



Report of Melanie Stubbs, Virtual School Head, Durham County Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide an outline summary of the full virtual school annual report for 2022-2023 (Attached at Appendix 2). This summary focuses on children and young people of statutory school age.

Executive summary

- 2 In line with DfE reporting, the data reported in this document is based on those children and young people who have been continuously looked after for a minimum of 12 months from 1 April 2022, to 31 March 2023 – hereafter referred to as the reporting cohort. This executive summary covers statutory school age, whilst the body of the report also includes Early Years and Post 16.
- 3 At Durham Virtual School we believe we are making a difference to the education of children and young people in care. This report can evidence educational outcomes and progress from entry to care this year through formal examinations for all Key Stages. Good attendance, few suspensions, high aspirations, strong vocational and academic pathways, and effective preparation for adulthood continue to be evident for children in our care. This is all brought about by a virtual school team which advocates strongly and loudly for our young people through collaborative working. Over the last three years we have insisted on an increasing focus on the education of children in care within schools and with our partners and raised the profile of the work of the virtual school, developing very close working relationships with headteachers and Designated Teachers. The strengthening of the virtual school has allowed us to have increased capacity to attend PEP meetings and work more directly with social workers and schools to achieve the best outcomes for the children on our care.

Recommendations

- 4 It is recommended that members of the Corporate Parent Panel note the contents of the full annual report.
- 5 The virtual school head should ensure that children and young people in our care and remain a priority focus within the wider team since the extension of the role to all children with a Social Worker.
- 6 The virtual school head should ensure that the identified priorities are actioned to further improve the educational achievement of children in our care, and these children are placed in schools and settings which are appropriate to their needs.
- 7 That the report be read with an understanding that the return to formal examinations has affected all measures this academic year. Outcomes are available for Key Stage 1 and 2 children and Year 11 students.

Background

- 8 As of July 2023, there were 766 Durham children looked after of statutory school age (SSA). This is an increase of 13.3% from the same time 2022 and 136 Post 16 in care. 48.04% were of primary age and 51.96% were of secondary age. The gender split across SSA and Post 16 is 40.13% girls and 59.87% boys. The more marked difference, however, is in P16, where 72.06% are male and 27.96% are female.
- 9 22.34% of children and young people (R - yr. 11) attend out of county schools; this is an increase of 2.67% from last year. 77.66% are educated in schools based in County Durham. The increase in children attending provisions may in part be a reflection on the difficulty in placing children in Special Schools appropriate to their need. The remaining children are placed across 47 other local authorities, although a significant number of these are placed in our neighbouring local authorities.
- 10 As of July 2023, 76% of the cohort attended a school with an Ofsted judgement of good or better and 11.6% attended a school with a grade of Requires Improvement or below. To avoid additional trauma, we do not routinely remove a child from a school which becomes inadequate unless there was an exceptional reason, but we do provide additional scrutiny and academic support if required. 92 young people attended schools where a current Ofsted judgement isn't available due to a recent academy conversion. Any maintained school in Durham that is not judged to be Good or better will receive extra scrutiny and the Local Authority will work closely with these schools to improve provision. As a virtual school we provide additional tuition and scrutiny to all schools, as required. Any maintained school in Durham that is not judged to be Good or better will receive extra scrutiny and the Local Authority will work closely with these schools to improve provision. As a virtual school we provide additional tuition and scrutiny to all schools, as required. Any maintained school in Durham that is not judged to be Good or better will receive extra scrutiny and the Local Authority will work closely with these schools to improve provision. As a virtual school we provide additional tuition and scrutiny to all schools, as required.
- 11 At the end of July there were 29 unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) of statutory school age on the roll of the Virtual School, 23 of whom were placed out of county for care reasons. This brings additional challenges when seeking a school placement. 20 were in Year 11, all of whom had a Post 16 destination organised. In addition to this there were 39 Post 16 UASC.

