

## Special themed issue on autistic children Looked After by local authorities



Pictured above: the ACoRNS logo

### Websites



[acorns-soton.org.uk](http://acorns-soton.org.uk)

[autismtransitions.org](http://autismtransitions.org)

### Twitter



[@ACoRNSoton](https://twitter.com/ACoRNSoton)

### Contact us



[S.J.Parsons@soton.sc.uk](mailto:S.J.Parsons@soton.sc.uk)

[H.Kovshoff@soton.ac.uk](mailto:H.Kovshoff@soton.ac.uk)

NOVEMBER 2021

## About us

The Autism Community Research Network @ Southampton [ACoRNS] is an education-focused initiative which seeks to improve the lives of autistic children and young people. It is a unique collaboration between Education and Psychology at the University of Southampton and local nurseries, schools and colleges who are interested in developing, researching, understanding, and sharing good practice in educational provision for autistic children and their families. The network is co-directed by [Professor Sarah Parsons](#), from the University's [Education School](#), and [Dr Hanna Kovshoff](#) from the [School of Psychology](#) in partnership with our Steering Group who you can read about on our [website](#).

## ACoRNS News

### International conferences

As previewed in the last newsletter, ACoRNS team members were well

represented at the [Inclusive and Supportive Education Conference \(ISEC\) 2021](#) which was hosted by UCL Centre for Inclusive Education and the National Association for Special Educational Needs, and held online from 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> August 2021.

We have made the recordings of all these talks freely available to you at the links included in the text below.



Sarah and Mark Fry (Director of Education) from New Forest School talked about the [ACoRNS participatory model for connecting research and practice](#); Hanna and Kathryn Ivil (Nursery Manager) from Aviary Nursery talked about our [Digital Stories research in the Early Years](#). Educational Psychology trainee [Stephanie Lewis](#) talked, with Kirsty Marsden (Head of Care at Hill

House), about their research at Hill House School [using Digital Stories to support transitions for students into adult life](#). Last but not least, our Integrated PhD student [Verity Ward](#) talked about her research exploring the [inclusive pedagogic strategies of teachers using technologies](#) for teaching and learning.



**Summer workshops at the Hansard Gallery for the Voices through Art project**

**Voices Through Art** is a collaborative project between ACoRNS (Dr Hanna Kovshoff, Prof Sarah Parsons & Intern

Annie Keefe), Sam Davies, illustrator, and Tracie Raufi, Assistant Headteacher-Curriculum and Head of Art and Design, at New Forest School. The project is funded through the University's [Impact Acceleration Account Funding](#) (IAAF) from the ESRC. We are designing four short comics with and for autistic children making the transition from primary to secondary school.

The project team has been busy during the summer! On August 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> the Voices through Art team held two workshops at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton.

The first workshop was aimed at autistic students, to gain further feedback on Comic 1, and some of the storylines and initial artwork for Comics 2 and 3. The second workshop was aimed at invited professionals from different educational settings, to promote the use of comics to gain student voices, talk about transitions, and to think through how these can be best used and integrated into different educational practices and settings.



Pictured: workshop members drawing their 'ideal sidekicks'

The workshops were a great opportunity to develop the storylines and dialogue for the comics as well as gain some feedback about how the comics could be used in practice to support young people with school transitions. Very positive feedback was received including:

**'Please keep developing this idea – it's brilliant!'**



Pictured (L to R): Sarah, Hanna, Tracie and Sam enjoying the workshop

We will be running another workshop with students at New Forest School in November with the aim of finalising and then making the comics available early in 2022. We'll let you know! You can also check-in with developments through our [project blog](#). Thanks very much to New Forest School for kindly funding the workshops.

### **Invited talks for ACoRNS team at the National Autistic Society (NAS) education conference**

Dr Ruth Moyse, ACoRNS Visiting Research Fellow, and Prof Sarah Parsons were invited to give talks at the NAS' education conference on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2021. Ruth's talk drew upon her Doctoral research focusing on: **Autistic girls and education – lessons about inclusion**. Sarah's talk drew from a range of ACoRNS research to highlight the importance of using creative methods to support young people and families to share their perspectives on provision: **Student voices – the educational experiences of autistic pupils and their families**.

This was a good opportunity to share our work with a wider audience!

## **ACoRNS public webinars**

Happily, Ruth Moyse will also be sharing her research as part of our programme of ACoRNS open research webinars.

