

<b>4 January 2022</b>		<b>ITEM: 10</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>The Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for Children Looked After – Academic Year 2020-2021</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> No	
<b>Report of:</b> Keeley Pullen, Headteacher of the Virtual School for Children Looked After and Previously Looked After Children		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Michele Lucas, Assistant Director of Education and Skills		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children’s Services		
<b>This report is public</b>		

## **Executive Summary**

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. It 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. It is a statutory document which forms part of the Annex A documentation required by Ofsted during an Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services.

The report has been presented to and approved by the Virtual School Governing Board as part of the meeting held on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

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 2020-2021 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 is a key document which summarises the wide variety of services that the virtual school team provides. It details the broad scope of information for corporate parents to consider how the council promotes good educational outcomes for our children and young people who are looked after.
- 2.2 This particular report will not contain attainment data for 2021. Due to the ongoing presence of the Covid 19 pandemic, all national academic testing was cancelled for 2020 and 2021. Individual teacher assessed grades were provided for our Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils by their schools/colleges. Some validated data from 2019 and 2020 has been provided within the report to supplement the lack of data provided in the previous annual report 19/20. The source of this data has come from the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT).
- 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 (Page 7 Appendix 1)  
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. The number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) increased over the year and in particular this increase occurred in Year 11 and in the summer term. Overall our UASC data increased from 9.4% to 12%. Additional education measures were created to support these young people such as an online learning app, IT resources for those needing access and tuition.
- 3.2 Attendance (Pages 15-17 Appendix 1)  
The pandemic affected attendance rates for Children Looked After. In normal circumstance we usually have a healthy attendance rate of above 95%. However, illness, rules around self-isolation and school closures have made an impact. This has been seen across the country for the majority of schools. Overall attendance rates were 85.9% with 12.48% of absence being unauthorised. There were in total 9,077 school days lost due to school closures for the school age pupils. This is a significant amount and all efforts are being made to provide our pupils with the support necessary to support any learning that was missed.

### 3.3 Exclusion (Pages 17-18)

There have been no permanent exclusions of CLA for over an eight year period. 21 school age pupils out of the CLA cohort have experienced a fixed term exclusion (FTE) during the course of the year. This equates to 10.6% of the cohort. This is above the national figure 3.76% of all pupils in England for data 2019/2020. There is currently no comparative data of CLA exclusion rates or a rate for 2020/2021. The DFE recommends that the published data for 2019/20 is treated with caution due to the pandemic. More national statistical updates will be available in July 2022. The VSH takes every exclusion seriously and a clear process and set of actions is applied to reduce all exclusions of CLA pupils.

### 3.4 Pupils with a Special Educational Need or Disability (Pages 8-13)

In summary there are 102 school age pupils who are on Virtual School SEND register. This has increased from 88 pupils in February 2021.

This equates to 44.5% of the school age cohort (Nursery 2 to Year 11) which has increased from 39% for the previous academic year. This is high compared to all national pupils but still remains below the national average for CLA which for 19/20 was 55.5% according to the SFR (SEN Statistical First Release).

National published data for all children in 2020/21 shows that, 3.7% of school age children have an EHC Plan and 12.2% are identified as SEN Support. This provides a combined figure of 15.9% which is far lower than our Thurrock CLA data of 44.5%.

There are a number of actions we have taken during this year to support our SEN cohort:

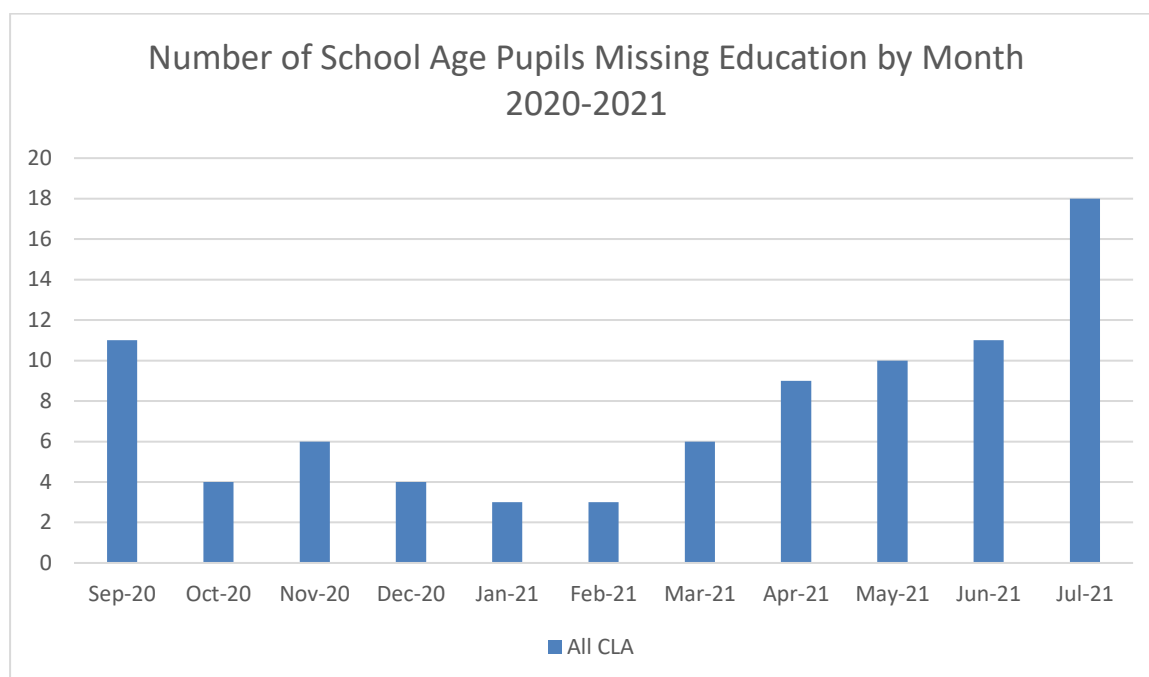
- Recruitment of a senior educational psychologist to work with the Virtual School for two days per week. This is to provide training, challenge, support and assessments where necessary to meet needs.
- Using specific programmes to look at evidencing pupil progress in addition to the Personal Education. B Squared is a SEN programme which is used to track our pupils.
- Use of the Boxall profile system to provide an assessment tools for SEMH needs and to provide strategies for interventions
- Use of the Access to Inclusion toolkit with schools to support those children and young people who have behavioural difficulties and/or trauma and attachment needs which may be a barrier to learning and engagement. This system enables practitioners to use strategies to support our children and young people in their education setting.
- The impact of these systems has been that the Virtual School has been able to look at suggesting teaching strategies used by education practitioners to be more effective and to support pupils to overcome their barriers to learning.

