group. Berridge et al. (2009) reported that virtual school heads’ interpretation of their remit around post-16 varied, with some feeling it ended at Year 11 and other being actively engaged post-16. In this virtual school, the staff were committed to developing post-16 provision, in order to support the outcomes of older cared for children which are recognised to often be lowered (Driscoll, 2011; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). The virtual school have since employed an additional staff member with a specific remit around post-16 provision. In the future the researcher would be interested in exploring the impact of this appointment on outcomes for cared for children and the confidence of designated teachers.

5.3.5.2 Supporting post-adoption.

Additional support post-adoption was requested from the questionnaire and raised as an area for development in the appreciative inquiry session (section 4.10.2.2). The researcher was not able to locate any literature regarding support for post-adopted
children, specifically related to the work of the virtual school. As discussed in section 4.10.2.3, during appreciative inquiry, the option to extend the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups was discussed. The researcher is not aware of an existing knowledge base around widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable children and young people; which will be discussed further in section 5.6.

5.3.5.3 Supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children

Designated teachers reported that additional training and resources around supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children would be of benefit. As highlighted in the literature, the instability of being in care (Berridge, 2007; Sinclair et al. 2005) and range of emotional wellbeing difficulties experienced by cared for children (McCann et al. 1996; Meltzer et al., 2003) are well established. In this local authority, the respondents suggested enhanced access to services such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and educational psychology services for cared for children would be of benefit. Through being a team member, the researcher is aware that the educational psychology team informally prioritises the needs of vulnerable young people and two days of senior specialist educational psychologist time is ring-fenced to the virtual school and social care teams. The virtual school already provide a range of training sessions; following feedback from designated teachers they may wish to increase the focus of future training around the emotional needs of cared for children.

5.3.6 Summary of research question 1.

In summary, responding designated teachers reported positive perceptions of confidence with 90% being “very” or “quite” confident in supporting the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children and 84% being “very” or “quite” confident in supporting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children. Despite these high levels of confidence, designated teachers were not complacent and were able to identify a number of areas in which they would benefit from further support, as illustrated in figures 20 and 22. There was some overlap between areas of further support required by the designated teachers and areas for development suggested during the appreciative inquiry session. Although additional areas of support were identified, the designated teachers were largely complementary regarding the support they were currently receiving from the virtual school. The researcher acknowledges
that these findings and implications should be treated with caution due to the small sample size and the fact that the reviews reflect designated teachers in one local authority.

5.4 Research Question 2

2. What are the perceived facilitators and barriers to the virtual school raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils in this local authority?

5.4.1 Purpose of research question two.

Research question two aimed to investigate the current role of the virtual school for cared for children in raising academic attainment and achievement and promoting emotional wellbeing. In order to do so, the researcher sought to explore existing work being carried out by members of the virtual school staff and establish the perceived facilitators and barriers in supporting positive outcomes for cared for children. In order to address this research question, data was sought through semi-structured interviews (see section 3.7.2 and Appendix C). Analysis suggested a number of facilitators and barriers to the current work of the virtual school with some additional information triangulated from the appreciative inquiry session (see section 3.7.3 and Appendices D and E).

5.4.2 Perceived facilitators to the work of the virtual school.

A range of facilitators to the current work of the virtual school were suggested, namely strategic issues, practical support, child focused issues and interpersonal issues as represented in figure 24. The researcher will now focus on the strategic role of the virtual school, funding issues and the dedication of staff working with cared for children; these key issues are considered as they triangulate with previous research or present new perspectives to the field. The researcher acknowledges that there was existing good practice in the local authority prior to the formation of the virtual school and some of these issues are likely to have built upon previous good work. It would be interesting to gain a perspective on facilitators in a local authority with a different history of supporting the needs of cared for children, to establish commonality and differences.
5.4.2.1 Strategic facilitators.

In the semi-structured interviews it was perceived that being “branded” the “virtual school” had raised the profile of the needs of cared for children, as well as improving access to funding. Prior to the formation of the virtual school the educational consultants, personal education plan coordinator, education liaison officer and senior specialist educational psychologist were all involved in supporting the needs of cared for children. The head teacher was a primary head teacher at this point; literature suggests that “Those [virtual school heads] who had previously held school headships or were otherwise senior educationists and were placed at a senior level in the organisation were able to exert particular influence and operate more effectively” (Berridge et al., 2009, p.2). It was perceived that the virtual school head had access to meetings which previously could not be attended due to capacity, workload and position within the local authority hierarchy. This suggests that the appointment of a virtual school head added to the good work already being carried out by staff in the local authority in relation to cared for children. Virtual school staff members felt this access allowed issues around the needs of cared for children to be “kept on the table”.

5.4.2.2 Funding.

It was perceived that funding had enabled the virtual school and designated teachers to support cared for children in a number of ways. Staff reported that the same level of funding had been secured for the following academic year, following a report to councillors, exemplifying the positive impact of funding on outcomes for cared for children. Staff provided the researcher with examples of how funding had been spent; one pupil in care who was gifted and talented in performing art had been funded to attend a private school which specialised in music to enable this child to meet their potential in this area. Other pupils had been placed in specialist provisions in order to meet their social and emotional needs. The virtual school were able to report that all of their pupils were in a “good” or “outstanding” school (as recommended by the Care Matters Green Paper, DfES, 2006) thanks to the ability to manage their funding strategically and operationally. It was felt that funding opportunities had been able to enhance the work previous carried out by individuals prior to the formation of the virtual school. Increased funding had also enabled the senior specialist educational psychologist to devote an additional day to the needs of cared for children:
... because I now have two days a week ... with social care – a lot of the stuff I just listed I wouldn’t have been able to, or it would have been very difficult to
(Senior specialist educational psychologist)

Funding had been widely used to support pupils through one-to-one tuition which aims to close the gap between cared for children and the wider school population, raising the attainment of cared for children. The DCSF (2009g) suggested that cared for children made better progress with one-to-one tuition than other groups as it addresses gaps in learning and enables the individual to ask questions without peer pressure concerns. Prior to the formation of the virtual school, existing good practice was in place, such as Letterbox Club⁹; it appears that additional funding opportunities enabled existing good practice to be enhanced and developed. Reports during interviews and appreciative inquiry from the virtual school suggested that the status of the virtual school and virtual school head had enabled access to strategic funding to further support their work.

Funding had also enabled increased enrichment activities such as a Forest Schools¹⁰, music tuition and sports events; virtual school staff were keen to provide opportunities to cared for children that they would provide to their own children. The importance of enrichment activities has been highlighted in the literature (Broh, 2002; Gilligan, 2007) and it is suggested that activities such as sports clubs can lead to improved academic performance due to factors such as the cared for children feeling connected with a key adult (Gilligan, 2007) and supportive relationships with peers (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

The “celebrating and recognising excellence awards” are an example of good practice that was in place before the formation of the virtual school. It was perceived that additional funding and a raised awareness of the needs of cared for children has raised the profile of this event since the formation of the virtual school.

⁹ Letterbox Club focuses on improving educational outcomes for cared for children by providing them with parcels or books and educational materials once a month for six months, directly addressed to them at their home. http://www.letterboxclub.org.uk/

¹⁰ Forest Schools “encourage and inspire individuals ... through positive outdoor experiences.” http://www.forestschools.com/
5.4.2.3 Facilitating positive outcomes.

During appreciative inquiry it was suggested that supporting cared for children at times of transition was facilitative to maintaining or raising their academic attainment and achievement, and supporting emotional wellbeing. The designated teacher suggested that support from the virtual school was “instrumental” at times of transition between placements, schools or key stages to promote stability. The importance of supporting young people at times of transition was highlighted by Care Matters (DfES, 2006), with a particular emphasis on supporting transition into adult life. In addition it was suggested that in championing the needs of cared for children; virtual schools should be promoting stability through admissions policies and the use of school transport (DCSF, 2010c). Staff reported that good practice regarding transition was in place before the formation of the virtual school, but the increased strategic and funding opportunities had enabled staff to act more quickly and offered a wider range of placements and provisions.

Virtual school staff suggested that the knowledge and dedication of staff in their team and in schools was facilitative to positive outcomes for cared for children. Staff knowledge and experience also enabled the team to deliver training to the designated teachers, the importance of which is highlighted in documentation (Berridge et al. 2009; DCSF, 2009a, DCSF, 2010c). Prior to the virtual school, existing staff had engaged in training with residential staff, foster carers and individual schools. Following the formation of the virtual school a “designated teacher network” was created which formalised training opportunities, provided training opportunities to all schools in the local authority and provided networking opportunities for designated teachers.

An additional facilitator to the work of the virtual school was having staff within the team and in schools who were knowledgeable and dedicated to “championing” the needs of cared for children. Experienced individuals were working to promote the needs of cared for children before the advent of the virtual school. Responses from the interviews and appreciative inquiry session suggested that the virtual school model has enhanced and promoted this work through increased funding opportunities and a greater awareness of the work of the virtual school.
5.4.3 Perceived barriers to the work of the virtual school.

Following thematic analysis of the interview data, a number of barriers to the work of the virtual school were identified including child focused issues, expectations, practical and financial issues and staff focussed issues. The pre-care experience of cared for children and the impact this has on academic attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing was suggested as a barrier to the work of the virtual school. Staff identified traumatic experiences and a lack of trust as barriers to improvement. The impact of loss, bereavement and unwanted change were also acknowledged. The impact of pre-care experiences on lowered attainment of cared for children have been identified as problematic by a number of authors (Comfort, 2007; Goddard, 2000; Jackson & Sachdev, 2001; Jackson & Simon, 2005; Selwyn et al., 2006). Unfortunately such barriers are not isolated to the work of this virtual school, but are characteristics of the needs of cared for children; the respondents did not express any examples of barriers that had arisen specifically as a result of being “the virtual school”.

Low expectations placed upon cared for children by home and school were identified as a barrier to the work of the virtual school. It was felt that expectations had improved, but there were still examples where lowered expectations needed challenging amongst school staff, corporate parents and carers. It was felt that individuals were often trying to be kind to cared for children by lowering their expectations due to traumatic backgrounds. Virtual school staff were encouraging carers and schools to ensure that expectations were high and to encourage attendance, as there would be little point in implementing interventions to support the needs of cared for children if they were not in school to experience the support.

During interviews staff reported that they have been challenging expectations regarding low attainment and attendance for a number of years. It was perceived that the virtual school model had enabled the team to formalise this focus and for schools to become more aware that data was being tracked through the use of systems such as “Welfare Call11”. Welfare Call provided the virtual school with a weekly update and the virtual school were then able to contact individual schools or carers if problems with attendance were noted. It was reported that attendance figures has risen since

11 http://welfarecall.com/lac/lac.html
the formation of the virtual school, although there was an existing positive trend in attendance prior to the formation of the virtual school (Appendix S).

Funding was suggested as both a facilitator and a barrier to the work of the virtual school. Although funding had enabled some work such as one-to-one tuition and increased access to enrichment activities, it was perceived that further funding would have had a positive impact on the work of the virtual school and allow them to broaden the range of opportunities available to cared for children. This research took place during a time when austerity measures were necessary in local authorities across the country. It is hypothesised that the impact of austerity measures and cuts to funding will act as a barrier to a number of areas of education and these issues are not unique to the virtual school model.

One member of the virtual school suggested that a lack of facilities (buildings, outdoor spaces and alternative provisions) was a barrier to their particular role. The facilities available within each local authority are likely to depend on factors such as the geographical location, level of tourism and the availability of empty buildings or open spaces which can be developed. Within the researcher’s local authority it was perceived that open spaces such as farms and small classrooms with limited distractions would be of benefit.