Her talk **'I've got something to add to that!' Using creative methods to open up conversations with autistic young people** is scheduled for **09:30 - 10:30 (GMT) on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> November 2021**.

Please join us [via Zoom](#) [no registration necessary].

**Meeting ID:** 861 2287 3365  
**Passcode:** 828626

Dr Ruth Moyse is a Visiting Fellow with ACoRNS at the University of Southampton, and a Director & Associate at AT-Autism. She is a qualified teacher and completed her doctoral studies at the Institute of Education, University of Reading. Her research interest lies in the education of autistic children and young people, particularly the female experience. Ruth is an advocate for participatory research and the co-production of knowledge and chooses creative methods of engagement that centre autistic young people and their views. She has two children, one of whom is autistic, and is autistic herself.



Pictured: Dr Ruth Moyse



## Another successful Festival of Social Science event for ACoRNS!

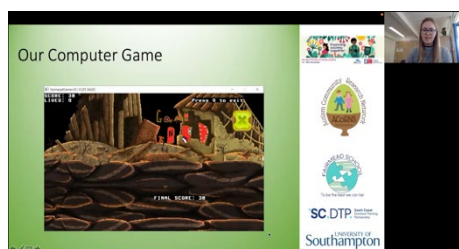
Doctoral student Verity Ward led this year's ACoRNS event on November 5<sup>th</sup> as part of the [ESRC's Festival of Social Science](#). The festival is an annual, UK-wide, free celebration of the social sciences with over 300 public and youth events taking place in November, with a mixture of online, in-person and hybrid formats.

Verity's event '[Count Me In! Celebrating Student Contributions to Collaborative Video and Game Design](#)' focused on her collaborative research with students and staff at [Fairmead School in Somerset](#), which supports autistic students and students with moderate learning difficulties.



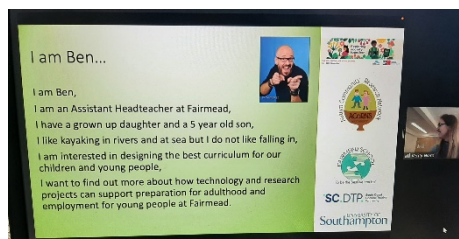
Aimed at an audience of researchers and practitioners, the morning webinar showcased Verity's research with students at Fairmead School.

Verity's collaboration with Fairmead provided new and different opportunities for student participation at the school, either through computer game design or video making. The students talked about how they participated in the project, and Verity shared some examples of their work.



Pictured: Verity presents the game the students designed together during the webinar.

Ben Crump, the lead teacher and collaborator for the project at Fairmead, also talked about how much value this participatory approach has brought to the pupils involved and the school more widely.



Pictured: Ben introduces himself at the webinar

**A recording of the session can be found here:**  
[https://youtu.be/Gr4A4oJRi\\_c](https://youtu.be/Gr4A4oJRi_c)

After the webinar, key stage four students from Fairmead had the opportunity to visit three exhibition rooms. These rooms allowed students to play with the computer game which the students had developed, watch the Digital Stories about the game design project, and explore the virtual tour created from videos the students had made.



Pictured: students at Fairmead try out the co-designed game

Students who had contributed to the projects ran each of the rooms, supporting other to engage with the interactive elements and answering questions about their work. At the end of the school day, the exhibition rooms were opened to external guests. Parents of students who had taken part, school governors and other educational practitioners who work with Fairmead were invited to the exhibition of students' work.

It was an excellent opportunity for those who attended to hear more about the research which students had contributed to, and to talk more about how the benefits of this experience could be extended to other aspects of school life.



Pictured: Verity Ward

# A focus on autistic children and young people Looked After by their local authority

As part of the ACoRNS focus on transitions and trajectories, we are especially interested in the experiences of autistic children and young people who are Looked After by their Local Authority (children 'in care'). A child or young person is legally defined as 'looked after' by a Local Authority (LA) if they are provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, or if they are subject to a care order or a placement order (Children Act, 1989).

There is good evidence that the outcomes of autistic children and young people who are Looked After by local authorities are amongst the poorest of all children in care, and all children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities. Despite this, there is surprisingly little research in this area to understand experiences and processes in more depth. We think it is, therefore, important to maintain a focus on this vital topic to try to find out more.

This newsletter focuses on our work to date within this theme:

- (1) A summary of our published paper based on **Freedom of Information requests** to all Local Authorities in England;
- (2) Key findings from our former DEdPsych trainee Jen Pickles into the experiences of **Virtual School Heads**. Jen now works as an Educational Psychologist for the London Borough of Hackney.