- 12 In 2022-2023 there were 52 school moves during the academic year. We aim to ensure moves take place at the end of an academic year, but there are occasions where a move mid-year is beneficial. More rigorous monitoring took place of school move planning and there was a clear message that school moves would only be considered as a last resort for our young people to promote stability of education. *A further 54 were suggested, but challenged by the Virtual School and therefore did not take place.* 33% of school moves were to support moving to a permanent placement or due to distance, while 9% were due to a child leaving care on an Adoption Order or Special Guardianship Order. 6% were due to a care placement breakdown, and 25 % because of a care led decision. School moves due to permanent places remain the most significant factors in requesting a school move. However, in all cases the PEP Caseworker oversees the move, including agreeing the chosen school. The Virtual School Head has the final say in agreeing school moves and the PEP Caseworker ensures they are consulted fully in the process.
- 13 166 (22%) of the school age cohort were educated out of the boundaries of County Durham in 2022-23. This is a slight increase of 2% from 2021-2022
- 14 According to the Spring Census 2023, there are currently 999 previously looked after children on roll in Durham schools (maintained). This reflects an increase of 11 children from January 2022. This is a rise of 1.1% from 2022, compared to a rise of 13.4% from 2021. The Virtual School offers support and advice to guardians and schools for this cohort of children.
- 15 Children in care (12 months on 31 March) are over three and a half times as likely to have an identified special educational need (SEN) and eight times more likely to have an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than all children. Nationally in 2022, 56.3% of children in care had a special educational need compared to 15.6% of all children. In Durham 2022-23, 53% of children and young people (R-Y11) had identified special educational needs; 22.2% were supported by an EHCP whilst 30.8% had school SEN support plans (K code). There is less than 1% decrease in all areas from the figures for the same time last year. The percentage of Durham children looked after with an EHCP nearly doubles from primary to secondary school, although the percentage of children with an SEN Support Plan is higher in Primary than secondary. A challenge for Durham Virtual School is to ensure the needs of children with a SEN Support Plan are known and strategies put in place at transition points. When a child has an EHCP there is the additional challenge of securing the correct education provision at a time when many Special Schools are oversubscribed. It is important that our Caseworkers monitor the child's progress closely to ensure the

child's SEN needs are being adequately addressed and supported by the plans that are in place. Wherever possible the Designated Teacher/SEN Coordinator (SENCO) from the secondary school will attend the Summer PEP.

- 16 The primary SEN need of children in our care of statutory school age is social, emotional & mental health (SEMH). 44% of the children in our care SEND cohort are identified as having SEMH, with 26% having a moderate learning difficulty and 8% a speech, language, and communication need. This influences the way in which the virtual school directs the top slice pupil premium plus (PP+) money into the support we offer our schools through the service level agreements made available at no cost to schools.

Headline Outcomes 2023

- 17 The reporting cohort in Year 2 was 32. There was roughly an equal split of 15 girls and 17 boys. 75% of the cohort attended schools in Durham. 17 (53%) children had SEN, and increase of 15% from last year, with 6 having an EHCP and 11 with an SEN Support Plan. The most common Primary need in SEND was Cognition and Learning. Although outcomes were below expected, our girls have performed better than the boys across all areas, with quite significant differences in maths and in matching the reading, writing and maths expected, where girls were 3 times more girls achieved expected standards. However, only 4 children achieved Greater Depth in Reading, 1 in Writing and 1 in Maths.
- 18 The reporting cohort in Year 6 was 55; there were 29 boys and 26 girls in the reporting cohort. 48 of the reporting cohort attended schools in Durham, with the other 7 attending schools outside of the local authority. 26 (47%) had SEN, with 12 having an EHCP and 14 with an SEN support plan. Nearly 4 times more boys than girls had an SEN Support plan. The cohort have improved in all areas from 2022 other than GPS where we have maintained 53%. Outcomes are more in line with those from 2019, prior to the pandemic, although with changing cohorts and numbers it is difficult to make comparisons. Our girls have performed better or in line with the boys across all areas apart from Maths, where 69% of boys achieved the expected standard compared to only 62% of girls. However, it is also worth noting that the boys account for 69% of the children with SEN. 13.8% of boys achieved Maths at Greater Depth (110+ Scaled Score), no girls achieved this measure. Although achieving roughly in line across all other measures, we will continue to monitor this year's cohort as we need to improve the numbers achieving greater depth across all areas to ensure our young people have the best chance of achieving their potential.

