

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Committee:	Corporate Parenting Board
Date:	15 June 2022
Title:	Virtual School Update
Report From:	Director of Children's Services

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Purpose of this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the services and support provided by Hampshire's Virtual School for children in care.

Recommendation

2. The Corporate Parent Board note and agree the content of this report.

Executive Summary

3. This report seeks to set out the services and support provided by Hampshire's Virtual School to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of Hampshire's children in care.

Contextual information

4. The Virtual School Head discharges the local authority's corporate parent role as the educational advocate for children in care. The Virtual School approach is to work with children in care as if they were in a single school, tracking the progress they make and supporting them to achieve as well as possible.
5. In 2021, the improvement seen in 2020 has been sustained in our overall GCSE results for our cohort of children in care with 33 children (25.8%) achieving grade 9-4 in English and maths, compared to 32 children (28.1%) in 2020. We had an increased number achieving the EBACC and more pupils who sat any exam, 75.8%, up from 73.7% in 2020.
6. The delivery of a high-quality personal education plan (PEP) is a key tool for promoting the educational outcomes of children in care. The PEP should cover the full range of education and development needs, outline the appropriate provision and set out the support in place for each child including the out of school hours learning. The PEP should clearly identify short- and

long-term targets, actions and timescales which will drive forward educational improvement and should set out how the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) will be used to support children's educational attainment and progress.

7. The Virtual School has a quality assurance role in relation to PEPs and must ensure they are effective, high quality and that the local authority has in place systems and arrangements to ensure they are delivered and reviewed within statutory timeframes.
8. Following the Ofsted inspection in 2019, the Virtual School Head (VSH) has planned and led work to continue to improve both our local authority wide approach to improving our PEP system and measures to drive up the efficacy of the existing system, to improve both return rates and quality.
9. The VSH led a PEP review project as a joint initiative between Children and Families and Education and Inclusion branches which was delivered by Children's Services Transformation Practice (TSC) in June 2021. The project included a rapid stakeholder engagement exercise, interviews with 15 designated teachers across all settings, focus groups with colleagues from social care, education, DAIT, HIEPs and foster carers and a survey with 279 responses, including over 160 school and 65 foster carer responses. This helped to identify the key areas of improvement and the short- and long-term actions required across the multi-agency partnership, including by the Virtual School. Following this project, we are in the process of reviewing the model of PEP delivery in Hampshire with a view to developing an electronic PEP.
10. As a result of the project, the Virtual School increased our offer of statutory training to designated teachers (DTs) to twice termly and has introduced a follow up session specifically on writing an effective PEP to ensure we continue to strengthen practice in this area. In addition, we have planned to deliver 'lite bite' training sessions across all social work districts and will be included in the induction e-learning programme for new social work staff. The VSH has commissioned more dedicated time for the school improvement service to enable more PEP auditing and feedback to schools to be undertaken as part of our 'Corporate Parent' visits to schools.
11. The Virtual School undertakes regular PEP audits every term. The key findings and themes are then used to inform our practice, planning and priorities. The number of PEPs rated as excellent for their identification of children's educational needs improved between spring and summer term 2021. In summer term 2021, we had improved our PEP return compared to summer term 2020. During Covid, we focused our PEP auditing activity specifically on transition year groups given their increased vulnerability. We have provided additional transition training for Year 6 pupils and developed a specific resource pack project for 35 children. We also delivered emotional literacy training for 15 delegates in Early Year settings. The Advisers from the Virtual College now attend the spring and summer PEPs for Year 11 pupils to ensure that appropriate planning is undertaken to support post 16 transition.

12. The Virtual School's approach is to build capacity across schools and strengthening the role of the designated teacher is central to our strategy to improve educational outcomes. A key component is the high quality of our guidance and training on PEPs delivered to designated teachers, foster carers and social workers. This is complemented by our 'Attachment and Trauma Aware' training programme for schools.
13. The Virtual School has developed a comprehensive PEP Toolkit which helps schools to identify and understand children's unmet needs and areas of difficulty. As well as supporting needs analysis, it offers practical guidance on strategies and interventions to raise attainment. This innovative tool was identified by Ofsted as enabling key professionals to understand the reasons for lower attainment.
14. The Virtual School has developed an Education Plan for Adopted Children (EPAC) and our exemplary practice in this area has been recognised in this academic year by both the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) who wish us to lead a webinar on our good practice and by the Rees Centre (Department of Education) who are interested in collaborating with us on a substantive piece of research on its impact.
15. One of the key statutory duties of the Virtual School Head is to directly manage the arrangements for the distribution of the pupil premium plus (PP+) grant for children in care. This should be used without delay to meet the individual needs of children as outlined in their PEP. Most of the funding is provided directly to schools to meet individual children's educational needs. The centrally retained funding is used to fund the Virtual School team, to support our training and capacity building and to support partnership working. Our work in these three areas makes a significant difference to the educational experiences and outcomes of Hampshire's children in care and the key adults in their lives as outlined below.

