

**Progress report on Children Looked After in
the Virtual School: Update for Autumn and
Spring Term**

**Report of Melanie Stubbs, Durham Virtual School Head, Children
and Young People's Services, Durham County Council**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of the report is to provide an update on the work carried out by the Virtual School September 2022 to April 2023. This summary focuses on children and young people of statutory school age.

Executive summary

2. The Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint at least one person for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its children looked after. That person – the Virtual School Head (VSH) - must be an officer employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in England.
3. The VSH should be the lead responsible officer for ensuring that arrangements are in place to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the authority's children looked after, including those placed outside the home authority's boundaries

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that members of the Corporate Parenting Panel note the contents of this update

Background

5. As of March 31st 2023, there were 693 Durham children looked after of statutory school age. 46.5% were of primary age and 53.5% were of secondary age. 43% were female and 57% were male. 21.8% were supported by an Education Health care Plan (EHCP) and 30.2% were identified as requiring SEND Support

Attendance and Exclusions

6. National CLA overall absence rates were over double those observed locally in the 2021/22 academic year. Similarly, national persistent absence rates were almost three times the rate observed locally.
7. Overall attendance since September 22 is 91.3%, reception to Year 11
8. Attendance is improving following the disruption caused by the pandemic and children are less anxious about attending school.
9. The Virtual School works with schools to maintain a high standard of attendance and in line with the Government attendance guidance we do not authorise holidays during term time.
10. We have had one Permanent Exclusion since September 2022

Quality Assurance of the Personal Education Plan (PEP)

11. The Autumn and Spring term has reflected a dip in the number of PEP's rated as Green. This reflects the challenge to schools from the Casework team and the message we are giving to schools that the PEP is a live document and the sign off period must be actioned within a ten-day window. Where this has not taken place a PEP can only achieve an Amber rating.
12. There has been an improvement from the Autumn PEP when 79.9% were rated as Green. The Spring PEP has seen this improve to 85.3%. We believe this challenge is having impact.

Durham Virtual School Team

13. The casework team of seven has been able to maintain the high level of support for our young people and challenge for schools. Since September we have employed two additional Caseworkers on a temporary basis to support a growing cohort of children and young people. One of these Caseworkers carries the Post 16 caseload.
14. We have continued to provide advice to parents of PCLA and those on SGO, thus meeting our duties as a Virtual School.

Virtual School Areas for Development

The key priorities for 2022 – 23 as outlined in the Annual Report :

- a) Identify ways to support CLA to close the gaps created by Covid
- b) Focus on Years 6 and 11 to allow early intervention and release catch up funding during the Autumn term.
- c) Develop progress meetings with the CLA PEP Casework team to enable them to promote reflective conversations with schools around progress
- d) Develop the way in which we work with Foster Carers
- e) Develop work with Children's Homes to support school anxiety and other barriers to education.
- f) Increase the CLA PEP Casework Team to enhance the service we offer and have a bespoke caseworker for Post 16.
- g) Work with other areas, including schools to ensure PLAC and those with a Special guardianship order (SGO) are aware of the support available and how to access this.
- h) Further develop the Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Full Circle to raise awareness of Trauma and Attachment in schools
- i) Review all our SLA to ensure high quality and easy access for schools and identify any gaps in our offer to improve outcomes
- j) Develop the EWEL offer to schools to support early intervention and reduce the numbers of Suspensions.
- k) Develop the work with the SEND and Inclusion Team to ensure all CLA with an EHCP have a named SEND Caseworker, raising the awareness of the need to find a suitable placement when the child needs to change school through a placement breakdown.
- l) Support Designated Teachers to identify smart outcomes for CLA and develop coordinated ways of working with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) in their schools.

Conclusion

15. Members of the Corporate parenting panel will be sighted on the work of the Virtual School

Author

Melanie Stubbs

Tel: 03000 265848

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to ensure that top priority is given to creating a culture of high educational aspirations and strives for accelerated progress and age-related attainment or better for looked-after children.

Finance

The support for CLA of statutory school age is provided through the allocation of Pupil Premium Plus, schools receive £1800 per academic year for each Durham child. The Virtual School uses the remaining £730 to provide the additional therapeutic Services and other support for schools to access for children at various points during their learning journey when a need is identified.

Consultation

Ongoing consultation with schools through briefings and a designated teacher network meeting. Consultation with young people through the CiCC.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

As a public body, the Council must consider the Equality Act 2010, a consolidating Act which brings together previous Acts dealing with discrimination. Decisions must be reviewed for potential impact on persons with "protected characteristics".

Climate Change

N/A

Human Rights

It is the right of the child to a high-quality PEP that identifies their needs, sets targets, and uses PP+ appropriately to support their educational outcomes. It is their right to have their voice heard and contribute to matters that affect them in education. We acknowledge the Children Promise and have highlighted this in the Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Policy we have shared with schools and settings.

Crime and Disorder

Young people who do not access full-time education are more at risk of criminality, CSE or criminal exploitation across county lines. The VS supports all CLA to find the right setting to support their needs and promotes high attendance in school.

Staffing

There are eleven full time members of staff, funded through the corporate budget. We currently have two temporary Caseworkers funded through Pupil Premium Plus, one focuses on Post 16, the other on statutory school age children. This is to meet the demands of the increased number of CLA and the need to maintain a high level of support to schools. Without the additional capacity Caseworkers would have a caseload of 102.

Accommodation

The Virtual School Team are based at Green Lane, Spennymoor. The full team now sit in Education Durham.

The Inclusion Base is placed at Lanchester and is accommodated within the building known as The Bridge.

Risk

The extended offer to schools and settings relies upon Pupil Premium Plus. Staff costs are funded through the corporate budget; however, this does not apply to two members of staff at the Inclusion Base. The Base is an asset and supports CLA in times of crisis.

Procurement

The contract with Welfare Call has been extended to August 2024. It would not be wise to change the provider for the ePEP system due to the system we have established with schools and Social Care.