- (3) An overview of the research of one of our Educational Psychology trainees, Lynn De La Fosse, on **Designated Teachers**.
- (4) Some reflections on this topic from **Educational Psychologist with Southampton, Dr Alex Boys**.

**Finding out what Local Authorities know about autism and Looked After children through Freedom of Information requests**



This was a topic that initially landed at our ACoRNS door via a parent who had some direct experience of the care system.

She was concerned about what Local Authorities knew, or did not know, about the autistic children in their care, including whether and how diagnostic information was shared or prioritised in strategic planning. Consequently, between January – March 2017 she asked all Local Authorities in England via Freedom of Information requests about the information about autistic children that they know, share, and use for planning of provision. She asked 5 questions in total, which are shown in the green boxes below:

1: How many children are Looked After by the Local Authority?

2: How many children that are Looked After by the Local Authority have a diagnosis of autism (Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger Syndrome)?

In total, 70,666 children and young people were recorded and reported as being Looked After by the local authority. 59,453 looked after children lived in councils where their autism status was known and disclosed (84.1%). Of these, 1788 (3.0%) children were recorded as having an autism diagnosis. A further 11,213 children were Looked After in councils that did not have or did not disclose the numbers of children with autism (15.9%). **Therefore, the 3% figure of children on the autism spectrum is very likely to be an underestimation.**

3: Has the Designated Health Professional/Clinical Commissioning Group ever reported to the Corporate Parenting Board on the numbers and needs of Looked-After children with an autism diagnosis?

Out of the 147 who provided a response, only five local authorities were able to answer this question positively, with two stating their plans to be able to do so in future. **The majority (n=139; 95%) answered in the negative.**

4: Has the Virtual School Head ever reported to the Corporate Parenting Board on the numbers and needs of Looked After children with an autism diagnosis?

Of the 147 local authorities who responded, the majority **(140; 95%) answered this question in the negative**. This means that the majority of local authorities' Virtual School Heads have never reported to the Corporate Parenting Board on the numbers and needs of Looked After children with an autism diagnosis.

5a: Does the Local Authority have in place protocols to ensure that social workers and others (e.g. Independent Reviewing Officers, Virtual School Heads, personal assistants, carers) who support a Looked-After child with autism are always aware of a child's autism diagnosis? 5b: If so, please provide details.

141 local authorities responded to this question. **61 either stated "yes" or provided sufficient narrative details to demonstrate that policies and procedures were in place** to ensure awareness of diagnosis. **80 local authorities either responded "no" or "none" or were classed as a "no" based on the information supplied**, which suggested that it was unlikely that they had protocols in place to ensure everyone was aware of an autism diagnosis for a Looked After child.

#### Implications for practice and research

On average, 3% of children and young people being Looked After in England are known to have an autism diagnosis; this is higher than the 1-2% prevalence rate of autism in the general population in the UK. The

reasons for this elevated level need to be further researched and better understood. However, it is also likely that this is an underrepresentation of the actual numbers of autistic children in care.

Autism status is not a category of need that is reported or monitored at a strategic level within most local authorities. This raises important questions about the extent to which the specific needs of autistic children being Looked After are appropriately acknowledged and met.

We need to find out more from within local authorities, and amongst those directly involved, what is happening on the ground and where the challenges within the system lie.

This is a good example of ACoRNS in action in terms of prioritising the concerns and questions that come from our community including from autistic people, families and professionals who support them.



The full paper is published open access in the British Educational Research Journal and can be accessed [here](#).

#### Virtual School Heads' experiences of supporting autistic children in care

Following on from the Freedom of Information project, our former DEdPsych student, Dr Jen Pickles, wanted to find out more about the experiences of Virtual School Heads.



Pictured: Dr Jen Pickles

**Virtual School Heads (VSHs)** in England have a statutory responsibility to improve the educational outcomes of children in care following the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014.

However, very little is known about the experiences of VSHs in supporting autistic children in care, including whether and how knowledge about autism diagnosis is shared within interprofessional teams.

Jen interviewed eight VSHs and one Occupational Therapist from eight Local Authorities (LAs) in England and conducted an in-depth analysis of their responses. Her semi-structured interviews asked participants how they perceived their roles, to describe and reflect upon the processes in place, and to explore how they felt about their remit.

