

# Agenda Item 12.

**TITLE** Virtual Head Report

**FOR CONSIDERATION BY** Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17 June 2020

**WARD** (All Wards);

**LEAD OFFICER** Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss

**OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**  
To improve the education of all children in the care of Wokingham and previously looked after children in Wokingham.

**RECOMMENDATION**

To accept the report of the Virtual Head.

The vision for the Virtual School (VS) is that all our Looked After Children (LAC) achieve expected or better than expected levels of progress and that the difference between their achievement and non-LAC is diminished. This will be achieved through working at a strategic and operational level within the local authority and with the many partners of schools, health, voluntary sector, members, carers and young people.

The work of the Virtual School falls into three categories:

- a) Operational support for children and young people through effective local support and use of Pupil Premium Plus budget.
- b) Training for multi-agency professionals, elected members and carers
- c) Tracking, monitoring and evaluating outcomes and practice, identifying and securing service improvements.

The Virtual School has changed to include LAC beyond the statutory schooling age of 5-16 and we aspire to be a good 0-25 years' service. We are currently using two members of the Education Welfare Service to support our work with post 16 care leavers. The council has also given the Virtual School additional resources to recruit staff after the Corona Virus pandemic to make this support permanent and to improve our support for post 16 care leavers.

The Virtual School spent the last few years in decline as its capacity was drastically reduced due the number of staff being reduced from seven to two part time staff at the beginning of 2019. In this time numbers of looked after children have risen. Also, during this time, the Virtual School's responsibilities and work load have increased with the addition of previously looked after children being added to their requirement to provide support. As a consequence, the Virtual School only supported looked after children of compulsory school age. This left the early years children (0-5 years old) and care leavers (post 16) with no educational support. The most urgent need is to reduce the number of looked after children who become NEET ( not in education, employment or training) at 17 and 19 years of age as it is too high and is a significant measure of how successful the local authority is in supporting its looked after children into adulthood.

The arrival of the Coronavirus changed the way the Virtual School operated. It became an in-line service as it could not attend peps or other meetings for looked after children. The use of skype and Microsoft Teams has enabled the team to adapt very quickly to the new circumstances and most meetings have now resumed using these IT tools.

Before the arrival of the Corona Virus, the Virtual School had arranged for all carers to have access to the epep system. This is for carers to have an equal part in the pep meetings which will be on line until at least September. This is not a temporary move as carers need to be recognised as an equal partner with social workers and designated teachers in supporting the education of looked after children. It will enable carers to see the epep on line as well as help fill in the young person's section which has moved to be the first section as it as the most important part of a pep.

The pep itself has been overhauled to make it far simpler for everyone to use and reflect the current crisis.

The Virtual School now has a website (available from 1<sup>st</sup> June 20) which is a huge improvement on the one page previously available. It is growing and aims to support everyone involved in the education of looked after children and care leavers.

(ii) **ALL AGE GROUPS**

The Virtual School has arranged for a number of developments.

Schools have been contacted to ask them to report on attendance of looked after children on a weekly basis.

All looked after children have been offered an on line tutor. The Virtual School pays for on line personal tuition to all Wokingham's Looked After Children and care leavers still in education to support them with the school work being sent home. They can have 2 one hour lessons a week which the Virtual School pays for using Pupil Premium plus. We are trying to encourage as many children (and care leavers) as possible to make use of this invaluable asset.

Carers have been offered a free education course to allow them to become education mentors. This has been paid for by the Virtual School.

Carers have been given a free extensive library of resources to enable them to investigate or read about all areas of education concerned with the education of looked after children. This has been paid for by the Virtual School.

The Virtual School has been in contact with carers who have needed advice or practical help with on line schooling for their children.

Social workers have been contacted to give them access to all the on line support resources available to looked after children. They have been asked to encourage the children to make use of these and to contact the Virtual School if they find any child who is struggling with access or hardware. The Virtual School has responded rapidly to any request from social workers or carers for support.

The Virtual School has been contributing articles and advice to carer and social work literature as well as the newsletter to Independent Reviewing Officers.

The Virtual School has written to all carers and social workers asking them to investigate if their child is not currently receiving on line tutoring for the Virtual School project and to try and persuade the child to take advantage of this invaluable resource.

The Virtual School has been approached by a number of private boarding schools to offer the looked after children use of their on line schooling. This is now being made available to all Wokingham's looked after children. In particular, we are trialling a course on resilience which will then be offered to all virtual schools nationally.

The Virtual School provided all looked after children and previously looked after children with three specific on line education programmes to support their learning. They are Encyclopaedia Britannica, Maths Whizz and Flash Academy.

The Virtual School has made Encyclopaedia Britannica available to all Looked After and Previously Looked After Children. It is an on-line resource which safeguards children when they wish to explore topics for homework in that it is a closed system with no unsuitable material that a child might inadvertently stumble upon. It has proved invaluable given the need for children to learn at home.

(iii) **Early Years**

The Early Years' service has nominated an officer to support the Virtual School with tracking and supporting the Under 5s who are in care.

1 nursery child was attending school before Easter during the lockdown period.

(iv) **Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2**

Children below Year 5 who do not have a device to access the internet have been supported to buy one if necessary.

Primary children are offered 2 X 45 minute 1-2-1 lessons a week with the on line tutor using skype, zoom or another face to face programme.

(v) **KS 3 and 4**

Carers have been contacted to ensure the children still have devices that allow them to access the internet. Where there have been problems we have supported carers or social workers to resolve them

Secondary children are offered 2 X 1 hour 1-2-1 lessons a week with the on line tutor using skype, zoom or another face to face programme.

(viii) **Key Stage 5.**

Care leavers in education have now been included in the 1-2-1 on line tuition offer, to support them to continue their studies. Their ability to access the internet has also been targeted in order to ensure they are not disadvantaged.

