

7 January 2020		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Intensive Foster Carer Training Action Research		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
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: Roger Harris, Corporate Director for Adults, Housing and Health and Interim Director for Children's Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

One of the roles of the Virtual School is to provide training to a range of colleagues including social workers, designated teachers and foster carers. This training includes providing information which enables those professionals to support the educational outcomes for Children Looked After [CLA].

The Virtual School Headteacher [VSHT] is currently participating in an exciting new professional qualification for Virtual Schools which explores support for a range of colleagues who support children in care. .

This two year course is being provided by Bath/Spa University and the National Association of Virtual School Heads [NAVSH]. The VSHT's attendance on this course is being funded through Thurrock's Continuous Professional Development programme. This course will ultimately lead to the VSHT for Thurrock obtaining a Masters Degree in Professional Practice for Care Experienced Children.

A key element of the course is to complete a piece of action research which relates to the role of the Virtual School Head. The focus of this particular subject was chosen based upon prior research into the impact that foster carers can have on promoting the educational outcomes for children in their care. The title chosen by the VSHT for this action research is 'What is the impact of a structured training programme, with a focus on key educational information, on improving the confidence and knowledge of foster carers to support children in their care?'

Details of the specific expectation and statutory guidance for training can be found in the document 'Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children' DFE February 2018.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The Committee support the structured training programme to be delivered to foster carers which is provided annually by the Virtual School;**
- 1.2 That the Committee sets an expectation that all Thurrock foster carers attend the training to improve their knowledge and confidence to support the education of the children and young people in their care.**

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The main aims of the action research were to:

- Create a structured programme of training which included power points, video clips and paper based and online resources which could be delivered by the Virtual School team
- Provide carers with a folder of useful resources, information and documents which could be kept for future reference
- To – provide carers with the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to promote the education of the children in their care.

2.1.1 The programme was delivered across 20 working hours. This was achieved by providing 4 weeks of sessions which totalled 16 hours, plus the option of a further 4 hour session to cover any subjects that a carer may have missed due to missing any of the preceding 4 weeks.

The participants of this action research were all volunteers obtained from the Thurrock Fostering team. The VSHT attended key meetings of carers to explain the course content and why it was being offered. The dates and times were negotiated prior to the training commencing. It was important that it did not interfere with the crucial times of the start or end of the school day to enable carers to complete 'drop off' and 'pick up' duties.

It was also essential that there was a clearly agreed set of rules linked to confidentiality within the training group in order to ensure that children and carers were safeguarded.

2.1.2 In order to gauge the level of knowledge and confidence that each participant had before the training commenced, a questionnaire was provided for the carers to complete. These were anonymised and carers did not add their names or mention the names of the children in their care. This is was to ensure that the strict ethical guidelines of Bath/Spa University and the General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] guidelines were adhered to.

At the end of every training session, the carers completed an evaluation of their learning and of the content of the session. This was to ensure that the course content was meaningful, relevant and that the delivery of the training and quality of the resources were meeting the course objectives and the learning needs of the carers.

At the end of the completed programme of sessions, the carers completed the original questionnaire to gauge their knowledge and confidence after the training.

3. Course Content

3.1 The course was specifically written to cover the key components that carers should have knowledge of in order for them to maximise their ability to support their children educationally and to be the daily educational advocate for the children and young people on their care.

3.1.1 The first session incorporated the subjects of: the roles and functions of a virtual school, the role of the designated teacher in schools, the purpose and content of a personal education plan and how pupil premium plus is used by schools and the virtual school to raise pupil attainment.

3.1.2 In the second session the carers learnt about the impact of carers in the education of care experienced children, how the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire is used to gauge the mental health of children, how mental health can be supported in schools, behaviour policies and how schools promote behaviour, exclusion guidance and anti-bullying.

3.1.3 The third session comprised of a trauma and attachment overview and how this affects children and young people in school including the ability to learn and develop. The session also covered Special Educational Needs including categories of need, barriers to learning and the Educational Health and Care Plan process.