- 19 There were 68 young people in the Year 11 reporting cohort, which consisted of 50% boys and 50% girls. 37 had identified SEN, 54% of the group. 20 had an EHCP, 29% of the reporting cohort, 68% were on the roll of a mainstream Secondary, 14% more than 2022. 12% of young people attended a Maintained/Academy Special School, with a further 10% placed in an Independent Special School. The percentage in independent special school has doubled from last year. 15 young people followed a curriculum that did not include GCSEs in Maths and English. Of these, all but 2 had SEN, with 8 having an EHCP. All followed a curriculum appropriate to their needs including teaching in literacy and numeracy. 3 young people (4%) attended an Ofsted Registered Alternative Provision.
- 20 Unfortunately, this year we have seen a drop in all areas, though this is most noticeable in English grades. Despite a significant amount of support offered by schools, this cohort of young people, we believe, remain impacted by covid. We have had a significant number disengaged from education and a continued number of persistent absentees, which we believe have impacted on grades. One area which has remained consistent is our young people achieving Maths and English at grade 9-5. In this area, 9% of our cohort achieved this, which is only 1% less than last year.
- 21 Results indicate that unlike in previous years, where our girls outperformed boys significantly in English, this year performance at both 9-5 and 9-4 was equal in English. However, boys significantly outperformed girls in Maths, with only 3% of girls achieving the higher measure compared to 10% of boys. Additional monitoring and intervention will be considered this year to ensure appropriate support and intervention is available to all the Year 11 cohort, with a particular emphasis on matching the higher grades in the Basics.
- 22 Early indication shows that 2 Care Leavers achieved A Levels and others achieved BTEC equivalents in August 2023. Intended destinations show that 8 have secured a university place.

Attendance and Exclusions

- 23 Attendance continues to be a strength of the virtual school. The slight increase in absence and persistent absence is in line with the national and local trend. It also reflects the anxieties demonstrated by some young people when realising the return to normality and formal exams post Covid
- 24 Since returning to school in September attendance of children looked after has mostly been good. Data collected in July provides a picture for this academic year. Attendance was 91.04%, almost -0.6% lower than in 21/22

- 25 Primary aged children looked after show a positive attendance at 95.5%, whilst the attendance of the Secondary children looked after cohort, 86.2% has raised an area for concern.
- 26 58 children looked after achieved 100% attendance across the academic year 2022/2023, while 343 children looked after sat within the group who achieved between 94% and 99% attendance. Strategies have been put in place to address concerns when a young person drops below 95%
- 27 There have been forty Suspensions during the academic year 2022/2023 for children looked after. Twenty One children/young people experienced more than one period of Suspension. Twenty Seven children attended the secondary sector, ten were primary aged children and three children attended Specialist Provision.
- 28 There has been one permanent exclusion. The casework team work closely with schools to prevent any issues reaching crisis point and explore appropriate alternative pathways better suited to meeting the need of the young person. We challenge any schools which consider permanent exclusion, and then implement appropriate support, using PP+ funding to avoid this.
- 29 During 2022-2023 all young people had a PEP on the Welfare Call system completed. 2,193 PEPs have been completed for 834 young people of statutory school age. These have taken place across 51 Local Authorities. Introducing the electronic PEP has improved and streamlined many processes including tracking PEP completion; monitoring involvement; tracking and analysing PP+ use and the quality assurance process.
- 30 During 2022-2023 the Autumn ePEP quality was rated as 79.9% Green (High Quality) and 20.1% Amber (did not meet expected standard to achieve high quality). This reflected the challenge to schools to sign the document off within 10 days of the PEP meeting. At the end of the academic year 86.7% were rated Green and 13.3% Amber. Challenge continues to schools.

Pupil Premium Plus Funding

- 31 In 2022-23 (Financial Year) our total PP+ budget was £1,896,670. Schools were allocated £1,800 of the government allocation of £2,530), in 3 instalments. In total, approximately £1,4 million was provided directly to schools during the 2022-23 academic year to support their work with children in care. Recovery Grant Premium for eligible pupils was given directly to schools and usage was monitored in the PEP. The School Led Tutoring Grant was used to fund packages of support

delivered to some of our most vulnerable learners, including those not attending school, in our children's homes, leaving secure and those at risk of permanent exclusion. Additional funding was also sent directly to schools to fund multiple packages of support.

- 32 A significant amount of the PP+ funding given to schools is spent on academic achievement and progress. 56% of PP+ funding given to schools is used to support individuals with academic progress and achievement. 22% is used by schools to support emotional health and wellbeing.
- 33 The top sliced PP+ is used to buy a variety of Service Level Agreements to support children looked after and allow schools to act in a timely manner when a need is identified. In 2022-23 (Financial Year) Durham Virtual School retained approx. £500,000. The full report gives a detailed account of how this was used.

