

## Corporate Parenting Panel

17 January 2025

## Virtual School Annual Report Summary



### Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services, DCC

#### Electoral divisions 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 2023-2024. (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 April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024 – 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 evidenced through formal examinations for Key Stages 2 and 4. Good attendance, few suspensions, high aspirations, strong vocational and academic pathways, and effective preparation for adulthood continue to be evident for most CIC. 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 CIC. At the same time, we are taking our extended duties seriously and have developed strong working practice

for those who are previously children in care or a child with a social worker (CWSW) through the Grant 31 funding to strengthen the workforce in these areas.

## **Recommendations**

- 4 It is recommended that members of the Corporate Management Team note the contents of the full annual report.
- 5 The virtual school head should ensure that children and young people in our care 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.

## Background

- 7 As of July 2024, there were 779 Durham children in care of statutory school age (SSA). This is an increase of 1.7% from the same time 2023. 48.7% were of primary age and 51.3% were of secondary age. The gender split across SSA and Post 16 is 41.36% female and 58.64% male. The more marked difference, however, is in P16, where 70% are male and 30% are female.
- 8 22% of children and young people (R - yr. 11) attend out of county schools; this is an increase of 0.34% from last year. 75.7% are educated in schools based in County Durham. A further 2.3% of children were not in a provision and a number of these were in care placements outside of the local authority. The number not in a provision 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 45 other local authorities, although a significant number of these are placed in our neighbouring local authorities.
- 9 As of July 2024, 77.8% of the cohort attended a school with an Ofsted judgement of good or better and 9.6% 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. 80 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 LA will work closely with these schools to improve provision. As a virtual school we provide additional tuition and scrutiny to all schools, as required.
- 10 At the end of July there were 22 UASC children of statutory school age on the roll of the VS. 16 attended schools outside of the local authority for care reasons. This brings additional challenges when seeking a school placement. 18 were in Year 11, all of whom had a Post 16 destination organised.
- 11 In 2023-2024 there were 69 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 32 were suggested, but challenged by the Virtual School and therefore did not take place.* 25% of school moves were to support moving to a permanent placement or due to distance, while 13% were due to a child

leaving care on an Adoption Order or SGO. 13% were due to a Care Placement breakdown, and 26 % because of a Care led decision, this has become the most significant factor 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.

- 12 171 (22%) of the school age cohort were educated out of the boundaries of County Durham in 2023-24. This remains roughly in line with figures from previous years.
- 13 According to the Spring Census 2024, there are currently 1045 children previously in care on roll in Durham schools (maintained). This reflects an increase of 46 children from January 2023. This is a rise of 4.4% from 2023. The Virtual School offers support and advice to adopters, guardians, kinship carers and schools for this cohort of children. Schools receive Pupil Premium Plus (£2570) directly into their budget in April each year if the child has been identified on their October Census. To provide a high-quality service a Child Previously in Care Officer has been appointed to the Virtual School, funded through Grant 31.
- 14 Children in care (12 months on 31 March) are over three and a half times as likely to have an identified SEN and eight times more likely to have an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than all children. Nationally in 2023, 58.1% of children in care had a special educational need compared to 17.1% of all children. In Durham 2023-24, 54.81% of children and young people (R-Y11) had identified special educational needs requiring either a SEN support plan or an EHCP; 22.85% were supported by an EHCP whilst 31.96% had school SEN support plans (K code). There is a slight increase 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 DT/SENCO from the secondary school will attend the Summer PEP for any child at a transition point.
- 15 The primary SEN need of CIC of statutory school age is SEMH. 45% of the CIC SEND cohort are identified as having SEMH, with 19.1% having

a moderate learning difficulty, 12.92% identified as autistic, (this is probably much higher due to the time it takes to identify this need; several children will be identified as being on the pathway) and 3.37% a speech, language, and communication need. This influences the way in which the virtual school directs the top slice PP+ money into the support we offer our schools through the service level agreements made available at no cost to schools.

## **Headline Outcomes 2024**

- 16 There was not an expectation to report on KS1/Year 2 SATs in 2024. The government announced, “these tests are now optional and are no longer a statutory requirement”. Based upon this guidance the VS have not reported on KS1 optional tests this year.
- 17 The reporting cohort in Year 6 was 51; there were 24 boys and 27 girls in the reporting cohort. 45 of the reporting cohort attended schools in Durham, with the other 6 attending schools outside of the local authority. 33 (65%) had SEN, an increase of 18% from 2023, with 10 having an EHCP and 23 with an SEN support plan. The prevalence of SEND needs were slightly higher in girls than boys. Boys have generally performed better or in line with girls across all areas apart from in matching all measures R/W/M where only 29% of boys achieved the expected standard compared to 41% of girls. Girls do account for the highest prevalence of SEND, with Cognition and Learning being the primary need. Maths is an area for development, although boys outperformed girls, only 4 children achieved this at greater Depth. Outcomes in Reading this year are above both the Durham and national figures from 2023 and in line with those in writing for the same years.
- 18 There were 83 young people in the Year 11 reporting cohort, which consisted of 51.8% boys and 48.2% girls. 53 had identified SEN, an increase of 16 from 2023, 64% of the group. 29 had an EHCP, increase of 9, 35% of the reporting cohort, 59% were on the roll of a mainstream Secondary, 9% less than 2023. 18% of young people attended a Maintained/Academy Special School, with a further 10% placed in an Independent Special School. The percentage in special schools has increased 6% from last year. 18 young people followed a curriculum that did not include GCSEs in Maths and English. Of these, all but 4 had SEN, with 12 having an EHCP. All followed a curriculum appropriate to their needs including teaching in literacy and numeracy. 5 young people (6%) attended an Ofsted Registered Alternative Provision.
- 19 The context of the Year 11 cohort has impacted upon the outcome measures. Although slightly above in English 4 – 9 grades from last year, we have seen a drop in the 4 – 9 English/Maths basics measure. This was in part due to the drop in those achieving 4 – 9 in Maths.

