

2 March 2021		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Update on the actions of the Virtual School service during lockdown		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: No	
Report of: Keeley Pullen, Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children Looked After		
Accountable Assistant Director: Michele Lucas, Assistant Director for 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.

On the 4th January 2021, the Government announced a national lockdown which closed schools to all pupils except those deemed as vulnerable or whose parents/carers were critical workers. This report will provide members with an overview of the work that the Virtual School is doing to promote the educational outcomes of our Children Looked After during this lockdown period.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The Committee uses the information provided in this report to evaluate the response of the Virtual School team and to scrutinise the support that is being provided to our service users.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 Schools and Colleges are currently closed for all pupils but they have remained open in order that certain children and young people can attend. The criteria for this attendance for face to face learning has been identified as those who are vulnerable children and young people or those who are children of critical workers. Those who do not access school/college are expected to be provided with an online learning offer and that they are supported at home to do so.
- 2.2 All Early Years settings have remained open to all children and are currently expected to operate as normal.
- 2.3 Thurrock Children and Young People Looked After are classified as being in the vulnerable category because they have a social worker and are in care to the local authority. This means that if a face to face offer of education is possible, they can attend.
- 2.4 There are currently 267 children and young people who are aged between 3 and 18 years old who are eligible for accessing an educational placement at 137 different establishments.

3. Expectations for Education

- 3.1 It is expected that wherever possible and safe to do so, our children and young people should be accessing the face to face offer provided by their respective educational establishments.
- 3.2 For our pre-school and school age children, the social workers have discussed with their families the individual circumstances surrounding school attendance. A joint decision has been made which considers the educational needs of our CLA alongside any potential health implications.
- 3.3 Many of our post 16 college students have only been offered an online educational package by their college. This has been due to staffing, timetabling and general logistics surrounding the running of the college. Many of our students who are studying English as Second Language have been able to access face to face learning. Some students are also able to access their college's pastoral team if required.
- 3.4 During the autumn term (pre lockdown) many of our college students were accessing a combination of face to face and online learning. The online learning has tended to be for their subsidiary subjects, for example, if they were re-sitting English or maths. The core subjects studied as part of their courses have been provided face to face.
- 3.5 There has been a shift in the quality of provision offered in this current lockdown compared to the previous lockdown of March 2020. Schools and Colleges are now far more able to provide face to face and high quality online

learning during this period of closures and there is a greater expectation nationally that this is offered. There is an expectation that schools/colleges can offer a 'blended learning' approach which means that when students are sent home as part of a self-isolating bubble, their learning should not be detrimentally affected as it should be provided online.

4. Removing Barriers to Learning

- 4.1 Within 4 days of the recent lockdown, the Virtual School team knew the educational offer for our CLA. We keep weekly records for all of the children and young people in order that we know what their educational offer for that week has been. By having this level of data, it enables us to Red Amber Green (RAG) rate our pupils to know if there are any concerns or barriers to learning they may be facing. By knowing this, we are able to challenge and support as appropriate.
- 4.2 A sheet is provided by the Designated Teachers that we work with at the 137 different educational establishments who report the educational offer for that week. This provides us with a list of who is either having face to face, online or a blended learning approach. Teachers have been very supportive with this data return and should be commended for their support of this process. (Please see Appendix 1)
- 4.3 Some of our carers have requested that their children/young people stay at home. This has been relevant for those who may be shielding or caring for clinically vulnerable family members. We have supported this decision, however, we have stipulated that if our CLA are detrimentally affected by not being in school, then other arrangements must be made to support education, including consideration of a return to the classroom environment.
- 4.4 Access to IT resources has been key to ensure that online home learning can be supported. Any pupil who has not had a laptop issued has had one provided either by the Virtual School or their own educational establishment.
- 4.5 Carers have been contacted to remind them that the Virtual School are available to support in terms of educational advice and guidance and also to challenge schools/colleges if they have not been as supportive as we would have wished. Ideas for home learning activities and mindfulness resources have also been circulated to support those carers who may be wanting to supplement activities.
- 4.6 Overall there is a mixture of educational experiences that our children and young people are being provided with by their educational establishments. For example:
 - Some children are attending school but are having online learning whilst in school
 - Some are being taught in small group bubbles

- Some are attending school for practical subjects but then remote home learning for other subjects
- Some are attending in the morning and then home learning in the afternoons
- Some are working purely online and submitting work as requested
- Some are having live lessons combined with pre-recorded lessons

This illustrates that there is no 'one size fits all' approach and if the pupils are not engaging or making progress our monitoring system has enabled for the Virtual School team to respond to any areas of concern or barriers to learning.