Further barriers to the work of the virtual school related to the emotional wellbeing of staff. Members of the virtual school team acknowledged that the emotional wellbeing of staff within their team and those working directly with children in schools had to be considered and supported at times. Virtual school staff were aware that school staff could be dealing with children who had very traumatic experiences, with limited opportunities for debriefing and supervision. A virtual school member had supported some staff following such traumatic events and reported that this work was well received. It is recognised that the emotional wellbeing of school staff would not be solely related to supporting the needs of cared for children, with other vulnerable groups requiring support, such as children with child protection issues. In the current economic climate, austerity measures, redundancies and increased work pressures are also likely to impact on professionals’ emotional wellbeing. In 2008 the Teacher Support Network carried out research into teacher wellbeing investigating how it is
promoted, undermined and construed. The research suggested that demands on teachers including behaviour issues and heavy workload resulted in stress, had a negative impact on job satisfaction and affected teachers’ sense of competence and accomplishment.

5.4.4 Summary for Research Question Two
In summary a number of facilitators and barriers to the work of the virtual school were identified. Facilitators included the raised profile of cared for children and funding opportunities afforded by being “The virtual school”. Barriers included the previous experiences of cared for children, a lack of facilities and resources, funding issues and issues regarding staff knowledge and experience and emotional wellbeing. A number of the facilitators and barriers identified in research question two echo the facilitators and barriers to wider work within education and multi-agency settings. The researcher acknowledges that a number of these facilitators and barriers are not necessarily restricted to the virtual school model.

5.5. Research Question 3

3. What does the virtual school perceive as the key functions of the virtual school model; what advantages are perceived over previous models?

5.5.1 Purpose of research question three.
Research question three aimed to establish the perceived key functions of the virtual school model and the perceived advantages of this model over previous methods of service delivery. The needs of cared for children have been recognised since at least the 1960s (Fergusson, 1966; Pringle, 1965) and a number of pieces of legislation have been passed over the years to promote the needs of cared for children such as The Utting report (1991), The Children Act (1989, amended by the Children Act 2004) and the Care Matters agenda (DfES, 2006 and 2007) which proposed the concept of the virtual school head in order to drive up the performance of schools in relation to cared for children.

Prior to the virtual school pilot (2007-2009), examples of existing good practice were identifiable in the local authority in which this research took place and beyond (DCSF, 2009c; DCSF, 2009d). The virtual school at the centres of this research was formed in
September 2010; prior to this a number of the staff members\textsuperscript{12} were employed to promote the educational and emotional wellbeing outcomes of cared for children in other contexts (discussed in 3.6.1). It was beyond the scope of this research to carry out a detailed investigation of the services that were in place before the virtual school was formed, but references were made to this through private correspondence and information provided during the semi-structured interviews. Within this research question the researcher will consider how the provision regarding cared for children has developed following the formation of the virtual school.

Within the semi-structured interviews and appreciative inquiry session it was suggested that a lot of good practice from experienced individuals was in place before the formation of the virtual school. It is possible that the introduction of the virtual school may have been less successful in another local authority with limited experienced in supporting the needs of cared for children. One of the educational consultants described how her work with cared for children has started around 2001 as a teacher in conjunction with educational psychologists and over the years had been funded by education and social care jointly or singularly at various times, before the formation of the virtual school in 2010. This individual described herself as “an educationalist” it is possible that in another organisation, the values of staff members may have differed, and a greater emphasis may have been placed on another element of work with cared for children.

5.5.2 Perceived key functions of the virtual school

The researcher sought to establish the perceived key functions of the virtual school within one local authority; this fit with the researcher’s critical realistic epistemological position, as described in section 3.4. The perceived key function themes were derived from comments made by members of the virtual school during semi-structured interviews (Appendix C for prompts) and the appreciative inquiry session (Appendices D & E for prompts). The researcher acknowledges that the information presented here is the reality for one virtual school and that each school is likely to have different perceived core functions based upon factors such as the strategic position they sit in

\textsuperscript{12} Educational consultant A, educational consultant B, senior specialist educational psychologist, educational liaison officer and personal education plan coordinator (the virtual school head was previously a primary head teacher).
within the local authority (education or social care) and the size and demographic of their cohort. The researcher suggests that the findings could be used to add to the limited knowledge base regarding the functioning of virtual schools as an illustrative example of the functioning of one virtual school. Commonalities were found between the perceived key functions of this virtual school (raising the profile of cared for children, training staff, creating opportunities for cared for children and tracking and monitoring cared for children) as illustrated in figure 26 and the key functions suggested by the toolkit (DCSF, 2010c, p.4-5):

- To make sure that there is a system to track and monitor the attainment and progress of looked after children
- To ensure that all looked after children have a robust and effective personal education plan and access one-to-one support, including personal tuition where appropriate
- To champion the educational needs of looked after children across the authority and those placed out-of-authority

5.5.2.1 Raising the profile of cared for children.

Although a number of the same individuals were carrying out similar roles, it was felt that being labelled “the virtual school” had enabled them to raise the profile of the needs of cared for children. One hundred percent of designated teachers responding to the questionnaire had heard of the virtual school, and members of the staff suggested that the appointment of a head and formation of the virtual school had enabled the needs of cared for children and duty of corporate parenting to be better promoted throughout the local authority. The researcher took part in a ‘Welcome to [Local Authority Name]’ event as a new member of staff and at this meeting the needs of cared for children and importance of corporate parenting were raised, with staff members being signposted to the work of the virtual school.

The evaluation of the virtual school head pilot (Berridge et al., 2009) found that the profile of cared for children had been raised in the 11 piloted authorities. The staff of the virtual school at the centre of this research felt that they had been successful in raising the profile of cared for children. The researcher acknowledges that information regarding the raised profile of the needs of cared for children comes from members of
the virtual school staff who could be biased in their reporting. It was beyond the scope of this research to survey wider corporate partners regarding their knowledge of the needs of cared for children. A recent safeguarding and looked after children inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (2011) suggested that the work of the virtual school was “embedded” and that the team “routinely provided training, advice and challenge to a wide range of professionals” (Office for Standards in Education, 2011, p. 29), supporting the perceptions of the virtual school staff that they were working to promote the needs of cared for children across the local authority.

Although it was not suggested as a factor in raising the profile of cared for children by members of the virtual school staff, the researcher suggests that the statutory requirement for schools to have a designated teacher of cared for children (DCSF, 2009a) is likely to have had an impact upon raising awareness of the needs of cared for children within schools, particularly amongst head teachers, governing bodies and the individual who took on the role of designated teacher. Analysis of the questionnaires showed that a number of designated teachers were also head teachers or special educational needs coordinators. The virtual school staff were interested to hear this and plan to use this information to further tailor their training to meet designated teachers’ needs.

5.5.2.2 Training staff.

Members of the virtual school identified training of designated teachers and wider school staff as a key function of the work of the virtual school. Improved training of designated teachers was identified as a key function if virtual school heads in the evaluation of the pilot (Berridge et al., 2009). The importance of training “key players” is also highlighted with the virtual school head toolkit (DCSF, 2010c).

Virtual school staff members mentioned a number of training opportunities, these included supporting designated teachers regarding their role and responsibilities as well as providing support regarding the emotional and academic needs of cared for children. These training opportunities had been rolled out to other role partners such as foster carers and staff in residential settings. It was perceived that funding related to the virtual school had enabled staff to provide more training than was previously possible and allowed the senior specialist educational psychologist to dedicate more
time to the needs of cared for children. Through the virtual school model, it was possible for psychological theory and practice to be directly applied. The researcher suggests that a similar model could be used to support other vulnerable young people.

Historically literature suggests that social workers do not place emphasis on the educational needs of cared for children, (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001) and that workload demands prevent social workers from being able to take a greater interest in cared for children’s educational experiences (Francis, 2000; Harker et al., 2004). The virtual school at the centre of this research perceived that they had been able to support social workers in developing their understanding of the importance of educational needs of cared for children and the importance of a stable educational placement as well as the importance of having a stable home placement.

**5.5.2.3 Creating opportunities for cared for children.**

Creating opportunities for cared for children in terms of access to educational experiences, one-to-one tuition, promoting their emotional wellbeing and offering enrichment activities emerged as themes following communications with the virtual school staff. These themes linked with the suggested “core function” of the role of the virtual school head to “be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment of all children looked after by their authority” (DCSF, 2010c, p.2). Prior to the formation of the virtual school, work to create opportunities was already taking place. It was felt that the formation of the virtual school had enabled a raised profile of the needs of cared for children and had provided an improved funding stream, which had enabled opportunities such as one-to-one tuition to be delivered to cared for children. During appreciative inquiry, group members were able to reflect that due to the change of government and austerity measures, some opportunities for cared for children which had been present before the virtual school concept or at its inception were no longer available, such as access to a leisure card form the council, which enabled the individual to access sports facilities without charge. Appreciative inquiry group members were keen to be creative in their approach to provide cared for children with increased access to enrichment activities, as will be discussed in section 5.6 when the envisaged future role of the virtual school is described.
5.5.2.4 Tracking and monitoring cared for children.

Members of the virtual school suggested that tracking and monitoring the progress, attendance and exclusions and post-16 destinations of cared for children was a key part of their role. Research has suggested that historically incomplete and unreliable data has been a barrier to raising the attainment of cared for children (DFEE, 2000; Fletcher-Campbell Archer (2003); Jacklin et al., 2006). The importance of tracking and monitoring the attainment and progress of cared for children was highlighted by the virtual school head toolkit (2010c) which described how virtual schools should track the progress of their cohort in a similar way that a head teacher of a physical school would do.

Data provided by the virtual school administrative team (Appendix S) showed that exclusions and examination results were carefully tracked by the virtual school between 2008 and 2011, with a downwards trend in the number of days cared for children were excluded for and improved examination results. This information suggests that the needs of cared for children were being well tracked by this local authority before the formation of the virtual school model.

The virtual school suggested that the use of Welfare Call to monitor attendance had been beneficial as it had raised schools’ awareness that attendance was being monitored by the virtual school. Overall attendance figures had risen by 10% from 84.3% to 94.3% between 2008-09 and 2010-11 (see Appendix S for further details). Interestingly between 2008-09 and 2009-10 the increase was 6.2% (84.3% to 90.5%) with a further increase of 3.8% between 2009-10 and 2010-11, the time in which the virtual school was formed, demonstrating the existing positive foundations for supporting cared for children in this local authority.

As suggested by Berridge et al., (2009) it is impossible to say what would have happened without the formation of the virtual school and it is important to acknowledge the existence of good practice around cared for children prior to its formation. Despite this, the staff members strongly felt that the formation of the virtual school had been a positive move and the model was working. The perceived advantages of the virtual school over other methods of service delivery will now be discussed.
5.5.3 Perceived advantages of the virtual school model over previous methods of service delivery.

Throughout the discussion, reference has been made to the fact that prior to the formation of the virtual school, work was in place within this local authority and beyond, to promote and support the needs of cared for children. Although members of the virtual school felt they had been working effectively before the formation of the virtual school, all members felt that the virtual school model had enhanced their work. The researcher was interested to try and establish what the perceived advantages of the virtual school model were, as the researcher felt that this information would be important when considering the impact and key functions of the virtual school model and the future role of the virtual school.