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) (Pages 18-19)

A child is deemed as missing education if they are not in receipt of a full-time educational provision. The data shows that the amount of Children Missing Education was affected by placement moves, so that due to a change in geographical location for care meant there was a change of school. Numbers for CME rose sharply in July 2021. This is attributed in part to 8 UASC coming into care and needing school provision.



The Virtual School has a clear policy that we should make every effort to ensure that children are receiving a good education at a school which meets their needs. Whenever a child is missing education, 1-1 tuition is provided for 10-15 hours per week.

### 3.6 Attainment of Children Looked After (Pages 19-23)

Due to the cancellation of all testing and exams for the years 2020 and 2021, 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 virtual school still maintained the programme of additional 1-1 tuition for pupils in those key year groups who are tested to help prepare them for their next stages in education.

The Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) has provided some data and this has been detailed in appendix 1 document. The latest published data set for Key Stage 2 pupils (Year 6 pupils) was in 2019 and this showed that Thurrock CLA were rated 3<sup>rd</sup> in the country for attainment in reading, writing and maths

combined with 58% of CLA achieving the expected standards.(Please refer to Page 20 on the Annual Report – Appendix 1)

For Key Stage 4 data, this was available for 2020 in the LAIT. Overall Thurrock CLA achieved good attainment 8 scores and are ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the country for this set of results. More significantly is the data relating to achieving grade 4-9 in English and maths for GCSEs with 47% achieving this and enabling Thurrock to be 1<sup>st</sup> in the national CLA rankings. (Please refer to Pages 20-23 on the annual report for data)

### 3.7 Support during the National Lockdowns 2020-2021

The annual report details the specific actions that were taken. (Please see Page 34 in Appendix 1). 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.
- Additionally we started tuition for Year 5 and 10 early so that we could prepare them for 2022 testing.
- Ensuring that Personal Education Plan meetings continued so that education was still provided and monitored during any period of lockdown.
- Ensuring that there was an emphasis on the support for transition for all pupils as they returned to face to face and a more structured timetable.
- The provision of laptops by the Virtual School to key pupils to ensure that pupils had access to IT resources to maintain their learning.
- Setting up a process whereby we could assess and monitor the quality of offer for education during the lockdown. This supported high expectations of engagement and challenged all professionals to ensure that education remained a high priority.
- Provision of ideas, resources and telephone support for any professional or family to support the education of our children and young people at home or in school.
- Creating a flexible approach to the use of pupil premium plus funding so that new approaches to school interventions could be used to support progress of pupils.
- We were still able to maintain our commitment to supporting reading in the home by providing Letterbox Book Trust resources for pupils in Nursery 2 through to Year 4. Kindles were also purchased to provide reading experiences for older pupils from Year 5 through to Year 13. Not every pupil has been allocated a kindle. Thus far they have been

distributed to those who have requested this as part of their Personal Education Plan.

### 3.8 Use of Resources

The use of the funding obtained from the Pupil Premium Plus grant enabled the VSH to allocate significant resource for tuition in order to support the progress of pupils. The allocation of IT resources such as laptops enabled our pupils to complete virtual classes and additional work so that would not be detrimentally affected by the impact of school closures or the need to isolate as part of a class bubble.

## 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.

4.2 Additional information for the Corporate Parenting Board to be aware of relates to the proposed extension of the role of the Virtual School Head. In June 2021 the DFE announced, following the Children in Need Review (2019) that, the role of the Virtual School Head is to be extended to become the strategic lead for promoting the education for children with a social worker. The DFE have provided £100,000 to Thurrock Council as part of a section 31 grant which is to support with the planned project. Thurrock Virtual School is working on developing strategy to support educational outcomes. We have currently employed a senior manager to lead on this 6 month project and will be evaluating the impact of this work in the academic year 2021-2022. The guidance relating to this extension can be found in 'Promoting the education of children with a social worker. Virtual School Head role extension' DFE (June 2021). The VSH has supplied the Governing Body of the Virtual School with information relating to the planned work and outcomes for this project.

## 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 increased significantly during the academic year in order to provide 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 (Page 26).

### **7.2 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 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. 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" (2018) that must be followed in meeting this duty. For the forthcoming year 2021-2022, the Committee will need to monitor the work linked to the extension of the Virtual School Head role for children with a social worker.

### **7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Becky 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.

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

8.1. There are no implications as a result of this report

**9. Conclusion**

9.1 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.

**10. 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
- 'Promoting the education of children with a social worker. Virtual School Head role extension' DFE (June 2021)
- 'Local Authority Interactive Tool' – last updated 25/11/2021 [Local authority interactive tool \(LAIT\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

**11. Appendices to the report**

- Appendix 1 - Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher Academic Year 2020-2021

**Report Author:**

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