3.1.4 The final session focussed on the assessment of children and young people from pre-school to A Levels. The areas covered included: the types of assessment methods that schools use, how to judge good progress and the national testing arrangements. The carers were provided with an insight to the types of tests and assessments that schools and other educational settings have. A particular emphasis was made on how children learn to read and how these experiences can be supported in the home.

4. Impact and Feedback from the Carers

4.1 There were originally 8 carers who started the course. Unfortunately, due to other commitments, 2 did not complete all of the course, but they did attend some of the sessions. For the purpose of the action research piece, the data provided by the questionnaires will be focussed on the 6 carers who attended all of the sessions and who completed the on-entry and exit questionnaires.

4.1.1 The questionnaire [Please see Appendix 1] was designed to establish the degree of knowledge and confidence that the carer had before and after the course. For each questionnaire completed, there was an increase in the carers' self-score in terms of their own knowledge, understanding and confidence. This would suggest that the course content covered the areas that carers need to have knowledge of in order for them to support their CLA. There was a consensus among the group that the training needed to be provided by an educational professional who knew the content of the subjects covered as well as being able to answer supplementary questions that arose during discussions. One carer commented that 'depth of knowledge is really important to offer training properly'.

All participants welcomed the training and felt that there was a need for a structured training programme. One carer wrote it 'gives confidence to carers to challenge the school and support the child'. Another carer felt strongly that a programme should be available and during feedback noted, 'much of the training for foster carers is based on care and well-being, very little (if any) is re – education'.

4.1.2 Each training session had an evaluation form to be completed at the end of the session [Please see Appendix 2]. When asked 'What is the most significant piece of learning you have taken away from today's session?', comments included:

'Understand my role as a carer and responsibilities of professionals'

'Bullying policies and how schools should be addressing this'

'Knowledge of exclusion'

'Reminder of impact of trauma'

'Phonics and watching the progress of my young person'

'Importance of reading to babies'

4.1.3 Overall the provision of this training course enabled carers to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence and make them more aware of how important they are in supporting our CLA in educational matters. It was a pleasure working with this group of carers as they were extremely keen and reflective about practice and how it can be developed to improve the educational outcomes for our children and young people.

Moving forward, the Virtual School would like to see this training approach become embedded as standard Thurrock practice for all carers. There would need to be some flexibility for sessions so that topics covered could be delivered in smaller subject areas. The sessions could also be offered more

frequently across the year in order to enable all carers to attend different training over a time period and gradually build up their portfolio.

5. Reasons for Recommendation

- 5.1 Our carers play a very important role in supporting our CLA and young people. The more knowledge, skills and understanding that carers can have in how to support their CLA's education, the greater impact they can have.

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 level of resourcing used to support foster carers access to training. The Virtual School fulfils a range of functions, and training is one aspect of this. The Virtual School would be providing a significant time commitment to ensure that this training could be offered flexibly across the year and, therefore, it is cost effective if carers were able and encouraged to attend.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Deputy Head of Legal Social Care & Education

This report asks that the Committee notes the outcomes, and offer its commendations, taking into account in so doing the various contextual influences described by the report author. 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. 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: **Natalie Smith**
Strategic Lead Community Development & Equalities

Supporting the equality of access for carers to attend training is essential when providing training. Resources and teaching styles, will be adapted to support needs. Access arrangements should be in place for carers.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder or Impact on Looked After Children.

There are no implications as a result of this report.

8. **Conclusion**

8.1 In summary, the above report details the action research project which was conducted by the Virtual School Head. As a result of the positive feedback from the participants, the Virtual School are now requesting that there can be a structured approach for foster carers to access training to develop their knowledge and confidence to support their children and young people in education.

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):

9.1 'Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children' DFE February 2018

10. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 - Foster Carer Questionnaire

Appendix 2 - Foster Carer Session Evaluation

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