Advantages of the virtual school model derived from the interviews and appreciative inquiry session included strategic and communication advantages as illustrated in figure 27. Strategic advantages included being placed in education as oppose to social care, the role of the virtual school head, funding, raised profile of cared for children and access to senior meetings within the local authority. Communication advantages included the development of relationships with designated teachers and setting staff and the virtual school being able to act as a bridge between education and social care.

5.5.3.1 Strategic advantages.

Members of the virtual school staff felt that the appointment of a virtual school head had got them noticed and helped to raise the profile of the work of the rest of the virtual school team. The appointment of the virtual school head enabled the individual to focus on strategic and management work to a greater extent than was possible prior to the existence of the role. Prior to the appointment, the educational consultants, senior specialist educational psychologist, personal education plan coordinator and education liaison officer strived to develop the strategic work around the educational attainment and achievement and emotional well being of cared for children. Staff members suggested it was difficult to do this as well as carrying out their day to day work and due to their relatively “junior” positions within children’s services, access to senior level meetings was not possible. Berridge et al., 2009 suggested that the title “virtual school head” was necessary to enable the individual to have the status
required to engage with schools and provide challenge to their practices around cared for children.

This piece of research strongly suggested that the role of virtual school head had enabled the individual to promote the needs of cared for children at senior levels. The virtual school head described their strategic position as enabling them to sit at the “top tables” of children’s services to promote the needs of cared for children and the importance of corporate parenting to individuals who were able to make important strategic decisions and distribute funding which could be used to support the needs of cared for children.

It was perceived that funding streams had increased following the conception of the virtual school model, and that the virtual school had more control as to how this funding could be distributed to best meet the needs of cared for children within their care. A number of interventions had been enabled by virtual school funding including one-to-one tuition. National evaluation suggested that one-to-one tuition has made a “particularly significant impact” on cared for children (DCSF, 2010d). At a local level it was perceived that one-to-one tuition had been effective as it has enabled cared for children to have gaps in their education filled and reduced the potential for cared for children being embarrassed by having to ask for a concept they had missed to be explained to them in front of peers. It was reported that in secondary settings, this tuition sometimes took place in the home as the pupils did not want miss their timetables lessons or stand out as “different” from the wider school population.

Great emphasis was placed by the virtual school team on the importance and advantage of the virtual school being placed under education within the structure of the local authority. This was perceived as particularly important by members of the virtual school staff team who had been involved in promoting the needs of cared for children for a number of years, and had been placed in a number of strategic locations within children’s services. It was felt that being placed under education enabled the virtual school to promote the importance of academic attainment and achievement for cared for children and identified the core function of those working within the virtual school as that of promoting the education of cared for children. In the pilot of the virtual school head role, ten of the eleven individuals were placed within the education
side of children’s services, with the remaining virtual school head being placed within social care (Berridge et al., 2009). In the pilot directors of children’s services were interviewed, once of whom suggested “We placed the headteacher for the virtual school within the schools block because that’s precisely what it is - a school.” (Berridge et al., 2009, p.38).

5.5.3.2 Communicative advantages.

Communicative advantages were suggested, in respect to the virtual school staff being able to develop personal relationships with individual designated teachers and schools staff, as well as acting as a bridge between education and social care staff. The pilot of the virtual school head role (Berridge et al., 2009) suggested that virtual school heads from an educational background (as was the case in this piece of research) were at an advantage and this often enabled them to develop positive relationships with head teachers of the physical schools that the cared for children attended. The importance and advantages of developing positive relationships to promote multi-agency work is well documented. Staff felt they were able to share their expertise through training opportunities and less formal opportunities such as telephone calls, encouraged by the development of personal relationships with designated teachers and school staff.

Previous research has suggested that social workers are not always able to place emphasis on the educational needs of cared for children due to their caseload and their limited understanding of educational issues (Francis, 2000; Harker et al. 2003). Similarly, it is suggested that pressures on teaching staff to meet educational targets can act as a barrier to them being able to maintain communication with social workers, which will impact on their ability to develop a shared understanding of each other’s roles (Jackson & Sachdev, 2001). The virtual school staff felt that they were able to act as a bridge between social care and schools settings and interpret what was being said by each organisation. Virtual school staff members were able to cite examples where schools or social workers had misunderstood each others’ conflicting priorities. The virtual school had been able to step in and explain why a course of action had occurred, and support continued positive relationships between agencies, or the development of such relationships. This important role was not unique to the role of the virtual school in this local authority; in the pilot Berridge et al. (2009) reported perceptions of the ability to “bridge the gulf” between social care and education.
5.5.4 Summary for Research Question Three.
In summary, it was perceived that the key functions of the virtual school related to raising the profile of cared for children, tracking and monitoring the progress of cared for children, creating educational, emotional and wider opportunities for individuals and training staff who worked directly with cared for children.

It was acknowledged that good practice in supporting the needs of cared for children was in place before the virtual school model was formed in September 2010. A number of advantages of the virtual school model were suggested with particular importance being placed upon the virtual school model “sitting” in education within children’s services. It was perceived that the role of virtual school head was advantageous and that this had helped to raise the profile of cared for children and allow access to meetings at more senior levels. Additional funding gained by the virtual school had enabled the staff to be creative and flexible in meeting the individual needs of their cohort.

5.6 Research Question 4
4. What is the collaborative vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in relation to raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils?

5.6.1 Purpose of research question four.
Following an exploration of the current role of the virtual school for cared for children, research question four aimed to establish the collective vision of the virtual school and designated teachers for the future best practice of the virtual school in raising the academic attainment and achievement and promoting the emotional wellbeing of its pupils.

5.6.2 Use of appreciative inquiry.
The collective vision of cared for children was established through an appreciative inquiry session. Appreciative inquiry is an affirmative approach that reflects on existing strengths to build a collective vision of the preferred future of an organisation (Carter, 2006). There are limited examples of the use of appreciative inquiry within educational research (Shuayb et al., 2009); particularly regarding vulnerable groups such as cared
for children (Woollam, 2010a; Woollam, 2010b). As well as using appreciative inquiry methodology to establish the future role of the virtual school, the researcher aimed to provide a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry to the limited knowledge base.

Further information about appreciative inquiry can be found in section 3.7.3 and Appendices D and E. As discussed in section 3.6.5.1, only three members of the virtual school staff were able to take part in the appreciative inquiry session due to other work commitments or illness. Six designated teachers had committed to taking part in the appreciative inquiry day. Unfortunately on the day only one designated teacher was able to attend; although the researcher was disappointed with this at the time, the real world nature of research was reflected upon (e.g. Robson, 2002). After the sessions the researcher and senior specialist educational psychologist discussed the session and felt that despite the small group size, informative data had been gathered. The researcher acknowledges that it would have been preferable for all members of the virtual school and a range of designated teachers to have been able to attend the appreciative inquiry session to produce a wider collaborative vision of the future work of designated teachers and the virtual school. The virtual school staff members and designated teacher who was able to attend may have had specific views and experiences regarding cared for children which were not reflective of the majority of virtual school staff or designated teachers. Through triangulation the researcher identified that the collaborative vision identified by the appreciative inquiry group members was consistent with areas for further support suggested by the designated teachers who responded to the questionnaire and the “three wishes to improve the work of the virtual school” suggested by staff members during the semi-structured interviews.

Data from the appreciative inquiry session were fed back to group members with the intention of the virtual school being able to use this information when planning for the future of the virtual school. Themes regarding the future of the virtual school included “child facing work” such as developing the post-16 and early years provision and extending the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups. “Organisational issues” included expanding the staff team and reorganising workload. It was recognised that all of these areas could not be addressed at once, and the
appreciative inquiry group members therefore selected three areas which they wished to focus on to begin, as presented in Appendix L.

5.6.3 Design Stage.

Group members discussed the future role of the virtual school in relation to increased enrichment opportunities, being bold and widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups of young people. The aim of developing these areas was to move towards a “preferred future” where these “best practice” was happening more often.

Initial good practice was taking place around enrichment activities, so the virtual school selected this for one of their areas of development, as they felt it was achievable and of benefit to cared for children. Carter et al. (2006) suggest that “A helpful prompt here [in the design stage] is to ask the group to explore the first step needed, or the smallest change with the biggest impact in moving towards its ideal practice.” (p.197). The researcher believes that increasing enrichment opportunities was a “small” goal, but one which would have but important positive consequences for cared for children and increase the confidence of the virtual school staff in carrying out the action plan (Appendix L).

The second goal “be bold” referred to a reduced need to “jump through hoops” to enable the virtual school to intervene as soon as possible when working with cared for children. The importance of early intervention was identified by research which established key qualities exhibited by school which provide high quality support for cared for children (DCSF, 2010d) and is highlighted in the coalition government’s green paper regarding the future of SEN (DfE, 2011a). This goal was more aspirational as it involved considerable change in the way that members of staff would engage in their work with multi-agency partners. The researcher acknowledges that other professionals could potentially be barriers to the development of this goal if they did not share the “be bold” vision of the virtual school staff.

The third goal related to widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups; namely children in need, those experiencing child protection issues and children who have been adopted. This goal largely arose from discussions which
took place during the appreciative inquiry session as it was perceived that the model was “working” for cared for children and could also support other vulnerable groups.

Currently the support of children in need, child protection and post-adoption cases is largely the remit of social care within the research authority. It was felt that the virtual school model had bridged the gap between education and social care regarding the needs of cared for children and could potentially do the same for these other vulnerable groups. One group member suggested that they could act as a “post common assessment framework” team and provide an interface between social care and education.

The researcher was not able to locate any references in the literature regarding widening the remit of the virtual school to including child protection, child in need and post-adoption issues and therefore suggests that the potential for widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups is a unique contribution of this research. It is acknowledged that there may be implications of widening the remit, such as a need for a larger staff team and the need for existing staff to develop their own knowledge base in order to effectively support the needs of other vulnerable groups. If the virtual school was able to widen their remit, it would be interesting to carry out further research regarding a “virtual school for vulnerable children” in the future in order to establish its key functions and indicators of success.

The second and third goals were much more aspirational and required significant positive change within the virtual school and the local authority. The researcher believes that such aspirational goals may not have been produced through a more traditional approach such as a focus group. Appreciative inquiry encouraged the group member to discuss their existing best practice and to consider how this could be developed to produce a future, where the “ideal” was happening more often. It is suggested that appreciative inquiry gives group members “permission” to highlight the positives of their works and that the use of appreciative inquiry encourages “motivation” and “buy-in” to change (Carter et al., 2006). The researcher believes that the group members were committed to this change; unfortunately there was not an opportunity to carry out the final stage of the 4D cycle, so this commitment cannot be reflected upon.
5.6.4 The use of appreciative inquiry within educational research

The researcher felt that appreciative inquiry would be an appropriate research method to use with the virtual school as it is affirmative and seeks to build upon existing good practice within an organisation. Typically appreciative inquiry involves a 4D cycle as described in section 3.7.3. Unfortunately due to the time restrictions of the thesis and the nature of real world research it was not possible to complete the fourth D of the cycle – destiny.

Carter (2006, p.54) describes the destiny stage as “focused on sustaining the envisioned future(s) or ‘what will be’ through supporting the ongoing learning and innovation.” Carter et al. (2006, p.197) suggest that the destiny stage allows group members to celebrate accomplishment and learning and that it “ensures that Dreams are realized (sic) through planned actions and outcome assessments.” (p.197).

