

**Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

**Report on Cardiff Virtual School (VS) and Virtual School Headteacher (VSH)**

**Background information**

The VS and VSH is a pilot funded by a Welsh Government grant.

In December 2019 Welsh Government asked Sir Alasdair Macdonald to carry out a scoping exercise focused on developing an integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children.

**‘An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales’**

by Sir Alasdair Macdonald

He was asked in particular to look at integrated local authority approaches in Wales and the impact of introducing a new model of the VS and VSH. Both are statutory in England and currently being developed in local authorities in Scotland.

The context of the review was as part of the Welsh Government’s continuing commitment to the vision that every child in Wales – including those who are looked after – has the right to expect an excellent education regardless of their circumstances. This also reinforced the commitment to raise the educational attainment and improve the life chances of children in care, adopting a child centred approach, through the collaboration of education, social services and others.

Education in Wales commits to “delivering a new, transformational curriculum supported by strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being.” The plan pledges to strengthen collaborative working to deliver better outcomes for our children and young people who are looked after. The plan also states that it is essential to look holistically at the support provided. Their educational needs cannot be considered in isolation and have to be addressed along with wider issues such as their well-being, health and placement stability.

This is a key theme in the document, ‘Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after’, which reaffirms the intrinsic relationship between the social context of the child and their educational attainment.

This is further supported by Article 39 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child which states that “children who have experienced trauma should receive additional support to promote physical and psychological recovery and social integration”.

The final report published in May 2020 set out 5 Recommendations:

1. The development of a Welsh Virtual School model
2. The level of resourcing required to enable an integrated approach that improves outcomes
3. The importance of high quality data
4. The implications for training
5. The need to broaden measures of what constitutes educational outcomes for our children and young people who are looked after.

In September 2021 a report by IFF was published. This was introduced following Sir Alasdair’s recommendations. One of the outcomes of the IFF Report was for the VS and VSH to be a pilot for two years before the consideration of a national model. This approach recognises the different profiles and needs of the local authorities across Wales.

In January 2022 Welsh Government invited all local authorities in Wales to complete an application to access funding for the VS and VSH. In July 2022 Cardiff were successful in the application process.

### **Overview of the work of the VS and VSH**

Local Authorities have a statutory responsibility to secure improvement in the quality of school education.

Directors of Education must ensure that they promote the educational achievement of the children they look after, regardless of where they are placed.

The VSH role is one of the ways in which Cardiff will discharge that legal obligation as part of a pilot from April 2023 to March 2024.

The core purpose of the role of the VSH is to be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and achievement of all children looked after by their authority, including those that have been placed in schools in other authorities. Putting the looked after children and young people at the heart of all we do.

The VSH has an important role in working in partnership with other authorities to support the educational progress of children in their schools but looked after by other authorities.

The VS is not a physical building where the children who are looked after attend. The children and young people continue to attend the schools they are registered at. Children who are looked after are being educated across a large number of schools, the Virtual School Head Teacher has a powerful role in tracking their progress as if they were in a single school.

The VSH and VS team work closely with the Designated Teachers in all schools developing strong and effective relationships to improve communication and to support the plans agreed with the pupils and other agencies.

This is a new role in Cardiff and in Wales. As a new role and way of working, the VSH will be responsible for reviewing, measuring impact, making changes where required and reporting back to the LA, Children's Services and ultimately to Welsh Government.

As the VS develops across Wales it is important to continue to be aware of further research carried out by the VSs in England and Scotland. It is hoped that a national association of VS and VSH will be developed in Wales as NAVSH (England) and CELCIS (Scotland). The VSH will be expected to be part of any future plans to influence policy and practice.

We want all looked after children and young people to fully participate in decisions about their lives and futures. The VS will enable all young persons to be fully involved in their own future planning and represent their views accurately.

