

5 January 2021		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
The Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for Children Looked After – Academic Year 2019-2020		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: All	
Report of: Keeley Pullen, Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children Looked After		
Accountable Assistant Director: Michele Lucas, Assistant Director Education and Skills		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children’s Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

Supporting the educational achievement of our Children Looked After (CLA) is a key priority for Thurrock Council. Every council must have a Virtual School Head to be responsible for ensuring that the statutory guidance ‘Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children’ (DFE February 2018) is implemented and adhered to.

The Virtual School monitors and supports the educational progress and outcomes for CLA irrespective of where they are placed, in or out of borough. The responsibility covers pupils aged between 3 years and 18 years and this includes those who have left care during an academic year. The Virtual School is also required to provide information, advice and guidance to Previously Looked After Children and their families when requested.

The annual report of the Virtual School Headteacher details the broad scope of services provided. The annual report has been presented to and approved by the Virtual School Governing Board as part of the meeting held on 18th November 2020. It pays particular attention to the Virtual School response to the challenges presented by the Covid 19 pandemic.

This Corporate Parenting report details a brief summary of the content of the annual report and should be read in conjunction with Appendix 1.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 The Committee approves the Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for the academic year 2019-2020 and uses this information to acknowledge, evaluate and, if appropriate, challenge the services that are provided for all CLA.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The annual report of the Virtual School Headteacher is a key document which must be produced as part of reporting arrangements. This report includes the wide variety of services that the virtual school team provides and the additional measures that were taken to support our pupils, carers and schools during the national lockdown period.

2.2 This particular report will not contain attainment data. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, all national academic testing was cancelled. Individual teacher assessed grades were provided for our Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils by their schools/colleges. In line with Department for Education guidance, schools will not be publishing their data for 2020.

2.3 In addition to the annual report, the Virtual School Headteacher and her team members provide reports to the Governing Body every term. These detail a range of information such which is provided to ensure that we are held accountable and that the delivery of services is efficient.

3. Summary of Report Headlines

3.1 Cohort Numbers

The numbers of pupils who were in the Virtual School cohort have remained at a relatively constant number over the academic year. The numbers of children coming into care and leaving care are fairly even between the two. Covid 19 has not affected the duties of social care nor how they responded to children in crisis. This has meant that children are still being placed in care or leaving care as planned.

3.2 Attendance

Our pupils' rates of attendance prior to Covid 19 were very good. The attendance figure of 96.3% represents attendance of school age pupils up until the national lockdown. There was a steady increase in attendance during the first part of the academic year up until lockdown. There was also an increase in unauthorised attendance. This was due to some pupils who came into care with existing unauthorised absence. Overall we have seen good rates of attendance and this has continued into the current autumn term 2020 as rates are 97% thus far.

3.3 Exclusion

There have been no permanent exclusions of CLA for over a seven year period. Wherever possible we encourage schools to avoid fixed term exclusions (FTE). 16 school age pupils out of the cohort of school age pupils have experienced a fixed term exclusion (FTE) during the course of the year. This equates to 7.9% of the cohort. When comparing this to national exclusion data, secondary school fixed term exclusions in the Statistical First release of August 2019 stands at 10.13%. The virtual school figure of 7.9% is still below this national figure, however, we are always aiming to reduce the number.

3.4 Pupils with a Special Educational Need or Disability

In total for Thurrock Children Looked After 39% of the whole cohort has been identified as having either an Education Health Care Plan or receiving additional help as SEN Support. The Statistical First Release data for the academic year 2019/20 for England showed that for all children 3.3% had an EHCP and 12.1% had SEN Support. This means that statistically, Thurrock CLA have a higher level of need compared to all children nationally. However, when we compare Thurrock CLA with all CLA nationally in 19/20, there were 55.9% of children with a special educational need. 27.2% had an EHCP and 28.7% had SEN Support. Therefore, compared to CLA nationally, Thurrock has fewer pupils with SEND.

The Virtual School team work closely with the SEND departments and schools/colleges where our pupils live. By closely monitoring every Personal Education Plan for our CLA and through ensuring that this plan is reviewed every term, we can ensure that the right levels of intervention are in place for our children and young people. Education plans are linked to the overall outcomes as specified in the EHC Plan. This promotes a holistic approach to setting targets and improving progress.

3.5 Children Missing Education (CME)

A child is deemed as missing education if they are not in receipt of a full-time educational provision. During the course of the academic year, the team have worked with a range of professionals to keep the numbers of CME to a very low number. The data for this is shown in the annual report section 9, page 20. We have a clear process which is followed in order to prevent delay in finding a suitable school place. Where pupils are missing education, tuition is put into place within 5-10 days depending upon the individual circumstances of the case. At the end of the academic year we had 5 pupils who were CME, all were in receipt of home tuition until a school place was found for September 2020. There were also some examples of excellent practice where some out of borough primary schools placed our CME onto their roll despite being closed. They were able to provide online learning for our pupils and as soon as the schools re-opened, they begun transitioning into the classroom.