The researcher has not been able to locate any literature that discusses the implications of not completing the appreciative inquiry cycle. As literature suggests that the purpose of the fourth D is to ensure that dreams are realised and to support and sustain change, the researcher suggests that there is a risk that change may not be sustained if the fourth D is not completed. The appreciative inquiry group members selected areas that were of importance to them so the researcher proposes that this will increase the likelihood of change happening despite the fact it was not possible to implement the destiny stage. The development of enrichment activities was selected as an area to discuss as there was some initial planning taking place regarding this issue outside the appreciative inquiry session, so it was perceived that this would be a good topic to discuss. The researcher was able to feedback information regarding the dream of the virtual school with the intention that staff would be able to use this information when forward planning for the future role of the virtual school. The researcher also suggested that internal performance management and reviewing techniques such as the virtual school head being required to present information regarding outcomes and successes of the virtual school to a “scrutiny committee” will encourage the virtual school team to develop the discussed future roles of the virtual school.
5.7 Conclusions
This thesis aimed to explore the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children in raising pupils’ academic attainment and achievement and promoting their emotional wellbeing, as well as providing a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry as an educational research method regarding a vulnerable group, cared for children.

5.7.1. Were the aims achieved?
The aims of this thesis were achieved and the researcher was able to present a rich picture of the current role of the virtual school through the use of a mixed methods approach. Suggestions as to the future role of the virtual school in this local authority were actively sought during the appreciative inquiry session, and raised through the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. The researcher was also able to comment on the usefulness of appreciative inquiry as a research method.

It was suggested by members of the virtual school staff that their current key role was to raise the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children. It was acknowledged that in order to do this, it was important for cared for children to be experiencing good emotional wellbeing. Roles included promoting educational opportunities and the emotional wellbeing of cared for children, promoting placement stability, providing training and support for adults who work directly with cared for children and managing funding. These findings were congruent with findings from previous research, presented in chapter two.

A number of facilitators to the work of the virtual school were identified (section 4.6) such as the raised profile of the needs of cared for children, strategic position of the team and communication. Barriers included previous experience of young people, attendance, funding issues and placement stability (section 4.7).

As discussed in section 3.7.1; the views of designated teachers of cared for children were gained through a questionnaire, as they are a key role partner of the virtual school. Responding designated teachers reported high levels of confidence in their ability to support the needs of cared for children and feeling supported in their role. A number of ways in which the virtual school currently support designated teachers were suggested, including training, information giving, funding and supporting
designated teachers and cared for children’s emotional wellbeing. These were triangulated with suggestions made by members of the virtual school regarding their current role. Designated teachers were able to identify areas that they would like additional support in, such as supporting children post-adoption, post-16 and in cases involving emotional wellbeing issues. These areas for further support could be triangulated with suggestions made by the virtual school staff during interviews and suggestions made by the appreciative inquiry group members.

The researcher sought to establish what the current role of the virtual school was and to understand why the virtual school model was perceived as working compared to previous methods of service delivery. It was perceived by the team that the model had enabled the profile of cared for children to be raised, funding to be secured and that the virtual school head role has enabled the team to access meetings at a senior level, subsequently promoting the needs of cared for children. Virtual school staff suggested that sitting in education was an important facilitator to the positive work of the virtual school and that virtual school staff were able to act as a bridge between social care and education and interpret the needs of each group.

The future role of the virtual school was specifically sought during the appreciative inquiry session, which aimed to encourage group members to reflect on existing strengths, seek out what was already working in the organisation and build on this success to develop a collective vision of the preferred future (Carter, 2006). Through the appreciative inquiry session the group members identified a number of areas for development as presented in section 4.10; these included developing post-16 and early years provision, supporting adopted children and extending the remit to include other vulnerable groups. In order to do this it was felt that expanding the staff team and reorganising work distribution would be of benefit. The group members selected three of these areas to be developed into an action plan which was fed back to the virtual school for use in future planning (Appendix L). The researcher believes that the potential to widen the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups is a unique contribution of this research and would be interested to further research a wider role for the virtual school for cared for children.
5.7.2 Contribution to knowledge.

The researcher believes that this piece of research has made a contribution to knowledge. Previously there was limited research regarding the virtual school for cared for children due to its contemporary nature. A systematic literature review offered no examples of research regarding the virtual school in peer reviewed journals. The DCSF commissioned Berridge et al. (2009) to evaluate the pilot of the virtual school head role in 11 pilot local authorities. As suggested by Berridge (2012) pieces of research commissioned by organisations such as the DCSF are restricted as they must meet the objectives set out by the commissioner. In brief, Berridge et al. (2009) found that the pilot authorities “performed well” in terms of GCSE results and that virtual schools were able to promote academic attainment and achievement and the importance of broader educational experiences.

The current piece of research expanded on this research to consider the work of wider members of the virtual school staff. It is acknowledged that this research focused on one local authority and provided a rich picture of the experience of one virtual school and make suggestions as to why the model was perceived as advantageous over previous methods of service delivery. Through the questionnaire the researcher was able to establish levels of confidence amongst designated teachers; the research is not aware of any previous literature in relation to designated teachers’ levels of confidence. Confidence was found to be high, and the researcher suggested that this could be due to existing good practice within the local authority which was facilitative to positive work of the virtual school or reflective of the self-selecting nature of the research participants. Potential psychological explanations for these high levels of confidence are discussed in section 4.4.4. They include the designated teachers being resilience, having strong feelings of self-efficacy and an internal locus of control. It would be of value to carry out further research in this area to support or refute these psychological explanations for the high levels of confidence.

Through the use of appreciative inquiry, the research was able to suggest a future role for this virtual school which included enhanced enrichment activities and an opportunity to be bold within work to support the needs of cared for children. The researcher was interested to discover that appreciative inquiry group members felt that the virtual school model was “working” and proposed extending the remit of the
model to include other vulnerable groups; children in need, child protection cases and children who had been adopted and required further support. The researcher believes that this is a new insight into the field and is not aware of other discussions around extending the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups. It was perceived that as the virtual school were able to act as a bridge between social care and education for cared for children, this same function could be performed for other vulnerable children who were typically supported by social care professionals.

The focus of this piece of research was on the use of the virtual school model in supporting the needs of cared for children. The researcher believes that a similar model could be proposed for a variety of groups that are typically included in the case load of an educational psychologist. These groups could include gifted and talented children, children with autistic spectrum conditions and children with emotional based school refusal behaviour. The researcher believes that such a model could enable the educational psychologist to apply psychological research findings and evidence based practice within the local authority, enabling them to make a distinct contribution within Children’s Services.

The research was able to provide a further example of the use of appreciative inquiry as a method of educational research, regarding a vulnerable group of young people. The researcher believes that the use of appreciative inquiry empowered group members to identify existing good practice, which may not have been presented through an alternative method such as a focus group. Some difficulties were experienced in organising the appreciative inquiry session, with only four of the twelve intended group members being able to attend the session. The researcher did not feel this was due to group members not wishing to attend an appreciative inquiry session, but a reflection on the nature of real world research and the difficulty in co-ordinating large groups of professionals with competing work demands.

The researcher will now consider the implications of this research for the practising educational psychologist before making suggestions regarding future areas of research and offering some personal reflections on the research process.
5.7.3 Implications for the virtual school staff and designated teachers of cared for children.

Throughout the research process the researcher has fed back information to the virtual school staff through attendance at team meetings and email correspondence. The researcher intends to produce a summary report of this research for the virtual school staff as well as making this thesis available to the virtual school staff should they wish to read it in full. A summary report will also be produced for the designated teachers and distributed to all schools in the local authority.

As a result of the gathered and analysed data, the research suggests that there is a wealth of existing good practice within the local authority. As suggested by the group members, this good practice could be further developed through increasing opportunities for enrichment activities for cared for children, a bold approach and widening the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups. In order to do so, the virtual school would have to consider staffing levels and possibly expand the team to enable them to support a larger group of children and young people.

5.7.4 Implications for educational psychology practice.

The findings of this research as presented in chapter 4 and discussed in chapter 5 have implications for the practising educational psychologist. This research has presented a rich picture of the current and future role of the virtual school for cared for children within one local authority. It is acknowledged that the findings of this research are specific to the context in which the research took place. However the themes presented and discussed are congruent with previous literature regarding supporting the needs of cared for children and are therefore of interest and relevance to an educational psychologist.

The findings of this research are likely to be of interest to educational psychologists as it has been suggested that they are well placed to support the needs of cared for children (Jackson & McParlin, 2005), through supporting attainment and enhancing emotional wellbeing (DECP, 2006). It is reported that cared for children are three and a half times more likely to have a special educational need than the wider school population (DfE, 2011a); therefore it is likely that cared for children will make up some part of a typical educational psychologist’s caseload, so an understanding of the needs
of cared for children and the work of the virtual school and designated teachers would be useful for an educational psychologist. The importance of a range of issues such as high expectations, good attendance, stable placements, enrichment opportunities and an individual approach to the individual’s needs have been highlighted in this research. Farrell et al. (2006) suggest that educational psychologists can “ensure a joined up approach to meet children’s needs” (p.37) when working with social care colleagues.

The notion of the virtual school acting as a bridge between social care and education was noted as an advantage of the virtual school model. The researcher suggests that educational psychologists should be mindful of this concept and may able to perform a similar function, due to the educational psychologist role typically involving multi-agency working.

The researcher has had the opportunity to informally feedback the finding of this research throughout the research period to the senior specialist educational psychologist for cared for children within the local authority and members of the educational psychology team. These opportunities arose through individual conversations, educational psychology team meetings and peer supervisions sessions. The researcher will also have the opportunity to share these findings with others in the field during The University of Manchester Research Conference in the academic year 2012-2013.

The researcher presented their findings to a regional cared for children continued professional development meeting for educational psychologists in June 2012. Here there was debate and discussion regarding how the virtual school model functions in neighbouring local authorities and what could be learned from the positive findings of this piece of research. Some virtual schools were largely administrative in their nature and one educational psychologist felt there were limited opportunities for the application of psychology within their setting. The researcher believes that the present research has highlighted a number of opportunities for the educational psychologist to apply psychological theory through such a model, making a distinct contribution to the work of the virtual school. Application of evidence based practice in order to support and develop positive attachments, encourage attunement and adjustment and manage feelings of rejection, as discussed by Cameron & Maginn, 2008) are areas in which the educational psychologist can contribute. There are also opportunities for the
educational psychologist to implement work in order to develop the resilience of both cared for children and those who work with them in order to promote positive outcomes.

The researcher believes that appreciative inquiry is a useful tool for educational psychologists to draw on within their practice. The researcher has started to incorporate aspects of appreciative inquiry within their typical casework, such as during group consultation. Here special educational needs coordinators were engaging in problematic talk regarding children with literacy difficulties. The researcher informally introduced questions from the discovery stage of appreciative inquiry, encouraging staff to think of what was already working well with these children.

5.7.5 Areas for Future Research.
As suggested by Oliver (2008); the researcher acknowledges that research takes place on a continuum. This piece of research has built on past research and existing literature and it is hoped that it can be built on in the future by this researcher or other academics. There are a number of possibilities for future research regarding the work of the virtual school and the promotion of the needs of cared for children. Areas for development include extending the remit of the virtual school to include other vulnerable groups such as children in need and child protection issues. It would be interesting to establish whether the model would be effective for these groups and if the facilitators and barriers to supporting these groups were the same as those for cared for children. There was an existing body of work around supporting the needs of cared for children within the local authority before the virtual school was formed, which is likely to have supported the positive development of the virtual school model. It would be interesting to establish the level of existing knowledge around child protection issues and children in need of staff if a widened remit was to occur and to explore the impact of previous good practice, knowledge and experience on such a model.

