

19 March 2024	ITEM: 11
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher 2022/23	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key
Report of: Keeley Pullen Headteacher of Thurrock Virtual School for Children Looked After	
Accountable Assistant Director: Michele Lucas, Assistant Director – Education and Skills	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy - Executive Director of Children’s Service	
This report is Public	
Version: Final	

Executive Summary

A Virtual School Head is a statutory postholder who is responsible for ensuring that the statutory guidance ‘Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children’ (Department for Education February 2018) is implemented and adhered to.

The Virtual School monitors and supports the educational progress and outcomes for Children/Young People Looked After (C/YP LA) 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 (PLAC) and their families when requested.

The annual report of the Virtual School Headteacher details the broad scope of services provided. It is very detailed to enable the committee and Ofsted to be informed regarding our work and scrutinise the service. It is a statutory requirement which forms part of the Annex A documentation required by Ofsted during an Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services.

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

Commissioner Comment:

None

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 **The Committee approves the Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher for the academic year 2022-2023 and uses this information to evaluate, scrutinise and, if appropriate, challenge the services that are provided.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The annual report is a key document which summarises the 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. It should be used to gauge the level of statutory service provided by the local authority to support the education of children looked after.
- 2.2 The annual report is arranged into sections and a summary overview is provided. Data references are based upon published data which is located in the to the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT). This details historical data for comparisons against other local authorities and national data sets. This enables corporate parents to compare our council's performance against others'. Other data sources used are from the NCER/Nexus reporting system and the internal data that is a live representation of the Virtual School cohort in that specific year.
- 2.3 The Virtual School Headteacher and her team members provide reports to the Virtual School Governing Body every term. These detail a range of information which is provided to ensure that we are held accountable and that the delivery of services is cost effective and efficient.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 Key Headlines Extracted from the Annual Report Include:
- Attendance rates for our Children Looked After (CLA) are better than those of all Thurrock children and higher than the national figures.
 - We have fewer incidences of unauthorised absence and the percentage of children who have below 90% attendance is lower than the national figure.
 - We have had no permanent exclusions of children or young people looked after.
 - Our cohort expanded over the course of the year including larger numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).
 - The Virtual School have responded appropriately to the challenges presented during the academic year to support the educational outcomes of those who are new into care.
 - More pupils in Key Stage 4 achieved grades 4+ in English and maths combined than in previous years.
 - Our children looked after are generally performing better in all areas compared to national CLA.
 - The impact of accessing tuition for our pupils has been positive and has supported them to achieve better outcomes.
 - Pupil Premium Plus funding has been used effectively to provide a range of resources and learning experiences to support educational outcomes.
 - All children or young people who were without a school place had an alternative education package that was offered through tuition and additional activities such as equine therapy.
 - Our comprehensive training offer is supporting educational establishments and staff to be able to support our pupils and address their varying needs.
 - Testimonials from professionals we work with have been very complimentary about the service we provide.
 - Although not statutory, the work of the Children with a Social Worker team continues to expand, and we are continuing to promote a greater awareness of the educational needs of this group of children and young people.

- There has been good progress towards achieving our School Improvement Priorities and we are using this progress to implement changes for the current academic year. These further developments include using the Pupil Premium Plus funding for post-16 pupils which we are being allocated in 23/24 to support educational aspirations.

3.2 Within the annual report there are sections pertaining to impact of actions and planned actions for further development. This should enable the committee to evaluate the impact that the service is having for those children and young people in care.

3.3 The annual report details the variety of interventions we provide as a Council to support education as well as the breadth of professionals we provide support and challenge to.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 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, Previously Looked After Children and Children with a Social Worker.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 Not Applicable.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 Impact of our service is detailed throughout the annual report. The Virtual School is part of the Council's work to support the outcomes of our children and young people. We endeavour to achieve the best that is possible. This will affect our cohort until adulthood and have an impact on their long-term outcomes. Education is a vital part of their journey.

6.2 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**
Head of Financial Management

19 February 2024

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. The scope of work has expanded for the Virtual School Head. The number of professionals needed to enact the new non-statutory duties and support the Virtual School Head are DFE funded. This funding could cease and therefore, the role/impact would have to be paired down.

Additionally, the Pupil Premium Plus funding can only be used to support Children Looked After. The Designated School's Grant and the Core Funding Provided by the Council enables the Virtual School to deliver our statutory duties. Any reduction in this funding could have implications on the level and effectiveness of the service and the outcomes of children and young people.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Daniel Longe**
Principal Solicitor Children, Adult and Education, on behalf of
Thurrock Council

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. The guidance outlines that the Children and Social Work Act 2017 established seven fundamental needs (collectively known as the corporate parenting principles) to which the local authority must have regard when they are carrying out functions in relation to looked-after children and care leavers. VSHs will need to consider how to apply the seven principles set out below to their role for looked-after children. In particular, VSHs will want to work with social workers and others in the local authority to ensure principles e) and f) are central to the authority’s ethos, and work with relevant children. The 7 ethos being: A) to act in the best interest and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people; • B) to encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings; • C) to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people; • D) to help children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners; E) to promote high aspirations and seek to secure the best outcomes for children and young people; • F) for children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and • G) to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

The guidance also provides that the VSH is responsible for supporting social workers to ensure timely provision of a suitable education placement for looked-after children. Their views should be given appropriate weight as part of decisions on placement moves. There should also be appropriate consultation with the VSH in another local authority where out-of-authority placements are planned and made. 10. In the case of an emergency placement, the authority that looks after the child should secure a suitable new education placement within 20 school days. 11. In arranging a school placement, the child’s social worker (working with the VSH and other local authority staff, where appropriate) should seek a school or other education setting that is best suited to the child’s needs.

It would appear that the report comprehensively provides data in relation to the areas identified above.

7.3 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 the young people supported. Individual plans are then created, these are informed by each young person's personal needs, including their diversity profile as well SEND and emotional health needs. This helps ensure equality of access for all.

7.4 Risks

None

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

Please see financial implications relating to Looked After Children.

8. 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):

- 'Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children' DFE February 2018
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a9015d4e5274a5e67567fbc/Promoting_the_education_of_looked-after_children_and_previously_looked-after_children.pdf
- 'Promoting the education of children with a social worker. Virtual School Head role extension' DFE (December 2023)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/virtual-school-head-role-extension-to-children-with-a-social-worker/promoting-the-education-of-children-with-a-social-worker-and-children-in-kinship-care-arrangements-virtual-school-head-role-extension>
'Local Authority Interactive Tool'
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-interactive-tool-lait>
- Pupil Premium – Virtual School Heads' responsibilities (March 2015)
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pupil-premium-virtual-school-heads-responsibilities#full-publication-update-history>

9. Appendices to the report

Appendix – Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher 2022-2023

Report Author:

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Headteacher Thurrock Virtual School

Virtual School, School Effectiveness, Children's Services.