The key areas of responsibility of the VS and VSH

- To make sure that there is a system to rigorously track and monitor the attainment of children who are looked after
- To ensure that all children who are looked after have a robust and effective plan that supports access to appropriate and timely support
- To champion the educational needs of looked after children across the Local Authority and those placed outside of the Local Authority
- To lead and manage the VS Team supporting our children and young people who are looked after.
- To provide support and advice to schools and to other agencies

- To influence policy and decision making

### **The work so far, including networks and links:**

- getting to know our children and young people
- attending and presenting meetings and network groups to understand our Corporate Parenting role and responsibilities
- working with the existing team to develop the core purpose for the VS
- working collaboratively with and the different areas within Education Children's Services
- planning and delivering training for school governors
- working with schools; developing relationships and communication with Headteachers and the Designated Teachers
- networking with other VSHs in Wales
- continuing to meet and consider the VS and VSH models (structure and organisation) with colleagues in Eng and Scot
- increasing awareness of the CS and VSH through meetings with a wide range of agencies and Professionals,
- attending and reporting to CPAC
- Health, improved links with health professionals including Goleudy a new joint working between Health, Children's Services and Education
- further opportunities to seek the views, ideas of our children and young people through NYAS and VFCC
- networking meetings and working collaboratively with our colleges and universities. Important links have been made with CAVC and their offer for our care experienced young people. Future work with CLASS Cymru who support our care experienced going to university with financial help, housing advice and promote the social and emotional wellbeing
- CASCADE, engaging with their research based evidence of social care matters
- National Development Group is being re started this month. This is crucial for the future of the VS and VSH model
- Widening knowledge and engagement with colleagues working at Post 16 and beyond 18 up to 25 to consider the WG's desire to align the work with the ALN Reform (0-25)
- working with WG to provide the evaluations and reviews that will support future actions

### **Short term plans**

- continue to developing relationships with children and young people, extending the plans to visit schools, colleges, education settings
- continue to develop collaborative work alongside schools and Children's Services
- reviewing the ALN Reform and impact of ALN notifications, the number of IDPs written and the transfer of the existing Statements into IDPs

- amend the existing PEP to reflect the changes to recording pupil progress and capturing what is needed to improve rates of progress and the impact of the actions
- consider how attendance information can be improved for our children and young people in Cardiff, those placed outside of Cardiff in other local authorities and placement in specialist provisions
- work with CSC to review and monitor the CLA PDG Cluster Plans. This will support a deeper understanding of the needs across the city and the different strategies and interventions used to provide support
- consult with schools and colleges through the Designated Teacher Forum platform what do they need and want such as training and advice, CPD
- 24th July INSET Day for the Team to re launch the Team as the VS, gather the views of the Team and set priorities for the next academic year.
- Collect the data for the GCSE results and prepare a report including the analysis
- ensure we know where the Y11s have moved on to; education, employment and or training. Extending the tracking to December 2023. This is following feedback during collaboration with the colleges
- work alongside a Play Therapist working with us to allocate the children they will be working with and developing relationship with the schools involved
- check in on all children and young people who are at transition years, N to R, Y6 to Y7
- use of case studies to support the impact of the work of the VS and VSH

## **Challenges and issues**

### Vision

We have a strong vision of what we want to achieve; a model of a Wellbeing Hub where our work can be developed. The hub would become the safe place for all ages including foster carers to access support. Children and young people to be able to access a range of opportunities including extra curriculum, school holidays and learning support.

We want to establish and extend our offer to different services to include training and a place to access therapeutic interventions. Improving the social and emotional wellbeing first before the capacity for learning can be explored.

This could be a Cluster or locality based model but a single point of access for support and advice

### Funding

The financial security of WG grant funding continuing is integral to the development and future success. The current situation does not support future planning.

The allocation of future CLA PDG funding post March 2024. Clarity is needed around the future and the planning how the grant will be spent and the evaluation of the expenditure alongside the evaluation of impact.

### VS Structure and Organisation

Unless we can secure the funding required the vision and further impact will be limited. We need to increase the capacity of the VS Team to achieve improving outcomes and the long term vision.

### Impact

The needs of our children and young people are diverse and complex. Each child and young person is an individual and reporting on impact will be important to develop the use of case studies. There will be some data, quantitative, as well as recognising the place and significance of the narrative, qualitative, in the form of case studies.

### Timescale

It is still early days and there is a significant amount of work to do operationally as well as keeping a focus on the wider long term strategic work. So far the networking and reaching out to wide range of professionals and agencies has already raised the profile and the work of the Team.

### **Support from the Scrutiny Committee**

- continue to fulfil the Corporate Parent responsibility
- support the need to secure the future funding