The researcher would be interested in considering the impact of the virtual school at specific times, such as how they are able to support the needs of cared for children during times of transition, or supporting cared for children who were school refusers. In order to increase the generalisability of the findings of this research, it would be
useful to gain the views of virtual school staff and designated teachers in other local authorities. It would also be interesting to gauge the levels of awareness of the virtual school amongst the cared for population and to gain their views regarding the positive impact of the virtual school and young people’s opinions regarding how the work of the virtual school could be developed in the future. This could be done through the use of focus groups or semi-structured interviews with groups of cared for children in order to establish what the key issues were for the local young people at the centre of the virtual school. It would be interesting to discover if young people had different support needs from the virtual school at key times, such as entering and leaving care or during times of transition.

5.7.6 Limitations of the presented research.

The researcher acknowledges that there are a number of limitations to the research presented within this thesis. The views of designated teachers and virtual school staff within one local authority were gained. It is possible that the views of these groups could be quite different to that of other local authorities due to the cohort of cared for children being supported and factors within the local authority such as existing work around supporting the needs of cared for children and levels of funding and staffing. The views of one local authority were gained within a critical realist approach. As there was a dearth of research into the functioning of the virtual school, the researcher sought to develop a rich picture of the functioning of one virtual school. Commonalities were found between this piece of research and that of Berridge et al. (2009), suggesting that with caution these findings could be used to add to the limited knowledge base around the virtual school model. The researcher acknowledges that the respondents were a self-selecting sample and those who did not respond may have held different views to those presented in this thesis.

Within the appreciative inquiry session the researcher aimed to develop a “collaborative vision” of virtual school staff and designated teachers as to the future working of the virtual school. Whilst the researcher feels that rich data was obtained during the session, it is acknowledged that the session only reflected the views of one designated teacher and other designated teachers may have had different priorities. Similarly, only three of the six virtual school members were able to attend the session, and the absent staff members may have had different hopes for the future role.
It is also acknowledged that appreciative inquiry seeks to gain positive examples of best practice and it has been criticised for ignoring problems or negative experiences. Barriers were gained from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and to some extent through the appreciative inquiry session. Difficulties can still be discussed within appreciative inquiry, but in an appreciative context where they can be turned into a plan for the future.


To conclude, the researcher would like to take the opportunity to make some personal reflections on the research process. This piece of research has been an enormously challenging yet enlightened experience, which has enabled the researcher to develop a better understanding of the needs of cared for children and the support offered by the virtual school. There were times during the research process where the real world nature of research was particularly frustrating, such as when participants were not able to attend the appreciative inquiry session due to other work commitments. Despite such difficulties, the researcher feels that a rich picture of the current and future role of the virtual school was developed and it is hoped that it will be of use to the work of the virtual school in the future.

As well as developing knowledge and understanding of the needs of a specific group, it has afforded the researcher an opportunity to develop research skills which can be further developed as an educational psychologist. The researcher found the appreciative inquiry approach to be a positive way of engaging with other professionals and has already started to use aspects of the approach within their day to day work, such as during consultation meetings. The researcher would like to develop their interest in this methodology further in the future.
6. References


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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Terms used around cared for children

The term ‘looked after’ is used to describe children who live away from their families as part of a voluntary agreement or as a result of a care order under the Children Act (1989). A child is looked after by a local authority if they have been provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, in the circumstances set out in sections 20 and 21 of the Children Act (1989), or is placed in the care of a local authority by a court order as set out in section 31 of the Children Act (1989).

The local authority may have sole parental responsibility for the looked after child, or may share this responsibility with the child’s parents. This can be on a temporary or permanent basis.

Accommodation

For accommodated children, there is a voluntary arrangement between the parents and the local authority, for the local authority to provide accommodation for the child. These children are accommodated with their parents consent and often at the parent’s request. Parents retain parental responsibility and can request that the child is returned to the home. A child may be accommodated for a day or many years. It is hoped that the local authority will be able to support rehabilitations back to families when possible.

Court Orders

Here the child is placed in the local authority’s care by a court order. The court would have to be satisfied that the child was or would suffer significant and avoidable harm; without one. Here social services share parental responsibility with the parents but have some authority to make decisions without parental agreement.

Special Guardianship

Special guardianship provides permanence for children for whom adoption is not appropriate. Unlike adoption, the parents retain parental responsibility, though their ability to exercise parental responsibility is extremely limited. The special guardian has responsibility for day to day decisions about the child and may exercise parental responsibility to the exclusion of other with parental responsibility, such as the birth parents.
Appendix B Questionnaire for designated teachers of cared for children

Please answer the following questions by circling/ highlighting the appropriate answer or completing the text box.

1. In which geographic area do you work (e.g. X, Y, Z)?

2. Which would best describe your setting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>Secondary School</th>
<th>Special School</th>
<th>Further Education/ Sixth Form</th>
<th>Residential Sector</th>
<th>Other (please specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. Please circle any other roles you have in that setting, besides being a designated teacher of cared for children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head Teacher</th>
<th>Key Stage Leader</th>
<th>Special Educational Needs Coordinator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Head Teacher</td>
<td>Head of Year</td>
<td>Designated Person for Child Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Head Teacher</td>
<td>Head of Pastoral Care</td>
<td>Class Teacher / Subject Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. How aware are you of the virtual school for cared for children in X and the support it provides?

| I know a lot about the support provided by the virtual school for cared for children | I know a little bit about the support provided by the virtual school for cared for children | I have heard of the term, but do not know what support the virtual school provides | I have not heard of the virtual school for cared for children |
5. Have you had any direct contact with the virtual school for cared for children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(please answer questions 6 and 7)</td>
<td>(please answer question 8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **If YES**, please circle the form(s) of contact:

| Personal Educational Plan support | Attendance at a virtual school led training event | Direct advice from an Educational Consultant | Documentation | Attendance at a meeting which included input from a virtual school staff member | Other (please specify) |

7. Which forms of support from the virtual school for cared for children have you found most useful to help you support the educational attainment and achievement and emotional wellbeing of cared for children?

8. **If NO**, please circle the reason(s):

| Have had no need to contact the virtual school | Did not know about the virtual school | Contacted someone else for support (please specify who) | Other (please specify) |
9. How confident do you currently feel in supporting the **educational attainment and achievement** needs of cared for children in your setting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very confident</th>
<th>Quite confident</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not very confident</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

10. What support would you like from the virtual school to enable you to increase your confidence in supporting the **educational attainment and achievement** needs of cared for children in your setting?

11. How confident do you currently feel in supporting the **emotional wellbeing** needs of the cared for children in your setting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very confident</th>
<th>Quite confident</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not very confident</th>
<th>Not at all confident</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

12. What support would you like from the virtual school to enable you to increase your confidence in supporting the **emotional wellbeing** needs of the cared for children in your setting?
13. Please list any other professionals who you believe could have a useful input in to the education of cared for children:


14. Is there anything else you would like to add, that has not been covered by the previous questions? (Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary).


Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire, your responses and time are greatly appreciated. The results of this questionnaire will be disseminated to all schools in X following data analysis.

If you would be willing to be contacted regarding further research into the role of the designated teacher, please include your name, school and preferred contact details below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred contact details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please return completed questionnaires by Friday 27th May 2011 to X, Trainee educational psychologist. This can be done via email [email address] or the internal mail system. Please mark it FAO [Trainee educational psychologist, postal address].
Appendix C: Prompts for virtual school semi-structured interviews

1. Can you tell me a little about the virtual school for cared for children?

2. What was your role prior to being a member of the virtual school?

3. How do you currently promote the emotional wellbeing of cared for children?

4. How do you currently promote the academic potential and individual attainment of cared for children?
   a. Can you tell me a little about how 1:1 tuition is currently targeted?
   b. Can you tell me a little about how the personal education allowance/pupil premium is currently targeted?

5. How do you currently support the designated teachers?

6. What do you see as the next steps for the virtual school for cared for children in terms of raising educational attainment and achievement?

7. What do you see as the next steps for the virtual school for cared for children in terms of ensuring the emotional well being of cared for children?

8. If you had a magic wand and three wishes to improve the work of the virtual school; what would they be?
Appendix D: PowerPoint used to facilitate the appreciative inquiry session

**Appreciative Inquiry Day**

How can the Virtual School for Cared for Children and Designated Teachers work collaboratively to raise academic attainment and achievement and promote the emotional well-being of Cared for Children?

Please help yourself to refreshments, we aim to begin at 9.15 am

---

**Welcome and Introductions**

- House keeping
- Introductions
- Purpose of the day
- Resource pack explained
**What is Appreciative Inquiry?**

APPRECIATIVE – Valuing the act or recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life (healthy, vitality, excellence) to living systems.

INQUIRY – The act of exploration and discovery. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005)
Appreciative Inquiry

- AI reflects on existing strengths
- It seeks out what already works within an organisation and builds on this success
- It builds a collective vision of the preferred future

(Carter, 2006)

Appreciative Inquiry

- Appreciative Inquiry
  ‘is much less threatening and judgemental than many variants of traditional evaluation for it invites the staff...To reflect on their best practice rather than to admit their failures and unsolved problems’.

Elliot (1999)
Appreciative Inquiry

• Today we will be working through:
  • Discover – appreciating what gives life to the organisation
  • Dream – envisioning what might be
  • Design – determining what will be

• Destiny is a review stage which will not take place today

Discover – Discovering what already works well (small groups)

• Take it in turns to describe a ‘peak experience’ in your work with C4C that you are happy to later feedback to the whole group:
  • This is a high point in your work with C4C
  • A time when the organisation was working at its best
  • A time when you found your work experience rewarding
Discovery (small groups)

- What made it possible? Consider:
  - The special skill, talent or attitude you bring to your role which helps to make a difference
  - What are the things you value most about yourself?
  - The nature of your work?
  - Who was involved?
  - How did you feel?
  - What was in place to allow it to happen?
  - What made this occasion stand out?

Discovery (whole group)

- As a whole group, share some of these examples of best practice
- Individuals to feed back the key message of their partner's success story
- Create a list of these successes on the flip chart
**Dream**

- Here we want to move the system beyond the ‘status quo’
- We want to envision future values
- Lift our sights
- Exercise our imagination
- Discuss what the organisation could look like if we were always able to work to our strengths and aspirations

**Dream (small groups)**

- Imagine you wake up tomorrow and we are providing the ideal service for C4C, where our ‘peak experience’ successes happen on a regular basis:
  - What are we doing?
  - Who are we working with?
  - What are the things that made it happen?
  - What makes this dream exciting?
  - What might your practice look like in 3 years time if the strengths and meaningful experiences happened more often?
Dream (small groups)

- Describe your **three concrete wishes** for the future of the Virtual School for Cared for Children and Designated Teachers working collaboratively to raise academic attainment and achievement and promote the emotional well-being of Cared for Children.

- These wishes need to evoke real personal experience and draw on best learning AND allow us to envisage the best possibilities for the future.

Dream (whole group)

- Share the wishes that were made in small groups
Break

- Please help yourself to further refreshments.

- We aim to start back at 10.45 am

Dream – determining what will be

- Which characteristics of the ideal practice are most relevant and strategic at this time?

- If necessary, narrow down the choices
  - Priorities
  - Existing resources
  - Participants interest

- What is the smallest step that would have the greatest impact?
Design and Provocative Proposals

- To take ‘dream’ to ‘design’ we are going to use provocative proposals.