Key findings from the interviews showed:

- **A diverse range of experiences** due to the varied arrangements of virtual school teams, how they are placed systemically within the LA, and the placement of the children in different LAs around the country;
- VSHs felt they were **knowledgeable about autism in a general way**, and more knowledgeable than social care teams and carers, but they also felt that supporting autistic children and identifying their needs **required more specialist knowledge**;
- Relationship building within and across multi-agency teams was critical to supporting young people, but the **greatest barrier** to successfully developing these relationships was the overarching question of **responsibility**;
- Specifically, where VSHs were unsure whose responsibility it was to ensure the requisite skillset and knowledge about autism for those working with autistic children in care, the result was that they **could not state with confidence that individuals around the child were sufficiently enabled to provide appropriate provision**;
- **EHCPs and PEPs** were key statutory tools that shaped information gathering and sharing about autistic children, and so attendance at these meetings by the Virtual School teams was essential;
- However, **not having sufficient resources to attend the EHCP and PEP meetings** had a significant impact on VSHs' ability to act as an effective facilitator for the child and created a major barrier for providing effective support;
- the Education (Areas to Which Pupils and Students Belong) Regulations 1996, commonly known as **the 'Belonging Regulations'**, were felt **not to be**

**fit for purpose** for Looked After children because VSHs could no longer track and monitor progress if a child was placed out of area;

- There remains a **substantial lack of information and awareness** based on the direct views of autistic children and young people who are Looked After by local authorities, and this is a significant research and practice gap.

Jen's paper based on this research is currently under review and we will let you know when it is published and can be made more widely available.

Following directly from Jen's research, Lyn De La Fosse focused on the role and experiences of Designated Teachers. Lynn is currently finalising her DEdPsych research under Hanna and Sarah's supervision and is working as an Educational Psychologist with Surrey County Council. Lynn addressed two key research questions in her work, and these are summarised in turn below.



Pictured: Lynn De La Fosse

### **How does the Virtual School promote multi-agency working to improve outcomes for Looked After children and young people?**

Poor communication between different professionals and agencies has historically been cited as a key contributing factor in the underachievement of Looked After

children. There has to date been no in-depth, systematic exploration of the way in which the Virtual School promotes multi-agency working to improve outcomes for looked after children. This systematic literature review aimed to address this gap in the literature.

A systematic search was conducted on three different electronic databases: PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Scopus. An additional search for grey literature was carried out.

In total, 13 studies were included in this systematic literature review. These were assessed for quality, and findings from the studies were organised thematically. Multi-agency working was evident in much of the work done by Virtual Schools, across the following themes:

- Virtual Schools were seen to **bridge the gap** between education and social care, putting across differing points of view and enabling staff to see each other's perspectives.
- **Promoting a shared understanding** of the needs of looked after children through training, which is a crucial part of the Virtual School's role.
- **Personal Education Plans (PEPs)** are critical for bringing multi-disciplinary teams together and holding schools accountable (via the VSHs) if expected progress is not being made.
- **The views of looked after children and young people** themselves are under-represented in the literature. From the included studies, it was evident that relationships are very important to the CYP, but their views are not always considered. Many processes in place to support them are not child friendly.

- **Communication with other agencies** is vital for the Virtual School staff to commission services such as tutoring or mental health support, and to reduce exclusions or support placement moves.

The literature review has also identified barriers to effective multi-agency working which must still be overcome to enable a more joined-up approach.

### How do virtual schools support Looked After autistic children?

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 states that all maintained schools in England must designate a member of staff who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of children who are looked-after. Designated teachers, while not employed by Virtual School, are 'key role partners' and must liaise closely with the Virtual School in their work.

This original research project aimed to explore how designated teachers support looked after children with a diagnosis of autism.

Lynn carried out semi-structured interviews with five designated teachers, all of whom were currently employed as the designated teacher for looked-after and previously looked-after children in their school. The designated teachers were recruited from different Local Authorities across England.

The interview schedule asked participants to reflect upon the nature of their roles within school, the support given to autistic and non-autistic looked-after children, and their working relationship with the Virtual School. The interviews have been transcribed and will be analysed

using Thematic Analysis. Key findings and implications for practice and research will be reported in due course!

## In conversation with....Dr Alex Boys!



Dr Alex Boys is a Joint Specialist Educational Psychologist for Southampton for Children Looked After, Previously Looked After Children, Children in Need, and children with a child protection plan. Alex is also a member of Southampton's Virtual School. We asked Alex to share her reflections on this topic.