Virtual School Team

16. The Virtual School Management Team consists of the Virtual School Head, Deputy Head for children in care, Deputy Head for children with a social worker and three Education Advisers. The Education Advisers lead on delivering a full programme of training and support to designated teachers, social workers and foster carers which focuses on their vital role in promoting education. The Education Advisers also lead on 'Corporate Parent' visits to schools ensuring that designated teachers are supported and challenged to fulfil their statutory role.
17. The Education Officers lead the operational work of the Virtual School and are linked to social work district teams serving children in care. They work closely with social care colleagues to support timely admissions and to maintain school stability for individual children. There is a focus on monitoring patterns of attendance, children at risk of fixed term exclusion and supporting children when they face difficulties in school or transitions. The impact of

Covid has been challenging in the last two academic years. However, in the recent DfE statistical release for outcomes in the 2021 reporting year, our overall absence rate for our children in care was 0.3% lower than the national figure.

Training and capacity building

18. The Virtual School places a strong focus on providing the highest quality training for social workers, foster carers and designated teachers. This includes statutory training guidance for new designated teachers including on how to use the PEP Toolkit.
19. The well-established Attachment and Trauma Aware Schools and Settings (ATAS) programme led by the Virtual School has entered its fourth year in partnership with Kate Cairns Associates (KCA). We currently have 78 schools in Hampshire who have completed the specialist training. The fourth Cohort will be externally evaluated by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford as part of the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme in October 2022. The wide-ranging impact of the programme includes whole school implementation of emotion coaching to support co-regulation of children's behaviour 'in the moment,' and programmes of staff development around attachment and trauma initiated and led by designated teachers.

Partnership working

20. The Virtual School collaborates with Hampshire Futures to deliver the work of the Virtual College, the post 16 arm of the Virtual School. The proactive work of the team around the most vulnerable young people in years 10 and 11 as they transition into the post 16 has contributed to fewer young people not in education employment and training (NEET). In Hampshire in 2021, the percentage of looked after children securing a place in post 16 education was higher (97.9%) than the overall cohort (97%).
21. The Virtual School has continued to collaborate with Services for Young Children (SFYC), and this contributed to the improvement in the number of children achieving a good level of development in our last published dataset in 2019, at 51.5%. This compared with 48% nationally, as indicated by NEXUS data. We have an Education Adviser in the Virtual School with an early years' specialism who has helped us to develop a 'Virtual Preschool' model. The joint work around the training offer for year R teachers, use of the early years PEP toolkit and focus on transition into school has had a significant impact.
22. This Virtual School works closely with Hampshire Inspection and Advisory Service (HIAS) and Hampshire Educational Psychology Service (HIEP) ensuring that expertise and specialism is provided in our service as needed for individual casework, school level challenge, corporate parent visits, PEP auditing and a wide range of training. We ensure that designated teachers

have access to individual consultations from Educational Psychologists every term to support them with children facing difficulties or challenges in school.

23. The Virtual School has worked in partnership with the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service (EMTAS) to pilot an approach to provide our unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people with a language assessment and profile of needs to support their transition into mainstream school. The success of this approach led to a more formal service level agreement for 15 assessments in 2021-22 which have all been undertaken.

Conclusion

24. The Virtual School remains committed to removing the inequality in educational outcomes between children in care and the wider population of children. This means working in partnership with schools, education, inclusion services and social care to ensure we adhere to corporate parent principles in seeking to promote the educational achievements of our children in care.

REQUIRED CORPORATE AND LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	No
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	Yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	No
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	Yes
OR	
This proposal does not link to the Strategic Plan but, nevertheless, requires a decision because:	

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation);
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

See guidance at <https://hants.sharepoint.com/sites/ID/SitePages/Equality-Impact-Assessments.aspx?web=1>

*Insert in full your **Equality Statement** which will either state:*

- (a) *why you consider that the project/proposal will have a low or no impact on groups with protected characteristics or*
- (b) *will give details of the identified impacts and potential mitigating action*