Durham Virtual School Team

- 34 The casework team of eight has been able to maintain the high level of support for our young people and challenge for schools. The agreement by Durham County Council to increase capacity of the virtual school from September 2020 has improved our offer to schools and allowed a more targeted response to our children. This has also led to improved communications with Social Workers and Carers. The increasing numbers of children coming into care and the inclusion of Post 16 has led to caseloads more than 130 in some cases. This has influenced the decision to appoint a bespoke Post 16 Caseworker
- 35 We have continued to provide advice to parents of PCLA and those on SGO, thus meeting our duties as a Virtual School.
- 36 The report alludes to the extended role of the VSH for Ever6 Children with a Social Worker (CWSW).

Virtual School Areas for Development

- 37 The key priorities for 2023-24 have been identified through consultation, data analysis, response to the gaps COVID19 has created, the return of formal examinations and the inclusion of EYFS and Post 16 in the ePEP system. Some of our priorities will roll over from 22/23 due to the needs of children looked after which are ongoing.

Continuing Priorities

- 38 We will continue to support more children to achieve higher levels / greater depth in KS2 and KS4 through early intervention and release

catch up funding during the Autumn term. Close the gaps emerging in KS1.

- 39 Continue to increase the focus on attendance for children looked after. Working in partnership with the Attendance Improvement Team (AIT) and Social Care to promote a positive ethos around attendance.
- 40 Continue to support Post 16 to reduce NEET data through a collaborative approach and by drawing upon the expertise within the Progression and Learning Team.
- 41 Further strengthen links with CICC, working towards the Investing in Children Award.
- 42 Continue to contribute to an increasingly integrated and joined-up process with health and social care teams to provide a holistic and cohesive approach to support readiness to learn whilst ensuring children looked after have stability in their education setting. Ensure a robust system is in place to increase school stability through monitoring and challenge.
- 43 Further embed the work for Ever6 CWSW through extended role of the VSH having a strategic lead with this cohort of children.

New Priorities for 23/24

- 44 Develop work with Children's Homes to support school anxiety and other barriers to education. Drawing on the expertise of the therapeutic services we make available to schools.
- 45 Appoint a Previously Child Looked After Officer to strengthen the Virtual Schools offer.
- 46 Develop ways of working with the UASC cohort to offer a package to support earlier access into education.
- 47 Develop a cohesive system for children looked after who require Statutory Assessment and require an EHCP. Produce a process that everyone can work towards to ensure needs are met in a timely manner.

Author

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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 children looked after.

Finance

De-Delegated funding from Maintained Primary Schools is no longer available to the Virtual School to provide additional behaviour support in school through the Behaviour Intervention Team. Additional burdens grant determination funding of £78,068 has been allocated to Durham to support the work of the Virtual School head with previously looked after children for 2022/23. Additional catch-up funding and National Tutoring Funding to support gaps in learning for some children looked after to be distributed to schools in addition to Pupil Premium Plus.

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

We adhere to the Council Policies on climate change.

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 children looked after to find the right setting to support their needs and promotes high attendance in school.

Staffing

The seconded post for developing the offer for previously looked after children has become a permanent post of children looked after and PCLA Manager. The increase of 4 children looked after PEP caseworkers to 7. A children looked after Front Door Manager to strengthen the offer to schools and children looked after. Due to the increase in the numbers of children coming into Care and the pressure this places on the number of cases the existing Caseworkers manage it has been necessary to use the top sliced PP+ to appoint a new children looked after PEP Caseworker. Due to our duties to the Post 16 cohort, we have also used this funding to appoint a bespoke Post16 Caseworker This will have implications upon the wider offer to schools as we review our existing Service Level Agreements.

Due to the additional responsibilities given to Virtual Heads from September 2021 both the children looked after /PCLA Manager and Front Door Manager have taken on extra responsibilities to allow the VSH to meet the requirements of the role and accountability for children in need / child protection. They now have an upgrade in salary funded through Grant 31.

Accommodation

The Virtual School Team is based at the Education Development Centre, Spennymoor. 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 the three members of staff at the Inclusion Base. The Base is an asset and supports children looked after in times of crisis and helps to avoid permanent exclusions. Currently these staff are funded through Pupil Premium Plus.

Procurement

The contract with Welfare Call was renewed in March 2022. It would not have been wise to change the provider for the ePEP system due to the system we have established with schools and Social Care.

Appendix 2: Virtual School Annual Report 2022/2023

Attached as a separate document.