# Some quick English context

- First Virtual Schools established in late 2000s
- The existence of a Virtual School Head (VSH) statutory responsibility for all Local Authorities from 2014
- Very limited national guidance on the activities or management of Virtual Schools
- Evolution of a very 'mixed economy' in terms of size, status, location, funding and role(s)
- Virtual Schools under pressure due to Local Authority funding crisis

Our starting point...
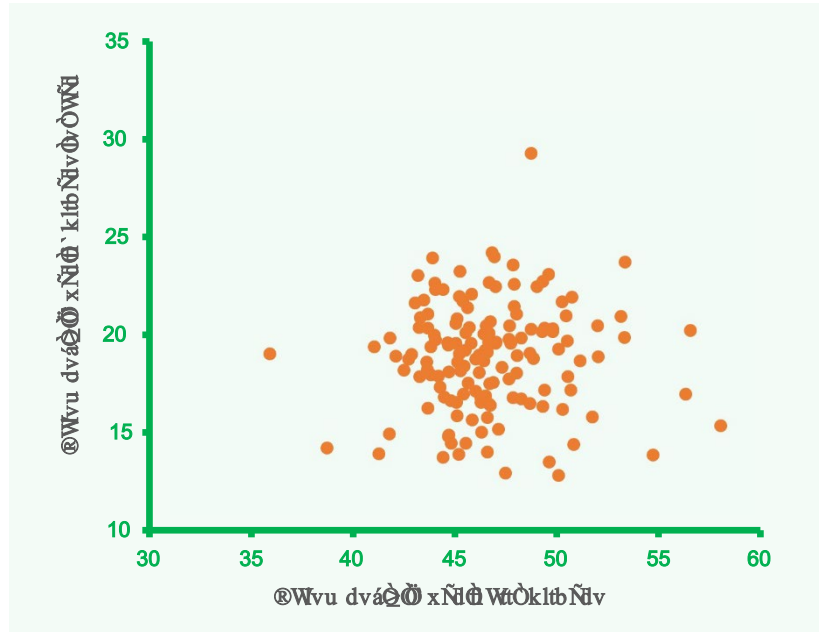
Mean of LA KS4 Attainment 8 scores (2017-2019). Source: LAIT dataset.

- Children in care do <u>not</u> do better at age 16 in areas served by higher achieving schools

- Children in care do <u>not</u> do better at age 16 in more affluent local authority areas

- Suggests that other local factors are driving outcomes for children in care

- Could the effectiveness of Virtual Schools be the answer?

Background to the study

- Funded by the **KPMG Foundation**
- Collaboration between University of Exeter, University of Oxford and National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH)
- Ran from Autumn 2021 to Spring 2023
- Mixed methods study: expert interviews, focus groups and quantitative analysis
- Working assumption: some models of Virtual Schools would be more effective than others

Research questions

1. How do Virtual Schools understand effectiveness within their work, including markers of success at the organisational and individual child level?

2. What elements of effective practice in Virtual Schools can be identified?

3. How does the apparent effectiveness of Virtual Schools with respect to educational outcomes for children in care vary between Local Authorities?

4. What relationships exist between the environmental and organisational contexts of a Virtual School and its apparent effectiveness?

