

CORPORATE PARENTING ADVISORY COMMITTEE

29 DECEMBER 2022

VIRTUAL SCHOOL AND VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEAD TEACHER, CARDIFF

Reasons for the Report

1. This report has been prepared to provide the Committee with an update in relation to the Virtual School and Virtual School Headteacher in Cardiff. The Virtual School (VS) and Virtual School Headteacher (VSH) Cardiff will be a pilot plan before future evaluations are submitted to Welsh Government leading to establishing both in the VS and VSH in Cardiff to further improve the educational outcomes of all children and young people who are looked after, and care experienced.
2. The report aims to inform the Committee on the purpose and structure of the Virtual School and the role of the Virtual School Headteacher.

Background

3. 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

4. He was asked in particular to look at integrated local authority approaches in Wales and Virtual School Headteachers (VSH), which are statutory in England and currently being developed in some parts of Scotland.
5. 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.
6. The Programme for Government, Taking Wales Forward, commits to “examine ways of ensuring looked after children enjoy the same life chances as other children and if necessary, reform the way they are looked after”.
7. This is reinforced by the national strategy Prosperity for All, with social care as one of the five priority areas, and actions 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.
 - Strengthen edge of care services to provide families with timely support to reduce the numbers needing care provision and provide assistance in the key transitional phase post 16 to access further education, jobs and housing for all those leaving care.
 - Education in Wales: Our national mission, commits to “delivering a new, transformational curriculum supported by strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being. “This plan pledges to strengthen collaborative working to deliver better outcomes for LAC”.
8. The plan also states that it is essential to look holistically at the support provided for Looked After Children. 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.

9. This is a key theme in 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.
10. 'All parts of the system must act in a coordinated and coherent fashion to ensure significant changes in the life of the child are minimised and managed sensitively, always with the child at the centre of decision-making'.
11. 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".
12. The final report published in May 2020 set out 5 Recommendations:
 - The development of a Welsh Virtual School model
 - The level of resourcing required to enable an integrated approach that improves outcomes
 - The importance of high-quality data
 - The implications for training
 - The need to broaden measures of what constitutes educational outcomes for CLA
13. Welsh Government followed this report with research carried out by IFF and was published in September 2021. One of the outcomes was for the VS and VSH to be a pilot for two years before the consideration of a national model. This recognises the different profiles and needs of the local authorities across Wales.
14. 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.

VS and VSH Role and Responsibilities

15. 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.

16. The Virtual School Head Teacher role is one of the ways in which Cardiff will discharge that legal obligation as part of a pilot from April 2023 to August 2024.
17. The core purpose of the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher is to be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment/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 they do
18. The VSH will have 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.
19. The VS is not a physical building where the children who are looked after attend. The children and young people will 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.
20. The VSH must have the ability to develop strong professional relationships. This will be a city-wide remit and will require close collaboration and joint planning between the VSH, teams within the Education department, teams in Children's Services as well as recognising the importance of establishing strong relationships with Headteachers and others across education who share responsibility for individual children and young people.
21. The VSH and VS team will 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.
22. This is a new role and will be at the centre of the core purpose of the VS Cardiff. 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 Local Authority, Children's Services and to Welsh Government.

23. As the VS develops across Wales it will be 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 National Association of Virtual School Heads NAVSH (England) and Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (Scotland). The VSH will be expected to be part of any future plans to influence policy and practice.

Key responsibilities of Virtual School Head Teacher

24. The Virtual School Head Teacher role should be undertaken by a person with substantial, current or previous senior level experience of supporting vulnerable children in educational settings, preferably including experience of school senior leadership.

25. The post holder will report to a Manager (Assistant Director of Education) but will routinely link with both the Director of Education and Director of Children's Services to ensure that the work to support those who are looked after and care experienced is given the highest profile.

26. The Virtual School Headteacher will be required to ensure that all aspects of the role are undertaken effectively. A vital aspect of the role is to ensure that positive relationships are maintained with those in their care.

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

28. The key areas of responsibility of a Virtual School Head Teacher for which they are accountable for:

- 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 a team of Education Support Officers within the VS Team supporting Children and Young People who are Looked After. Currently the Looked After Children Education (LACE) Team.
- To provide support and advice to schools and to other agencies

29. The long-term goal is to extend the role of the VS and establish the VS Cardiff as a centre of excellence for training accessed by schools, carers and others

Financial Implications

30. The funding for the VS and VSH for the period of the pilot have been part met by Welsh Government funding. Cardiff Education were successful with the application submitted to Welsh Government in July 2022. As part of the 2022/23 budget process, an additional £50,000 was allocated to Education Directorate recognising the need to ensure a level of financial sustainability in providing support to Looked After Children.

31. The full narrative justification for the £50,000 budget was to Support looked after children in Cardiff, placed in or out of county, to achieve the best possible outcomes in terms of their education and ensure they progress into Education, Employment or training post 16, further enhancing current practice. The funding was also to be used to provide an effective bridge between Education and Children's Services to ensure the best outcomes for our looked after children

Legal Implications

32. There are no legal implications arising from this report

RECOMMENDATION

33. The Committee is recommended to note the pilot of the Virtual School and Virtual School Headteacher Cardiff and to make any observations or comments.

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29 DECEMBER 2022