- Provocative proposals are idealistic statements that challenge the group to think of ways to put their ideas into operation.

- They should be specific and show how success can be evidenced.
  - E.g. No client should wait more than 1 week to be informed about a decision.

- They often start with words like:
  - Everyone will ...
  - There will always be ...

Design (whole group)

- Consider the provocative proposals and develop them into actions.

- List all the things that can occur now or in the near future to realise the dream.

- Record the key targets, actions and strategies necessary to make this happen – by whom and when.

- How can we track this is happening?
Design (whole group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provocative Proposal</th>
<th>Actions and strategies</th>
<th>Resources needed?</th>
<th>People involved?</th>
<th>Actions by when?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slide D19

Destiny

- It is not possible to carry out ‘Destiny’ today, but it would involve:
  - What happened?
  - How did it work out?
  - What were the hurdles and successes?
  - What did you learn that will help or sustain change?
  - What next?

Slide D20
Evaluation and close

- Any questions?
- Evaluation sheet

Thanks and Departures
Appendix E: Appreciative inquiry prompts

Discover – Discovering what already works well

• Take it in turns to describe a “peak experience” in your work with cared for children that you are happy to later feedback to the whole group:
  • This is a high point in your work with cared for children
  • A time when the organisation was working at its best
  • A time when you found your work experience rewarding

• What made it possible? Consider:
  • The special skill, talent or attitude you bring to your role which helps to make a difference
  • What are the things you value most about yourself?
    • The nature of your work?
    • Who was involved?
    • How did you feel?
    • What was in place to allow it to happen?
    • What made this occasion stand out?
Discover – Discovering what already works well

Notes about your peak experience:
Dreaming – Discovering what already works well

- Imagine you wake up tomorrow and we are providing the ideal service for cared for children, where our ‘peak experience’ successes happen on a regular basis:
  - What are we doing?
  - Who are we working with?
  - What are the things that made it happen?
  - What makes this dream exciting?
  - What might your practice look like in 3 years time if the strengths and meaningful experiences happened more often?
- These wishes need to evoke real personal experience and draw on best learning AND allow us to envisage the best possibilities for the future.

My three concrete wishes for my future work with cared for children are:

1) 

2) 

3)
Appendix F: Example photographs from the coding and data analysis stage

Photograph F1: Initial sorting of codes.

Photograph F2: Development of themes.
Appendix G: Key aims of the local authority’s virtual school for cared for children

- Ensure the emotional well-being of Cared for Children is supported
- Ensure the voice of Cared for Children is heard, listened to and acted upon
- Ensure Cared for Children access full range of curricular and extra-curricular activities
- Raise the profile of Cared for Children and their needs across [LA name]
- Support, train and guide the adults and others who support Cared for Children
- Ensure Cared for Children achieve their academic potential and raise individual attainment
- Ensure Cared for Children have access to the right resources, funding and materials
- Ensure Cared for Children are given opportunities to lead successful lives

The child/young person
Appendix H: Questionnaire information sheet

Information Sheet - Questionnaire for designated teachers of cared for children

In collaboration with The University of Manchester; X’s virtual school for cared for children are carrying out a research project which aims to improve outcomes for cared for children attending schools in X.

As a designated teacher of cared for children, you are invited to let us know your views on how the virtual school can support you in your work with cared for children by completing this questionnaire. The information gathered from the questionnaire will inform the future planning, training and practice of the virtual school. Following data analysis, the findings of the questionnaire will be disseminated to all schools in X.

The researchers are interested in a number of issues relevant to the education of cared for children including:

- Raising the academic attainment and achievement of cared for children
- Promoting the emotional wellbeing of cared for children
- How designated teachers and the virtual school can work together to improve outcomes for cared for children
- How designated teachers and Foster Carers, Residential Care Officers and Social Workers can work together to improve outcomes for cared for children

Completion of the questionnaire is entirely voluntary; your professional input is greatly appreciated as it enables us to target our future work to meet your needs and improve outcomes for cared for children. **If you do not currently or have never had a Cared for Child in your school, your opinions are still important so please do consider completing the questionnaire.**

The questionnaire can be printed and complete by hand then returned via the internal mail system or to the postal address at the foot of the page. The questionnaire can also be completed electronically and returned via email to [email address] In timed trials the questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Many answers
just require circling/ highlighting and not all questions will be applicable to your school.

Completion of the questionnaire will be deemed to indicate consent to participate in this study. Completed questionnaires will be treated confidentially, paper returns will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and data will be analysed on an encrypted computer. Data will be securely stored until December 2017.

If you would like to get in touch with the researcher or have any questions, please contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Contact details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Please return completed questionnaires by Friday 27th May 2011 to X, Trainee educational psychologist. This can be done via email [email address] or the internal mail system. Please mark it FAO [Trainee educational psychologist, postal address].
Appendix I: Virtual school consent form

The virtual school for cared for children

Dear [virtual school staff member],

I am currently a trainee educational psychologist working for [name] local authority and studying at The University of Manchester. As part of my training I am carrying out a piece of doctoral research and have chosen to carry out this research in collaboration with the virtual school for cared for children.

I would like to thank you all for your support so far and for allowing me to sit in at team meetings. Your ideas have all been very stimulating and I have had many interesting options to consider. Following discussions with yourselves, [supervisor’s name], [virtual school head’s name] and I have agreed that I will research how the virtual school for cared for children work collaboratively with designated teachers to meet the following aims:

- Ensure cared for children achieve their academic potential and raise individual attainment
- Ensure the emotional wellbeing of cared for children is supported

I propose to investigate this by sending out a questionnaire to all the designated teachers in [Name] Local Authority. The results of this questionnaire will be analysed and fed back to you in subsequent team meetings.

I would also like to interview the head of the virtual school, educational consultants, senior specialist educational psychologist, personal educational plan coordinator and education liaison officer in order to gain some further information from the virtual school staff regarding your current and perceived future role. These interviews would be audio recorded with your permission, and transcribed, ensuring that the individual, any young people discussed and the local authority remains anonymous.

I plan to carry out some appreciative inquiry with virtual school staff and designated teachers. Appreciative inquiry seeks out what is already working within an organisation and encourages the organisation to build on this success. The method has been selected to reflect your commitment and enthusiasm towards your work with cared for children. Appreciative inquiry is carried out with a four part cycle. Success stories are shared and participants are encouraged
to imagine what would need to change to allow this success to happen all of the time. Actions are then drawn up to lead to positive change.

I would like to audio record the appreciative inquiry session, with your permission and scribed notes will be photographed. I will ensure that no individual participants or the local authority are identifiable in the writing up of the research, and all responses will be treated confidentially. The appreciative inquiry will take no more than one working day to complete; this may be spread over a number of occasions such as team meeting and designated teacher network meetings.

All data will be securely stored. Paper records would be stored in a locked filing cabinet and digital data would be stored on an encrypted, password protected council owned computer. Data would be stored until December 2017, and then securely destroyed.

Your participation in this research would be appreciated but is of course entirely voluntary. If you have any questions now or during the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details provided below. If you wish to withdraw once the research has commenced, you may do so without the need to offer explanation.

I would appreciate it if you could complete the consent form below and return it to me via the internal mail system or in person. Thank you for your continue support; I look forward to working with you in the near future.

[Researcher’s name] [Researcher’s contact details]

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

CONSENT SLIP

I consent to taking part in the proposed research; investigating the collaborative work of the virtual school and designated teachers in raising the academic attainment, achievement and ensuring the emotional well being of cared for children.

I understand that I will be invited to take part in an individual interview and appreciative inquiry session which will be audio recorded and that all of my responses will be treated confidentially.

I understand that I will have the right to withdraw at any time, including once the research has commenced, without explanation.

Name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix J: Designated teachers consent form

Designated teachers and the virtual school for cared for children

Dear [designated teacher’s Name]

I am currently a Trainee educational psychologist working for [Name] Local Authority and studying at The University of Manchester. As part of my training I am carrying out a piece of doctoral research and have elected to carry out research into how the virtual school for cared for children and designated teachers can work together to meet the following aims:

- Ensure cared for children achieve their academic potential and raise individual attainment
- Ensure the emotional wellbeing of cared for children is supported

Thank you very much for completing the first phases of the research; the designated teacher’s questionnaire which was distributed by the virtual school head via email or obtained from the designated teacher network meeting. Your responses were greatly appreciated and will be fed back to all designated teachers and schools as soon as they are analysed.

Thank you for indicating an interest in participating in the later stages of the research which is intended to be a valuable opportunity to allow the virtual school and designated teachers to plan their future work together to assist cared for children in reaching their full potential.

You are now invited to share your views about working with the virtual school in an appreciate inquiry session involving designated teachers and members of the virtual school. Appreciative inquiry seeks out what is already working within an organisation and encourages the organisation to build on this success. The method has been selected to reflect your commitment and enthusiasm towards your work with cared for children. It is carried out with a four part cycle, success stories are shared and participants are encouraged to imagine what would need to change to allow this success to happen all of the time. Actions are then drawn up to lead to positive change.

If you wish to take part in this session, I will get in touch to arrange a date that is mutually convenient for all group members. The virtual school have a small supply budget should it
be required to enable you to access the session. With permission, I would like to audio record the session and scribed notes will be photographed. I will ensure that no individual participants or the local authority are identifiable in the writing up of the research, and all responses will be treated confidentially. The appreciative inquiry will take no more than one working day to complete.

All data will be securely stored. Paper records would be stored in a locked filing cabinet and digital data would be stored on an encrypted, password protected council owned computer. Data would be stored until December 2017, and then securely destroyed.

Your participation in this research would be appreciated but is of course entirely voluntary. If you have any questions now or during the research, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details provided below. If you wish to withdraw once the research has commenced, you may do so without the need to offer explanation.

I would appreciate it if you could complete the consent form below and return it to me via the internal mail system or to the address included below.

Thank you for your continue support; I look forward to working with you in the near future.

[Researcher’s name and contact details]

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

CONSENT SLIP

I consent to taking part in the proposed research; investigating the collaborative work of the virtual school and designated teachers in raising the academic attainment, achievement and ensuring the emotional well being of cared for children.

I understand that I will be invited to take part in an appreciative inquiry session that will be audio recorded and that all of my responses will be treated confidentially.

I understand that I will have the right to withdraw at any time, including once the research has commenced, without explanation.

Name: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________
Appendix K: Flip chart pictures of notes subscribed during the appreciative inquiry session

Photograph K1: Wishes (dreams) of the group members

Photograph K2: Wishes continued
Provocative Proposals

Everyone will...
There will always be...
- ‘Failure’ - confident to try
- Opportunities to try things out + if they don’t like it, try something else, move on
- Keep headlines small, realistic.

There will be a constant stream of opportunities + activities for CH+C - inspirational
- Easy access
- Information
- In our locality
- Child to feel safe to give it a try
- Go for it - fund - FSM - card - Tower days
- There will always be means of transport
- There will be so many options they can be walked to
- There will always be someone who can encourage them to engage - Widening opportunities
- Tap CH+C into groups
- CH+C’s dreams will be met - to know what is possible - breadth of experiences

Needed
- Taster day - opps all together
- Fun day
- Card system - funding - card payment +
  Funding sourced behind scenes - not a barrier
- CH+C to volunteer - community work -
  about themselves
- Olympic work - form requires postcode
  for school + school number - Via MP?