Analytical approach
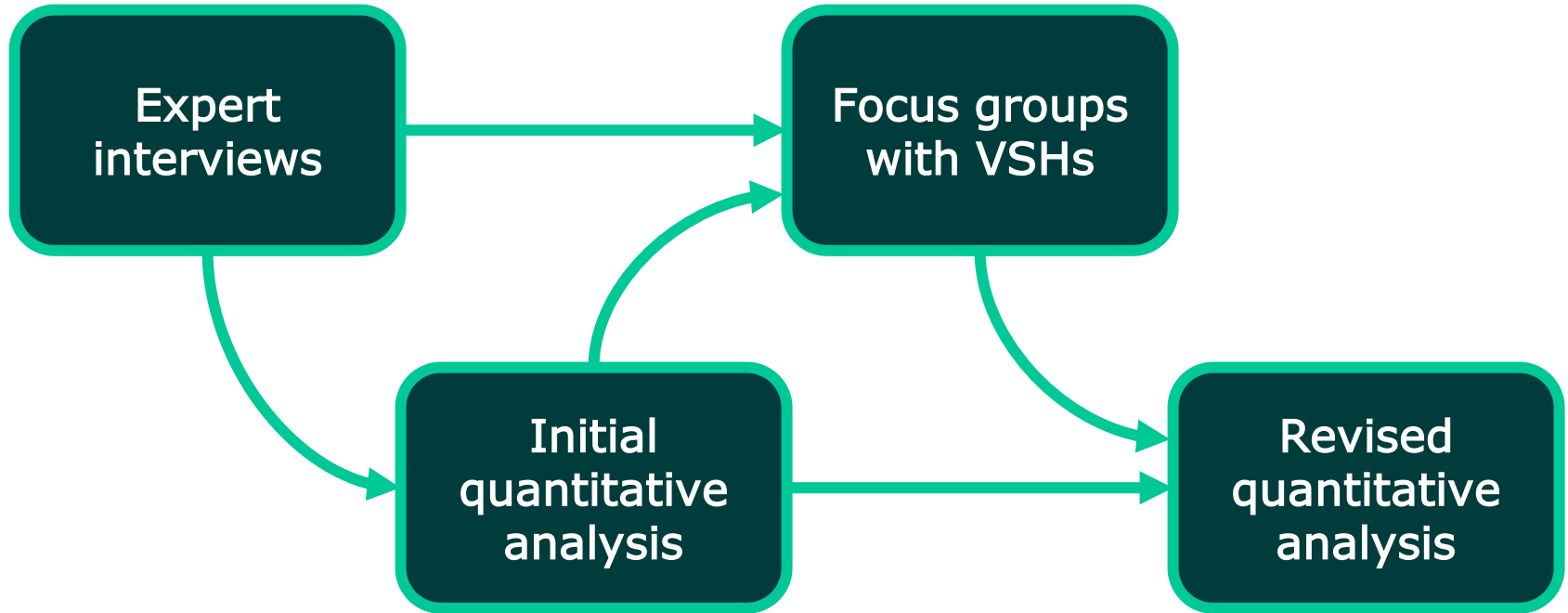
Time for a rethink…

- Little or no evidence to support working assumption that some models of Virtual Schools are 'better' than others

- Lots of different ways to be an effective Virtual School **within the local context** – e.g. commissioning vs. delivery

- **Refocus**: how can Local Authorities and national government provide an environment in which Virtual Schools **can be** effective?

Ten principles of effectiveness

Strong and influential VSHs

High status for virtual school within LA

Inclusive and welcoming local schools

Timely and transparent SEND support

Engaged with social workers and carers

Focused engagement with Ofsted

PEP systems that work for young people

Good availability of care placements

Local supply of specialist school places

Trauma-informed practice

Effective Virtual School Heads…

- Have high expectations about young people and the confidence to communicate them

- Understand the organisations and processes around the young person – 'systems wisdom'

- Have strong relationships with local schools, enabling them challenge and influence their practice

- Are persuasive and tenacious – importance of 'nag-ability'

- Are able to inspire and respond to change

"Multi-agency, multi-partnership pro-active work around vulnerable children, I think, is absolutely a growing characteristic [of Virtual Schools]."

Effective Local Authorities…

- Articulate a clear role for the VSH around outcomes for care-experienced learners

- Ensure that VSHs have ready access to senior leaders, councillors and relevant committees

- Provide a stable policy, leadership and funding environment

- Transmit a high status for the Virtual School to key agencies and ensure they are clear about its role

- Ensure that VSHs are appropriately paid

"Being line managed by the Director
of Children's Services puts me forward for all kinds of things, raises the profile of the Virtual School every turn. Absolutely champions our core
values and our development."

Concluding thoughts

- Effectiveness of Virtual Schools in England has been impacted by inconsistency:
  - Not necessarily about the **structures** of Virtual Schools as originally assumed
  - More about differing **relationships, expectations** and **local educational environment**
  - Importance of the role of the VSH itself
- Positive opportunity for Scotland to 'bake in' consistency about the role of the VSH

What makes a Virtual School effective?

Professor Neil Harrison

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