- 4.7 We currently have 3 CLA who are without a school place at present. These students have a 1-1 tuition offer for 15 hours per week. We currently have 7 pupils who are post 16 and who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). These pupils are being offered a variety of courses and opportunities to support their engagement in order that they can access further education or employment post lockdown.
- 4.8 The Virtual School are continuing to fund additional tuition to certain year groups for those pupils who require it. These being our current years 6, 11, 12 and 13. This is in order to sustain the support required for the national testing requirements and ensure that their teacher assessed grades are as high as possible now that testing has been cancelled.
- 4.9 In terms of monitoring mental health and well-being, we are still requiring that the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is be completed as part of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) process to ensure that conversations and actions are taking place to support emotional well-being. There is a monthly SDQ meeting which takes places with social care, the virtual school and EWMHS to discuss distribution of support for mental health.
- 4.10 Personal Education Plan meetings continue to take place as normal (i.e every term) to ensure that this statutory part of the care plan is maintained and that education is formally monitored through this process. This means that we are able to monitor attendance, educational targets and assessment data to promote good educational outcomes.
- 4.11 Those pupils who are affected by the cancellation of 2021 testing will be written to so that they are given advice and guidance as to how their grades are going to be managed. We have contacted the schools and colleges of these affected pupils in order to ascertain how these grades will be allocated and to discuss any further action that is required by the Virtual School in order to support pupil attainment.

5. Use and Allocation of Pupil Premium Plus Funding

- 5.1 This grant is provided by the Department for Education for children who are looked after aged between Year R and Year 11. This fund is managed by the Virtual School Head Teacher. The principle aim for this funding it to raise

educational outcomes. Schools apply for this funding through the Personal Education Plan by creating high quality educational targets and support. Schools can apply for £1,800 across an academic year.

5.2 During the course of the national lockdowns, schools have been encouraged to continue to use this funding to support learning. Some have found this a challenge as certain interventions have not been able to take place due to the pandemic. Moving forward, schools will continue to receive this funding, which they can carry forward within their budgets, to allocate resourcing to our pupils when they are able to do so.

5.3 As a Virtual School, we are continuing to use the Pupil Premium Plus top slice amount of £545 per pupil to source additional resources such as IT equipment, extra tuition, access to online courses for NEET pupils, sourcing Educational Psychologist referrals. Further details of this can be provided in the June 2021 corporate parenting report regarding Pupil Premium Plus Grant spending for the financial year 2020/2021.

6. Overall Comment

6.1 In line with the changing nature of the situation, the Virtual School will continue to plan, adapt and respond to challenges that are faced and remain as committed as ever to ensure that this lockdown has the minimum detrimental effect to our children and young people.

7. Reasons for Recommendation

7.1 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.

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

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

9. Implications

9.1 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 this report. This financial demand has been increased during the lockdown periods in order to supplement additional tuition, interventions and IT based resources. We are maintaining our financial commitment to those pupils who are in the post 16 phase of their education in Year 12 by using Pupil Premium

Plus funding to assist them in college. Additionally we are supporting Year 13 pupils who require additional tuition to achieve better outcomes.

9.2 Legal

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

This report asks that the Committee scrutinises the duties and responsibilities of the Virtual School. 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. The government has produced “Coronavirus (Covid 19): guidance for children’s social care services” updated on 2 February 2021 provides advice regarding provision of services including education during the pandemic. It is non-statutory.

9.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

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. It is expected that all reasonable adjustments are in place to ensure that our CLA are not disadvantaged by the current lockdown.

9.4 Other implications (where significant) –

- There are no implications as a result of this report

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 In summary, the above report details the variety of actions and support provided to limit the negative impact of the current lockdown on our CLA. Once schools and colleges are re-opened, the key focus will shift to ensuring that the transition back into full-time face to face teaching is as smooth as possible and that educational establishments are providing appropriate interventions to support needs.

11. 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):

- 'Restricting attendance during the national lockdown: schools. Guidance for all schools in England' DFE January 2021
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/952443/210114_School_national_restrictions_guidance_FINAL_14012021.pdf
- 'Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children' DFE February 2018
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/683556/Promoting_the_education_of_looked-after_children_and_previously_looked-after_children.pdf

12. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - Designated Teacher Questions for Lockdown January 2021

Report Author:

Keeley Pullen BA (Hons), PGCE, NPQH

Head Teacher of the Virtual School for Children Looked After. Children's Services