

**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 July 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 21 July 2023, there were 766 Durham children looked after of statutory school age. 48% were of primary age and 52% were of secondary age. 42% were female and 58% were male. 22% were supported by an EHCP and 31% were identified as requiring SEND Support

Attendance and Suspensions/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. The next national data for CLA is expected to be published in March 2024 and will include the whole year 2022/23 of attendance data for those children and young people who were CLA continuously for at least 12 months at 31 March 2023
8. Overall attendance since September 22 to July 2023 is 91.4%, reception to Year 11
9. Attendance of primary school age CLA was 95.35%.
10. Attendance of secondary school age CLA not including Y11 = 86.2%
11. Attendance is improving following the disruption caused by the pandemic and children are less anxious about attending school. Where children are anxious, we explore various interventions to support these children.
12. 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.
13. We have had one Permanent Exclusion since September 2022
14. 40 (2%) CLA experienced at least one Suspension during the academic year
15. 21 (1%) CLA experienced more than one Suspension during the academic year this is in line with 2019/2020

Quality Assurance of the PEP

16. The Autumn, Spring and Summer 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.
17. 783 PEP meetings were held in the Summer Term across 279 provisions. There has been an improvement from the Spring PEP when 85.7% were rated as Green. The Summer PEP has seen this improve to 86.7%. We believe this challenge is having impact.

GCSE results – Year 11 Outcomes

18. There were 68 young people in the Year 11 reporting GCSE cohort (in care continuously between 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023). This figure does not include those who do not fit the criteria for being included when reporting on outcomes, such as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, those placed in schools in Scotland and anyone not on a school roll.
19. 32.4% of the reporting Yr 11 cohort were not placed in mainstream schools and 29.4% had an EHCP.
20. 26.5% of the cohort achieved English (language or literature) GCSE at Grade 4 or above and 17.7% achieved Grade 5 or above. In Maths, 27.9% achieved Grade 4 or above and 13.2% achieved Grade 5 or above. 16.2% of the cohort achieved both English and Maths GCSE at Grade 4 or above and 8.8% achieved both subjects at Grade 5 or above. This is summarised in the table below. Further information and analysis will be available in the Virtual School Annual Report for 2022-2023.

English				Maths				English & Maths			
Pupils Achieving Grade 9-4 English (Lit or Lang)		Pupils Achieving Grade 9-5 English (Lit or Lang)		Pupils Achieving Grade 9-4 Maths		Pupils Achieving Grade 9-5 Maths		Pupils Achieving 9-4 EM		Pupils Achieving 9-5 EM	
Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
18	26.47%	12	17.65%	19	27.94%	9	13.24%	11	16.18%	6	8.82%

Durham Virtual School Team

21. The casework team of seven has been able to maintain the high level of support for our young people and challenge for schools. The additional Caseworkers have strengthened the capacity within the team and with increasing numbers of CLA will enable the high offer to schools to continue. The benefits of having a bespoke Post 16 PEP Caseworker from the Progression and Learning Team have provided oversight to those identified as NEET, ensuring they have a PEP and the most appropriate people are involved. Those classed as EET also benefit from their expertise.
22. 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

23. The key priorities for 2022 – 23 as outlined in the Annual Report are:
 - a) Identify ways to support CLA to close the gaps created by Covid. This has been addressed using the National Tutor Programme. This will continue into the next academic year 2023/2024
 - 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. This is now embedded into systems within the Virtual School and has informed challenge to caseworkers and schools.
 - d) Develop the way in which we work with Foster Carers. This is ongoing through closer working with Fostering.
 - e) Develop work with Children's Homes to support school anxiety and other barriers to education. Training provided through Full Circle and the Education Psychologist. Improved communication with Durham Childrens Homes through termly meetings. Supporting Homes with education conversations during OFSTED.
 - f) Increase the CLA PEP Casework Team to enhance the service we offer and have a bespoke caseworker for Post 16. This is now in place.
 - g) Work with other areas, including schools to ensure PLAC and those with a SGO are aware of the support available and how to access this.

Agreed by Head of Service for Education to create a new Post within the virtual School to appoint a Previously Children Looked After Officer.

- h) Further develop the 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. This has identified a need to review SEND processes for CLA.
- l) Support Designated Teachers to identify smart outcomes for CLA and develop coordinated ways of working with the SENCO in their schools.

Conclusion

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

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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. The offer of the Virtual School to Social Care and Schools relies upon Corporate Funding to enable the staffing structure.

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 and the Post 16 offer would be difficult to maintain.

Accommodation

The Virtual School Team are based at the Education Development Centre, 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 and prevents permanent exclusions.

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.