The Virtual School is now responding to having most of its looked after children being educated at home. It has offered an on-line tutor programme to all children and care leavers and currently there are 15 who have taken up the offer. We are continually encouraging carers and social workers to sign up their children to access this as it allows us to monitor the education the children are receiving. We receive a detailed weekly report from the carers.

We have decided to keep all the pupil premium plus budget currently as so few children are in schools so sending them money would not currently benefit our children. We are using the pep system to analyse what financial support we can give children individually. Wokingham already gives every Looked After Child a free laptop from Year 5. This allowed us to offer children use of free on line programmes such as Encyclopaedia Britannica immediately and not have to wait for the government's hardware programme. Children under Year 5 have been assessed individually and those needing a device have had one supplied.

### **Attendance**

FROM 1.4.20 to 19.5.0

15 Children.

| Name | School | key Stage   | Attendance | Days Attended |
|------|--------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| A    |        | Key Stage 2 | 51.47%     | 17.5          |
| B    |        | Key Stage 2 | 38.57%     | 13.5          |
| C    |        | Key Stage 1 | 50.00%     | 17            |
| D    |        | Reception   | 85.29%     | 29            |
| E    |        | Key Stage 4 | 14.71%     | 5             |
| F    |        | Key Stage 3 | 42.65%     | 14.5          |
| G    |        | Key Stage 2 | 39.71%     | 13.5          |
| H    |        | Key Stage 2 | 82.35%     | 28            |
| I    |        | Early Years | 36.76%     | 12.5          |
| J    |        | Key Stage 2 | 72.06%     | 24.5          |
| K    |        | Key Stage 3 | 42.65%     | 14.5          |
| L    |        | Key Stage 2 | 38.57%     | 13.5          |
| M    |        | Key Stage 2 | 22.06%     | 7.5           |
| N    |        | Reception   | 35.29%     | 12            |
| O    |        | Key Stage 2 | 11.76%     | 4             |

This chart details the looked after children currently attending schools.

The company employed to track all our Looked After Children's attendance and exclusions were unable to deliver their contact beyond monitoring 10 children. The Virtual School enlisted the help of social care and the fostering service to contact every school and carer to track the attendance of our children at that time.

We now use our epep system to do this for all children and we negotiated it for free. We ask schools to enter attendance data weekly and we then receive a report telling us how many looked after children are in school.

Before Easter 7 looked after children went back to school. This is 8% of school aged Wokingham Looked After Children. Following extensive work with carers and social workers to encourage looked after children to return to school this has risen to 14 which is 16% of the cohort. Given that national figures report that a maximum of 5% of vulnerable children have been attending school, this is a rapid increase and one which we hope to sustain. Currently there are 29 schools sending attendance data every week and we are contacting those who have not to help them complete this task.

We have had to completely rethink our spending strategy for Pupil premium Plus. It had been decided to give every school £500 per term per looked after child. This is now unrealistic as most will not have had a looked after child this term. It is envisaged that the demand for extra support will be great after September and so the termly amount will not resume before the next financial year.

The spending to date from the Pupil premium Plus budget has centred almost entirely on paying for tutoring although we have also bought hardware for any looked after children who had moved and needed immediate support. We have also paid for carer training.

The Virtual School now has a website (available from 1<sup>st</sup> June 20) which is a huge improvement on the one page previously available. It is growing and aims to support everyone involved in the education of looked after children and care leavers.

The Virtual School has linked up with the Royal Springboard Foundation to explore the option of Looked After, and Previously Looked After Children, attending boarding schools where this is deemed to be the best care and educational provision for their needs.

### **Going Forward.**

- \* The Virtual School will continually monitor its structure ensuring high quality support and value for money.
- \* The Virtual School will sustain its relentless drive on raising the progress and achievement of our young people and fully utilise educational planning to achieve this.
- \* The Virtual School will continue its drive to reduce the number of Young people not engaged in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

## Background

Looked After Children in Wokingham are served by good schools that ensure most of them achieve their educational potential. The longer a child is in care, and the more stable their placement, the better they achieve. It is post 16 where Wokingham has struggled to support the education of its looked after children when they become care leavers. One reason is the lack of an officer in the Virtual School taking responsibility for tracking and then supporting the young people to choose good options and then encourage them to stick to the courses if they become difficult. The council has recognised this and has given the Virtual School extra funds to improve the level of staffing and this will be the first priority.

## Analysis of Issues

Lack of capacity to tackle the complex reasons why looked after children lag behind their peers is the biggest issue facing the Virtual School. The extra budget allocated by the council will go a long way towards solving this.

The Corona Virus has become a major issue for all Virtual Schools and Wokingham's in particular. Fortunately, the Virtual School has received support from Wokingham's Schools ICT Commissioning Service to supply all Year 5 and above looked after children with a free laptop or tablet every three years. This enabled the Virtual School to respond very quickly to the issue of home schooling.

The use of the epep system to collect attendance and exclusion data has also enabled the Virtual School to overcome the issue of losing control over monitoring attendance and exclusions at the beginning of the Corona Virus pandemic.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

***The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.***

|                                   | How much will it Cost/ (Save) | Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall | Revenue or Capital? |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Current Financial Year (Year 1)   | N/A                           | N/A   | N/A                 |
| Next Financial Year (Year 2)      | N/A                           | N/A   | N/A                 |
| Following Financial Year (Year 3) | N/A                           | N/A   | N/A                 |

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| <b>Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision</b> |
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|---|
| <b>Cross-Council Implications</b> (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?) |
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| <b>Public Sector Equality Duty</b> |
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Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

**Reasons for considering the report in Part 2**

**List of Background Papers**

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