3.6 Attainment of Children Looked After

Due to the cancellation of all testing and exams for the year 2020, there is no attainment data to report. In line with Department for Education guidance, the Virtual School will not be publishing any data linked to testing or exams. However, the progress and outcomes of all our pupils was still monitored very

closely for this academic year and particular support has been provided for those transition from year 6-7 and year 11-12. We have worked with schools and colleges to support our pupils as they move to a new educational establishment.

We have also worked with Designated Teachers to ensure that pupils who were affected by the cancellation of exams were supported and assessed fairly to provide a positive next step pathway. We contacted each school and discussed how they were going to be approaching the teacher assessment process and asked the Designated Teachers in that school to advocate for our looked after pupil. We did this to ensure that those who were making the decisions, were also reflective of the uniqueness of the situation and the challenges that our CLA face.

3.7 Personal Education Plans

It is a minimum requirement that every CLA aged 3-18 years must have a Personal Education Plan that is reviewed at least every 6 months. We require that this is reviewed more frequently and so a plan is produced every school term. At the end of the academic year PEP compliance rates were 99% with only 1 pupil who had not had a PEP within the designated timescale. This was due to mitigating circumstances and the PEP was booked urgently to ensure it was compliant. Our PEP compliance figures remain above national average and despite Covid 19, we insisted that every child/young person had an up to date educational document during the summer term.

3.8 Support During the National Lockdown

A number of measures were taken when the announcement to close schools happened in March 2020. Despite working virtually, the service adopted a business as normal approach to operations and made adaptations where necessary to ensure that there was no disruption to our roles and responsibilities. The annual report details the specific actions that were taken. A few of the key actions were:

- Most significantly the decision to maintain tuition for those pupils requesting it, despite the cancellation of testing. This was for years 6, 11 and 13. This helped to support transition into the next year and provided our children and young people with the message that their education still mattered.
- Providing tuition for the forthcoming year groups of years 5 and 10 to help them for when they returned to school. The aim of this was to ensure they would not be disadvantaged for the 2021 testing period.
- Adapting the format of the Personal Education Plan to ensure that education was still provided and monitored during lockdown.
- Ensuring that there was an emphasis on the support for transition for all pupils as they returned to education for the summer term or for their new classes in the autumn term.
- The provision of laptops by the Virtual School to key pupils, before the Government scheme was announced, to ensure that pupils had access to IT resources to maintain their learning.

- Provision of ideas, resources and telephone support for foster carers to help with their new role of educating our children and young people at home.

4. Overall Comment on the Annual Report

- 4.1 The annual report provides an overview of the broad range of services and responsibilities undertaken by the Virtual School team. This is challenging and immensely rewarding and our work focusses on obtaining the best possible outcomes for our pupils.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 It is requested that the Committee agree the recommendations and uses the reporting mechanisms to support and challenge the work of the Virtual School on behalf of Children Looked After

6. Impact On Corporate Policies, Priorities, Performance And Community Impact

- 6.1 This report relates to the council priority to create a great place for learning and opportunity.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

This report asks that the Committee notes the increasing demand of services for Children Looked After and the range of services provided as detailed in the annual report. This financial demand was increased during the lockdown period as we provided additional tuition to pupils who needed this and access to IT resources. Additionally we maintained our financial commitment to those pupils entering the post 16 phase of their education by carrying over the Pupil Premium Plus funding to assist them in college. This is reflected in the allocation of the Pupil Premium Plus top slice which is evidenced in the annual report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

This report asks that the Committee scrutinises the duties and responsibilities of the Virtual School as detailed in the annual report. No decision is required. The Council is required by s22(3A) of the Children Act 1989, as amended, to promote the educational achievement of looked after children and also for

relevant children under Section 23ZZA (1) of the same Act The Children and Families Act 2014 amended s22 to require the Council to appoint an officer to ensure that the duty is properly discharged. There is statutory guidance “Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked after children” that must be followed in meeting this duty.

7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager Community Development and Equalities

Supporting the improved educational attainment of Children Looked After targets Thurrock’s most vulnerable young people. Data is collated to understand the profile of young people supported. Individual plans are informed by each young person’s personal needs, including equality and diversity as well SEND and emotional health needs.

7.4 **Other implications (where significant)**

There are no implications as a result of this report

8. **Conclusion**

8.1 In summary, the above report details the variety of actions and impact of the work of the Virtual School team. It provides an account of the key data and narrative that council members should be informed of in order to judge the quality of the work of the Virtual School.

9. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council’s website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- ‘The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data’ ADCS
- ‘Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children’ DFE February 2018
- ‘Statistical First Release SEN 2019/2020’ Published 2/7/2020 at gov.uk <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

10. **Appendices to the report**

- Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher Academic Year 2019/2020

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