There will always be opportunities to be bold and jump to success rather than experiencing failure
- Evidence based - not reading mat-down
- Informed reasoning - capacity
- Training - breaking the cycle
Photograph K5: Provocative Proposals and planning for action

- Everyone involved in decision making should have their own agenda.
- Spelling out minds
- “This isn’t good enough”
- What is appropriate?
- People listening to the staff who know the child/family best – work with me daily.
- Understanding of people’s principles, standards, and expectations.
- Removal of mistrust.
- At which point to speak to the lay staff?
- RELATIONSHIPS
- Developing trust between agencies?
- Valuing what DI’s say/see
- Know what’s happening on the front line.
- SMU listening to those face workers.

Photograph K6: Provocative Proposals and planning for action

- Leaders to be part of the team
- Language

Hub Schools, higher levels of need, locally
- known families/communities, e.g., Blackpool
- FSN 2
- SW 3
- Link between schools SMT/V/S etc. Wigan
- Familiar on a daily basis, trust

The VS will have opportunity to engage with children in other vulnerable groups across age range.
- Picking up families, early intervention, community work.
- Comm’s work schools – awareness of issues/families
- Liaison with heads of key services (High Schools)
- Early intervention - at grass roots
- Work at ground level
- Proposal - if we took on these wider groups, what would we need?
  - Staffing
  - Funding
  - Worth investing in for HT gains

- Anyone can phone & call TN + donors - getting this message out there

- VS - informal comms / asking for advice around X

- Widening this out so people feel they can access support services

- Knowing who to phone - who is available? Difficulties about being new to post

- Network days - EiPs - main place - road shows

---

- VS are well placed - schools know them

- Encourage schools to be more proactive

- Take the Service to the School

- VS to visit each school with CLC - expand this to all schools - may not be on their radar

- Schools to acknowledge that any type of school can have problems
## Appendix L: Appreciative inquiry action plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Provocative proposals</th>
<th>Resources/ actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Enrichment and self-esteem – putting on specific events and programmes.</td>
<td>● There will always be easy access to and information about a stream of opportunities and activities that are available locally.</td>
<td>● A mini bus and driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● A big programme for the spring/ summer with lots of events on.</td>
<td>● There will always be someone who will encourage and facilitate the children and young people to access these opportunities.</td>
<td>● Creative play workers who could go into schools and work with the children and young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● University stuff/ music club etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● A taster day/ road show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● A scheme along the lines of the ‘Go For It’ card.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● A leisure pass/ card system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Providing the children with a breadth of experience – anything is possible.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Sign up with the Olympics/ work alongside a school who are signed up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Provide taster days – bear in mind that all activities don’t suit all children.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● To provide an environment where it is safe for children to ‘have a go’.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Aspirational.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Opportunities to give something back via community work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Work around the Olympic Games.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>BE BOLD</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Be bold – to reduce the need to jump through hoops to enable the biggest impact to be made. Pulling in more people, ensuring that people who know the nitty-gritty details are consulted with. Time with key workers and 1:1 support staff.</td>
<td>● Staff working with cared for children will always be bold and proactive to ensure that the best outcomes for cared for children are achieved through early intervention.</td>
<td>● Training needs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● To reduce the need to be linear and jump through hoops.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Listening to people on the ‘chalk face’ who work with these children and respecting their opinions/ experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● If you’ve got evidence that something works and can prove it in multi-agency meetings you can start to be bolder.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Quality assurance of provision co-ordinated by the North West virtual school head group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Importance of people being prepared (e.g. placement panel) and showing the costs and benefits of approaches.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To be able to be proactive before something becomes a problem rather than reactive.

The use of case studies – demonstrate that if x then y – show long term savings.

Importance of early intervention.

Reduce any gaps in communications.

Possibility of Hub schools model as used in Blackpool – outreach/support worker working within the schools serving the local community – issues raised re: spreading the load, academies.

Enlarging the role to include children in need, post-adoption and child protection.

Financial argument – increased intervention now would save money in the long term in terms of care processes etc.

A holistic solution.

Replicating the model or widening it?

Consider what we mean by ‘vulnerable’ children - limited educational resources, how do we share them out? Educational attainment? Social needs? At risk?

Including children with a social care involvement? (Measureable group). Beware that ‘cared for children’ are not a homogenous group and each individual’s needs will differ.

A ‘post CAF\textsuperscript{13} team’ and an interface between education and social care.

Develop relationships with social workers.

For social workers to gain a better understanding of the importance of education.

Everyone will strive to work with staff across the local authority to expand the remit of the service to meet the needs of vulnerable children, regardless of their cared for status.

Educational consultants for each geographical area and age group.

‘Foundation intervention’ rather than ‘early intervention’.

Need further staffing

Encourage people to phone staff members with issues, rather than feeling they have to fill in lots of forms

Networking days/ market place / road show – take the service to the schools if they won’t come to us.

\textsuperscript{13} CAF – Common Assessment Framework
Appendix M: Pictorial representation and description of the thematic analysis process

1. The researcher listened back to the audio recording to familiarise them self with the data.

2. Partial transcription of the data took place as described in section 3.8.2 An excerpt is provided below. The respondent’s position within the virtual school has been removed to protect their identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trainee educational psychologist</th>
<th>I’m just going to ask you some questions about your work with the virtual school in terms of how does the virtual school promote academic achievement of the cared for children and also how does it promote the emotional wellbeing of its pupils.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responding virtual school staff member</td>
<td>How does the virtual school currently promote the academic attainment and achievement of the children who are in your care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think fundamentally by existing. I think the fact there is a virtual school for cared for children in itself is a means of us being able to promote it because if we didn’t exist there wouldn’t be anyone to do that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think the fact that we have links to all the schools that the children attend and to all the schools that are in the county and to all the schools out of county that the children attend. They know who we are and can contact us and we contact them and that we track the children, I think that means that we are promoting it [attainment].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think through the training that we do. We do training with designated teachers, foster carers and also we have done individual training with individual staff or small groups of staff or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with clusters of schools. I think the training again is supporting that.

So that’s sort of globally for the children in care, but then for individual children; we track their progress termly. We keep data sheets and information of how they’re progressing as a school would do. I mean a school should be having what their potential, what their predictions are in terms of the Fisher Family Trust data and then what their estimated grades are, what they’re likely to achieve and also the progress they’re making. A school should be doing that. We gather it year group by year group. In fact that’s what we’re just doing at the moment, we’ve got lists of all the children with their Fisher Family Trust and with their termly progress and then we look at any interventions that we’ve been involved in or we’ve put in or that we’ve funded to promote each individual child’s progress.

3. The researcher listened back to the data whilst reading through the transcript and corrected any errors or omissions.

4. Transcripts were emailed to the respondents to ensure that they represented the respondent’s recall of the session. If any changes had been required they would have been made, but none were requested.

5. Before beginning coding, the researcher re-read the whole transcript to again familiarised them self with the data. An additional column was added to the transcript in order to input codes. The researcher generated codes and entered them into this column. Codes were created on the basis of being related to the research questions and literature, or a reoccurring issue. Informal checks were carried out with a fellow Trainee educational psychologist as to whether the themes seemed appropriate. The researcher and Trainee educational psychologist both coded a small section of data; approximately 95% of the same codes were generated.
Trainee educational psychologist

What do the virtual school currently do to raise the academic attainment of the cared for children?

Responding virtual school staff member

I suppose that’s our main purpose and it’s a holistic approach I’d say. So we don’t just look at academic results, although we do look at those and we track those but we also look at attendance, we look at training for teachers, for foster carers for social care colleagues for the independent safeguarding chairs and for anyone else really who has a role to play within the children and young people’s lives.

We put funding in and we target funding specifically for those children who are behind where you’d expect them to be or have a particular problem.

Raising awareness really as well, like the corporate parenting training I’ve just been doing. Also other publicity and events that we do around raising awareness for the rest of the local authority and for schools as well and foster carers – what we do and the need to support the children and young people.

We do a lot of events and stuff around wellbeing as well. We’ve got a strongly held belief that you’ve got to get that stuff right before the academic progress comes around.
And the two are inter-linked obviously; if you’re achieving well it helps your self-esteem and hopefully leads to further achievement. Sometimes these children and young people are in a place where they’re not ready. To do the achieving well bit, first they need to regress and spend some time in play and do some more therapeutic things. Some of the stuff we’ve done around Forest Schools. The whole picture has to fit together for that end. We’re starting to see some of the impact of that.

6. The researcher repeated this process for all six semi-structured interviews. It was also completed for the appreciative inquiry session.

7. Once the codes were created they were numbered and changed into a different colour font for each respondent. Codes were put in a bold font if they were from the appreciative inquiry session. This was to assist the researcher in locating the origin of each code once they were triangulated and organised into themes.

8. Colour coded codes were printed and organised into global, organising and basic themes as described in 3.8.3. The semi-structured interviews were used primarily to address research questions 2 and 3, with some data being fed in from the questionnaire and appreciative inquiry session. The appreciative inquiry session was largely used to address research questions 4, with some codes from the semi-structured interviews being triangulated, especially regarding the ‘three wishes’ question (see questions 6-8 of Appendix C). The codes were reorganised a number of times over a period of around ten days to allow the researcher to reflect on the development and organisation of themes. The photographs below illustrate this process.
Photograph M1: Colour coded and numbered codes.

Photograph M2: Initial ideas around themes (funding, relationships, staff issues, profile of cared for children).
Photograph M3: Development of themes around the organising theme “function” and basic themes “purpose, core work, attendance and targets”.

Photograph M4: Development of themes around the organising theme “barriers” and basic themes “children’s experiences, post-adoption, transition, expectations, staffing, impact on adults and facilities”.
9. These themes were then presented in thematic networks, using the 'SmartArt' tool within Microsoft Word 2007. See figure M1 below which demonstrated the position of global, organising and basic themes. Themes were shared with the respondents; no changes were required.