Results indicate that unlike last year, where our boys and girls performed equally well in achieving 4+ in English, this year the girls outperformed boys significantly in this subject. Maths dipped significantly from last year, with performance by both boys and girls significantly lower than last year. We have had a significant number disengaged from education and a continued number of persistent absentees, which we believe have impacted on grades. Overall attendance for the Y11 cohort was 76.3%. It is important to acknowledge that due to the change in cohorts it is very difficult to compare each year's performance and consideration needs to be given to the challenges faced in each year.

- 20 Results indicate that our girls outperformed boys significantly in English, this year performance showed 24% of girls achieved 9-4, compared to 10% of boys. 9% of boys and 9% of girls achieved 9-4 in Maths. 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.
- 21 Early indication shows that 17 Care Leavers achieved A Levels or other BTEC equivalents in August 2024. Intended destinations show that all have secured and accepted a university place.

### **Attendance and Exclusions**

- 22 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.
- 23 Since returning to school in September 2023 attendance of children looked after has mostly been good. Data collected in July provides a picture for this academic year. Attendance was 90%, almost 1.4% lower than in 22/23.
- 24 Primary aged CIC show a positive attendance at 95%, whilst the attendance of the Secondary CIC cohort, 85% has raised an area for concern. This is due to the fall in the attendance rate for pupils in Year 9,10 and 11. Work with Secondary settings and the EWO for CWSW will be a focus for 24/25.
- 25 71 CIC achieved 100% attendance across the academic year 2023/2024, while 361 CIC sat within the group who achieved between 95% and 99% attendance. Strategies have been put in place to address concerns when a CIC drops below 95%. The appointment of the EWO for CWSW has provided additional capacity to challenge attendance of CIC.

- 26 There have been sixty Suspensions during the academic year 2023/2024 for CIC. Thirty-Three children/young people experienced more than one period of Suspension. Thirty-Nine children attended the secondary sector, seven were primary aged children, eight children attended Specialist Provision and six a Pupil Referral Unit.
- 27 There have been two permanent exclusions. 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 Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding to avoid this.
- 28 During 2023-2024 all young people had a PEP on the Welfare Call system completed. 2,407 PEPs have been completed for 894 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 Pupil Premium Plus use and the quality assurance process.
- 29 During 2023-2024 the ePEP quality was rated as 88% Green (High Quality) and 12% 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. High quality PEPs are rising each year.

### **Pupil Premium Plus Funding**

- 30 In financial year 2023-24, the authority received £2.067 million in PP+ for Looked After Children (£2,530 per pupil), of which £1.471 million was distributed directly to schools via payments of £1,800 per pupil per term. The balance of £0.596 million was retained centrally and was used to buy Service Level Agreements to support CIC and allow schools to act in a timely manner when a need is identified.
- 31 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. 53% of PP+ funding given to schools is used to support individuals with academic progress and

achievement. 25% is used by schools to support emotional health and wellbeing and 8% was used to promote social skills.

- 33 The full report gives a detailed account of how this was used, with a high proportion allocated to support for emotional wellbeing, mental health, and early identification of need.

### **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.
- 35 We have continued to provide advice to parents of CPIC and those on SGO, thus meeting our duties as a Virtual School. This has been extended through the appointment of the CPIC Officer.
- 36 The report alludes to the extended role of the VSH for Ever6 Children with a Social Worker (CWSW).

### **Virtual School Areas for Development**

- 36 The key priorities for 2024-25 have been identified through consultation, data analysis, observations from work with schools and settings, work with the attendance team and the changing needs of CIC. Some of our priorities will roll over from 23/24 due to the needs of CIC.
- 37 Continue to increase the focus on attendance for CIC. Develop the systems now in place and build upon the contribution of the EWO for CWSW, to support schools, children's homes, carers, and social care when overcoming attendance challenges.
- 38 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.
- 39 Further embed the work for Ever6 CWSW through the extended role of the VSH being a strategic lead with this cohort of children.
- 40 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 CIC have stability in their education setting. Ensure a robust system is in place to increase school stability through monitoring and challenge.



- 41 Develop work with Children's Homes to support school anxiety and other barriers to education. Drawing upon the expertise of the therapeutic services made available to schools.
- 42 To support more children to achieve higher levels or greater depth in KS2 and KS4 through early identification during the Autumn term PEP, virtual school monitoring meetings and the data available through Welfare Call Analytics.
- 43 Embed the agreed process for CIC who require Statutory Assessment whilst working in partnership with SEND colleagues to identify how the LA as Corporate Parents can support our most vulnerable children placed outside of the LA for Care reasons, who have an EHCP.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **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 in care.

### **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 2023/24. Additional catch-up funding and National Tutoring Funding to support gaps in learning for some CIC to be distributed to schools in addition to Pupil Premium Plus. This is no longer available to schools for 2024/25

### **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 CIC 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 part of CIC and CPIC Manager. The increase of 4 CIC PEP caseworkers to 7. A CIC Front Door Manager to strengthen the offer to schools and CIC. 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 CIC 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. We can no longer rely upon corporate funding to cover the salaries of the additional CIC PEP Caseworkers and are using PP+ funding to cover these roles. As a result, schools will receive £100 less per child 24/25 and £200 less per CIC 25/26

Due to the additional responsibilities given to Virtual Heads from September 2021 both the CIC/CPIC Manager and Front Door Manager have taken on extra responsibilities to allow the VSH to meet the requirements of the role and accountability for CIN/CP. 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 and the equivalent of four caseworkers. The Base is an asset and supports CIC 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.