*Can you tell us about your role supporting looked-after children and young people (CLA and PLAC) in Southampton? What interested you about this role?*

I work 2.5 days a week for the Southampton Psychology Service and for the Southampton Virtual School 2.5 days a week supporting Children Looked After (CLA) and Care Experienced Children and Young People (CEYCP; formerly Post Looked After Children – PLAC). In addition, as of September this year, the Virtual

School remit has extended to supporting pupils on a Child in Need (CiN) Plan or a Child Protection (CP) Plan following a change in governmental legislation to enable all children with social worker involvement to receive equitable access to support.

The role provides an opportunity to support these vulnerable Children and Young People (CYP), drawing on the core principles of Educational Psychology practice; holistic working, evidence-based practice, ethical practice and effective application of psychological theory. Through consultations, casework, training, supervision and research, it is possible to apply psychology at the individual, systemic and strategic levels to support CYP in these vulnerable groups, working with a variety of other professionals to effect change. Being part of the Virtual School as well as the Psychology Service is beneficial as it enables enhanced communications between the teams to support work for these vulnerable groups.

In addition, on a personal level, working in the Virtual School has broadened my understanding of the challenges faced by the pupils in these vulnerable groups, what resources are available to support them and the successes they can have as a result of focused work to meet their needs; in short, it is a rewarding privilege to be part of this.

*From an Educational Psychology perspective, what are the kinds of strategies that you find helpful in your practice for supporting these young people?*

There are different levels of strategies from Educational Psychology that are supportive in meeting the needs of the CYP in these vulnerable groups.

Evidence-based strategies that support at the individual level to meet social, emotional and cognitive needs are used throughout practice (e.g. Precision Teaching, Lego-based group work and Emotional Literacy development). Much of the work draws on psychological research into attachment and trauma informed practice (e.g., the PACE model – Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy; ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences; brain development; etc.) across the individual, systemic and strategic levels.

Many of the CYP have complex needs which require the application of attachment and trauma informed practice research alongside psychological understanding of specific conditions such as Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

Furthermore, psychological research regarding specific challenges such as Emotionally Based School Absence (EBSA) and anxiety feature heavily in the work. Drawing on psychological research in relation to areas such as the aforementioned helps to achieve an holistic understanding of the situation and achieve collaborative action planning for next steps.

#### *What are some of the challenges that you identify within the system?*

Rather than a 'challenge within the system' it is important to recognise that it can take time to gather evidence and explore information relating to the CYP in these vulnerable groups.

The journeys these CYP have been on are often long and arduous. It takes time to explore the historical information but an essential part of the process to understand the current context and help plan for the future. Exploring the journeys can also impact on the emotions of the reader. It is therefore important to ensure self-care, making use of the supervision available as part of Educational Psychology practice as well as discussing cases with colleagues in the Virtual School who are also involved in supporting the CYP are beneficial methods of managing any emotional response.

#### *From your experience, what are some of the challenges with supporting the needs of autistic looked after children?*

The needs arising from the combination of Autism and trauma can lead to a complex presentation. Understanding how the threads from Autism and trauma are interwoven, culminating in the presenting challenges, can be an equally complex process but one which is necessary to help plan next steps. Exploring the features of Autism and trauma both separately and together help us to see the parts and how they come together to make the whole. This then helps to plan for meeting specific challenges drawing on research from both areas of psychology in tandem.

#### *What are some of the questions that research could help to answer?*

Research into the connection between the interwoven threads

stemming from Autism and trauma and how these can come together to influence the presentation of a CYP would be amazing. In addition, research looking into the impact of interventions designed specifically for Autism and how they can support trauma as well (and vice-versa) would add to the existing evidence base from which Educational Psychologists can draw to meet the complex needs of these vulnerable CYP.

#### *What could ACoRNS help with in this context?*

ACoRNS has continued to be a source of support in meeting the needs of CYP with Autism and trauma through the sharing of research into specific challenges experienced by this group of CYP. Research exploring individual as well as systemic issues for this group will continue to be helpful in effecting change and I look forward to future instalments and updates.

Many thanks Alex for sharing your experience and perspective with us!

If any newsletter readers would like to respond to any of the issues raised in the newsletter, or work with us on this important agenda, please do not hesitate to get in touch by emailing Sarah: [s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.parsons@soton.ac.uk) and / or Hanna: [h.kovshoff@soton.ac.uk](mailto:h.kovshoff@soton.ac.uk)

The next newsletter will be out in the Spring Term!