Figure M1: Presentation of themes
## Appendix N: Time line and budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time budget</th>
<th>Contingency time</th>
<th>On time?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2010 – December 2010</td>
<td>Researcher to meet with the virtual school and collaboratively select a focus for the research</td>
<td>Three hours of meeting time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2010 – January 2011</td>
<td>Researcher to write thesis proposal</td>
<td>Private study days</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Thesis proposal handed in to The University of Manchester</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2011</td>
<td>Thesis panel</td>
<td>Private study days</td>
<td>Ethical approval was received on 3rd May 2011; this took longer than the researcher had anticipated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January/ February 2011</td>
<td>Researcher to practise using the appreciative inquiry technique within typical educational psychology practice.</td>
<td>Private study day in January 2011 Educational Psychology team meeting and peer supervision time, January and February 2011</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Study Plan</td>
<td>Details</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011 – May 2011</td>
<td>Literature review and submission of Assignment 2 on 15th May 2011</td>
<td>Private study days</td>
<td>Weekends and evenings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Questionnaire distributed to designated teachers.</td>
<td>Private study days in May 2011</td>
<td>Research to be put back by a month if the questionnaire cannot be distributed in time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trainee educational psychologist to attend the designated teachers Network Day to promote the questionnaire.</td>
<td>Distributed by the virtual school team</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with the virtual school staff</td>
<td>Private study days in June 2011</td>
<td>Interview to take place in July/August if they cannot be arranged for June 2011.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2011</td>
<td>Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews Descriptive statistical and thematic analysis of the designated teacher questionnaire Identify designated teachers willing to take part in the appreciative inquiry session</td>
<td>Private study days June 2011</td>
<td>Research days in June 2011</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews were transcribed in June 2011 and read in preparation for the appreciative inquiry session; full thematic analysis was delayed until January 2011 due to other fieldwork and assignment demands.</td>
<td>Literature review and Assignment 2 submission was extended until 30th May</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Timeframe</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Appreciative inquiry session with virtual school staff and designated teachers</td>
<td>To take place during the designated teacher Network Meeting if possible</td>
<td>Arrange a separate meeting in October 2011. Appreciative inquiry was arranged for 30(^{th}) November 2011; this was announced as a Strike day, so the session was moved to 09.12.11.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2011</td>
<td>Researcher to carry out thematic analysis on the appreciative inquiry session</td>
<td>Private study days October 2011</td>
<td>November 2011. This was completed in January 2011.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2011</td>
<td>Researcher to feed back to the virtual school findings to date Staff to feedback any actions/plans that have been made following the appreciative inquiry session</td>
<td>Virtual school team meeting time</td>
<td>December 2011. Informal feedback has taken place throughout the research process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>Thesis submission</td>
<td></td>
<td>On course to submit on time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2012 – August 2012</td>
<td>Viva  Researcher to feedback to the virtual school and educational psychology team following viva. Researcher to provide the virtual school with written documentation regarding the research</td>
<td></td>
<td>On course to complete on time Feedback planned to take place during Summer 2012 An “executive summary” planned for distribution in Summer 2012</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Principle</td>
<td>Risk(s)</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Respect for human dignity</td>
<td>The virtual school and designated teachers may feel threatened if they perceive the research to be questioning their ability to carry out their job.</td>
<td>Be clear that the research is taking an appreciative approach and is concerned with recognising the positive elements of current practice and building on these successes. Ensure staff are aware of confidential nature of the research, that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ensure integrity and quality</td>
<td>Measures may not be appropriate for addressing each research question Participants may reflect upon their answers and want to add additional information Participants’ views may be misrepresented/interpreted incorrectly Participants may not respond honestly because they are concerned about the implications of the research Participants may be anxious of the appreciative inquiry approach as it differs from usual problem based approaches</td>
<td>Consider all methods carefully and discuss the research proposal with University tutors, fieldwork supervisor and the virtual school staff. Debrief following each stage of the research. Provide participants with the researcher’s contact details and encourage them to get in touch if they wish to following reflection. The researcher will summarise the participants’ responses during the semi-structured interview stage to check understanding. Following thematic analysis, themes will be checked with the participants. Be clear that the purpose of the research is to identify what is working well and how this success can be built upon in the future. Clearly explain the philosophy behind the appreciative inquiry model and how the process works.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Respect for free and informed consent</td>
<td>Participants may have been informed about the research by a perceived figure of power. As a result they may feel pressured to take part in the research.</td>
<td>Provide participants with sufficient information for full informed consent. Stress that participation is voluntary and they have a right to withdraw at any time without explanation. Remind the participants of this right throughout the research.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Respect for vulnerable persons</td>
<td>Each participant will have different personal circumstances, which may include personal experience of being a Cared for Child.</td>
<td>Be mindful of this whilst asking questions and treat all participants respectfully. Make it clear to all participants that they may</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Action/Comment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Respect for privacy and confidentiality</td>
<td>Designated teachers may wish for their responses to remain confidential.</td>
<td>Questionnaire can be completed anonymously. If designated teachers do provide their contact details to take part in stage 3, it will be made clear that when general responses are shared, individual designated teachers will not be named.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtual school is a small staff so the team may worry that their views will be traceable.</td>
<td>Reassure the Educational Consultants that they will not be personally identified in any feedback.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Due to the vulnerable nature of the clients, the designated teachers and virtual school may be reluctant to discuss cases.</td>
<td>Provide the Educational Consultants with the option to be interviewed together.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Remind the virtual school of the positive and appreciative nature of the research.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reassure the staff that no children, schools or the local authority will be identifiable in the research.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All data will be stored on a local authority laptop which is password protected and encrypted.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Participation in a voluntary way</td>
<td>Staff may feel obliged to take part in the research</td>
<td>Stress that participation is voluntary and they have a right to withdraw at any time without explanation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff may feel obliged to continue with an activity once it has begun</td>
<td>If a participant chose to withdraw, their data would be destroyed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Procedures should avoid harm</td>
<td>Research may be a burden to the virtual school</td>
<td>The participants will not be offered an excessive incentive to take part in the research.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research may be a burden to the designated teachers</td>
<td>The virtual school were involved with the research from the outset and were made aware of the commitment required from the researcher.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants may be anxious regarding the purpose of the research.</td>
<td>The questionnaire is voluntary; questions have been carefully considered to ensure that unnecessary questions have not been included. For designated teachers involved in stages 3, time commitments will be made clear from the outset.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The purpose and scope of the research will be made clear at the outset. Debriefing will be used throughout the research.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix P: Risk analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Contingency Plan</th>
<th>Contingency plan required?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The research proposal is not support by the virtual school for cared for children</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>This is a low risk as extensive discussions have taken place between the researcher and the virtual school.</td>
<td>The virtual school staff were very supportive of the research throughout the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The time scale and commitments required from the virtual school staff have been made clear.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The topic is an area of interest to the virtual school, and was decided upon in collaboration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If necessary, the research proposal can be adapted to better match the virtual school’s needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. There is a low return rate of the designated teacher’s Questionnaire</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Questionnaires are frequently reported to have a low return rate (e.g., Robson, 2002).</td>
<td>51/149 questionnaires were returning providing a 34% response rate. This is just above 30% which Gillham (2001) describes as ‘average’ for an impersonal questionnaire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Questionnaires will be returnable via the internal mail system, so there will be no postage costs.</td>
<td>Attendance at the Network Meeting produced 19/51 responses. (16 were received via email and 16 through the internal mail).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A reminder will be issued via the school’s bulletin to encourage an increased return rate.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There will be an opportunity to publicise the questionnaire at the Designate Teachers’ Training Day. The cover letter will explain the purpose of the questionnaire and that designated teacher’s views are valued to improve future practice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. No designated teacher’s volunteer to take part in stage 3</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>There are 149 designated teachers in the local authority, so it is likely that five or more will be willing to take part in stage 3.</td>
<td>As discussed in section 3.6.5.1; six designated teachers were willing to take part in the research. Only one was able to attend on the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If no designated teachers volunteer, the researcher will ask the designated teachers at the link schools if they would be willing to take part in the research, making the voluntary nature of this clear.</td>
<td>Due to the late timing of the withdrawals, it was not possible to approach further designated teachers to attend the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The virtual school could have suggested that there are certain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
designated teachers with whom they have good relationships and these designated teachers could be directly approached to take part in the research.

4. Members of the virtual school staff do not wish to be interviewed or take part in the appreciative inquiry sessions

This is a low risk as extensive discussions have taken place between the researcher and the virtual school.

The time scale and commitments required from the virtual school staff have been made clear.

The topic is an area of interest to the virtual school, and was decided upon in collaboration.

If necessary, the research proposal can be adapted to better match the virtual school's needs.

The voluntary nature of participation will be respected.

5. Researcher illness

Contingency time has been factored into the research proposal.

A colleague could collect data if time was urgent.

6. Virtual school staff absence/illness

Contingency time has been factored into the research proposal.

Information could be gathered via email if the virtual school member was absent from the office but well enough to compose an email response.

One member of the virtual school staff broke a bone and was not able to attend the appreciative inquiry session due to being absent from work

7. Designated teacher absence/illness

Contingency time has been factored into the research proposal.

It is hoped multiple designated teachers will be willing to take part in stage 3, so reserve designated teachers could be called upon to interview.

See point 3.

8. Participants withdrawing from the research once it has begun.

It is unlikely the virtual school will withdraw, as they were extensively involved in the planning stages of the research.

The nature and time requirements

Participants did not wish to withdraw due to ethical issues or a wish to leave the research process.

As discussed in points 3 and 4,
of stage 3 will be clearly explained to the designated teacher upon recruitment. It withdrawal becomes problematic, the method could be adapted. withdrawal was necessary due to real life circumstances. Individuals volunteered to take part in an appreciative inquiry session at a later date, but this was not possible within the time constraints of the thesis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. Participants not engaging with the appreciative inquiry methodology</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>The appreciative inquiry cycle will be clearly explained to participants. Issue did not arise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It will be highlighted that the method was chosen as the researcher wished to focus on the positives and recognised the enthusiastic nature of the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The virtual school are aware that appreciative inquiry is a proposed research method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The researcher is going to pilot the method twice, which gives time for methodological problems to be considered and corrected.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Q: Role partners suggested by virtual school members during semi-structured interviews or the appreciative inquiry session

Role Partners suggested by virtual school members

- Education welfare officers
- Specialist senior educational psychologist
- Wider educational psychology team
- Teaching assistants
- Designated teachers
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
- Learning mentors
- Cared for support team
- Combined impact of all agencies
Appendix R: Tools and resources suggested by virtual school members during semi-structured interviews or the appreciative inquiry session

- Resources, e.g. books
- Technology – assistative/ laptops
- Celebration event
- Funding - pupil premium/ personal education allowance
- Personal education plans
- Wider life opportunities/ programme of events/ holiday clubs
- Counselling and play therapy
- 1:1 tuition
- Work placements
- Individual education plans
- Social and emotional support
- Musical instrument tuition
- Literacy
  - Letterbox
  - Volunteer readers
  - Wave 2/3 interventions
  - Love of books
Appendix S: Data provided by the virtual school for cared for children

### Table S1: Attendance of cared for children in the local authority between 2008-09 and 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>94.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary in local authority</td>
<td>91.9%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>95.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary in local authority</td>
<td>78.0%</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary out of local authority</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>95.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary out of local authority</td>
<td>79.8%</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table S2: Exclusions of cared for children in the local authority between 2008-09 and 2010-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2008-09</th>
<th>2009-10</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>236.5</td>
<td>232.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary in local authority</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary in local authority</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary out of local authority</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary out of local authority</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table S3: General Certificate of Secondary Education Exam (GCSE) results 2010 & 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Entered for GCSEs</th>
<th>Gained 1 + GCSE</th>
<th>5+ A*-G GCSE</th>
<th>5+ A*-C GCSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improvement?</td>
<td>+33%</td>
<td>+30%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (36 pupils)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (26 pupils)</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table S4: Key Stage 3 Exam results 2010 & 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th></th>
<th>Maths</th>
<th></th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L5+</td>
<td>L6+</td>
<td>L5+</td>
<td>L6+</td>
<td>L5+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement?</td>
<td>-13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (37 pupils)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (22 pupils)</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table S5: Key Stage 2 Exam results 2010 & 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th></th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th></th>
<th>English overall</th>
<th>Maths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L4+</td>
<td>L5</td>
<td>L4+</td>
<td>L5</td>
<td>L4+</td>
<td>L5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement?</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>-27%</td>
<td>+9%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
<td>+1%</td>
<td>-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (14 pupils)</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (26 pupils)</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table S6: Progress from Key Stage 1 for the 2011 cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th></th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th></th>
<th>English overall</th>
<th>Maths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making 2 +</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels progress from Key Stage 1</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table S7: Key Stage 1 Exam results 2010 & 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement?</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Maths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L2b+</td>
<td>L3</td>
<td>L2b+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement?</td>
<td>+2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 (22 pupils)</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 (22 pupils)</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table S8: Year 11 Destinations 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Apprenticeships</th>
<th>Not in Education or Training</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>