

**Report to:** Corporate Parenting Panel

**Date of meeting:** 29 October 2021

**Report by:** Director of Children's Services

**Title:** Virtual School Annual Report - 1 September 2020 - 31 August 2021

**Purpose:** To outline the performance of the Virtual School between 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

**The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the report**

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**1. Background and supporting information**

1.1 The Virtual School Report is contained within Appendix 1.

1.2 The Virtual School is funded through a combination of the Pupil Premium grant and core funding from ESCC and will continue to direct the funding to support the best possible educational outcomes for Looked After Children by effective use of available resources.

**2. Recommendations**

2.1 Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the report.

**ALISON JEFFERY**  
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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Virtual School Report 2020/21

## **Virtual School Annual Report - 1 September 2020 - 31 August 2021**

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 During this period the Virtual School (VS) focused on the delivery of support to Schools, Carers and Social Workers to ensure the best possible outcomes for children who were looked after (CLA), previously looked after children (PCLA) and care leavers (CL). All interventions were designed to meet this overriding objective and used an evidence-based approach, incorporating national research and local quantitative and qualitative data.

1.2 The VS supported 419 CLA in schools and a total of 732 children and young people (CYP) when care leavers were included. We have 93 children placed out of county (22.19%). 103 children (24.5%) of the CLA cohort had an Education Health and Care Plan, 69 children (16.46%) were on the special needs register at SEN support level and 68 children (16.22%) were in Special Schools. In July 2021, there were 80 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and young people in years 7 to 13, 17 of whom are year 11 or under.

1.3 The VS was responsible for the management and administration of the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) for CLA. In the financial year 2020- 2021 each CLA was allocated £2,300. Funding from the PPG was pooled to ensure the best outcomes for our children as outlined in 1.1 and according to the school priorities. Pupil Premium funding for previously looked after children (PCLA) was also £2,300 but was held by their individual School. The VS advised schools on the appropriate spend of this grant allocation for this cohort.

1.4 Caseworkers in the VS had an average caseload of between 80 and 100 children each.

### **2. Key Outcomes**

2.1 The last academic year was a highly unusual one. The Department for Education (DfE) announced that data based on summer 2020 tests, assessments and exams at any phase would not be published. Schools and colleges would not be held to account for exam and assessment data from summer 2021 and data would not be used by others, such as Ofsted and Local Authorities, to measure performance of schools and colleges.

2.2 In 2021, pupils were awarded grades based on assessment by their school or college. Because of the changes in methodology over the past two years, trend comparisons between years should be treated with extreme caution.

2.3 National and Local Authority data will not be published by the DfE. It will therefore not be possible to issue a further briefing note outlining East Sussex's performance as compared to Statistical Neighbours, Core Cities and National performance for 2021 or national and regional comparisons of CLA datasets.

2.4 Primary Phase end of Key Stage tests were cancelled in summer 2021 and grades were not awarded.

2.5 We are, however, extremely pleased with these year's GCSE results which have shown a significant increase on last year. We are also pleased with post 16 results. Ten care leavers went on to University in September.

2.6 The exclusion of CLA from school has been a significant national issue. Exclusions have been low throughout COVID. There were no permanent exclusions last year but 4.53% of the cohort had at least one suspension. The VS has worked with all schools to support children who were in crisis to avoid exclusion where possible. This has included funding Education Support,

Behaviour and Attendance Service (ESBAS) support, Educational Psychologist consultations, Extended Support Assistant classroom support and Alternative Provision.

2.7 The admission and attendance of CLA continued to be a key issue nationally with significant numbers having poor attendance. The VS tracked the attendance of all ESCC CLA educated both in and outside East Sussex and intervened as early as possible. The 2020/21 national attendance data has not been collected due to COVID and the partial closure of schools.

2.8 The VS tracked attendance for CLA during lockdown. Attendance during lockdown was monitored as part of the wider vulnerable children group within the ESCC system and support was given to ensure that all CLA were offered school places. The VS Headteacher was also part of the Vulnerable Children Risk Assessment Group who met weekly to ensure that adequate safeguarding measures were in place for vulnerable groups of children including CLA.

2.9 When year groups returned to school, the attendance of CLA was in line with or above the attendance of all children.

### **3. Virtual School Structure**

3.1 During this period the VS employed a Head Teacher (VHT), two Education Officers (Caseworkers with supervisory and additional responsibilities), an Advisory Teacher, 7 Caseworkers (full time equivalents) and a Teaching Assistant. The VS also employed 12 casual Intervention Teachers. In addition, two Personal Advisers (PAs) were funded to work within the Through Care Service. One PA focused on working with young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and on increasing youth participation in local and national issues; the other on supporting the education of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC).

3.2 In addition, a VS Extended Support Assistant was employed to work within the East Sussex Behaviour and Attendance Team (ESBAS). This has enabled the VS to respond quickly to children in crisis and to support them in their own schools. This structure also ensured that the support offered was incorporated into the wider package of intervention delivered to schools.

### **4. Key Developments**

4.1 The quality of teaching and learning continued to be the VS's key focus. The VS's team of teachers delivered interventions across all age ranges. Literacy and numeracy remained the main areas for focus and included phonics support at Key Stage 2 (primary school) to improve reading. Most of the tuition took place on-line. The VS also used tutors from private agencies to deliver lessons, and the year 11 cohort participated in on-line maths revision lessons which included the opportunity to take part in on-line mock exams.

4.2 From September 2020 to August 2021 the VS provided both individual and group tuition sessions. Year 11s were a priority, but tutoring took place across all year groups in both primary and secondary. In total, the Virtual School funded 180 blocks of tuition. 32 blocks were group interventions. Results show that 64% of year 11 students achieving a Grade 4 and above had received additional tuition. 100% of young people recorded an increase in confidence and 95% met their intervention targets.

4.3 Partnerships between the VS and local providers continued throughout the year. These organisations mainly delivered services to young people who were not engaging with school. Eggtooth and the Education Futures Trust, both based in Hastings, and Develop Outdoors provided educational and therapeutic interventions. The VS also worked with Jamie's Farm, an organisation that offers disadvantaged young people a programme, combining work on the farm alongside the opportunity to work with others and develop a range of life skills. During the Easter, break a small group of young people spent time working with animals on the Farm.

4.4 Eggtooth also ran an on-line Art Club for children in Key Stage 2. Students in Years 7-9 attended Spring School run by Brighton University in their Easter holiday. The group took part in challenges such as an Egg Drop/Product Design challenge and a Tower building challenge using spaghetti.

*"I thought the challenges were great, especially the egg challenge. We had to find a way to throw an egg from a height without it breaking. When we threw the egg out of our window at 9.30am in the morning our neighbours laughed!" Child quote.*

4.5 The Youth Employability Scheme (YES), offered a universal service to all young people from year 10, and worked intensively with those who required more support in identifying future pathways. As a result of these partnerships there has been an increase in the percentage of young people in Education, Employment and Training compared to last year.

4.6 Personal Education Plans (PEPs) remained critical to raising educational outcomes for our children. Any applications for Pupil Premium funding to support CLA and their learning continued to be made via the PEP. Most PEP meetings took place on- line allowing caseworkers to attend more meetings, particularly for those children who are placed out of county. There has been a significant increase in the completion rates of PEPs and the VS has continued to work with schools to ensure that they are of a high quality. An audit on the quality of PEPs rated 93% of the PEPs sampled as green or amber overall.

4.7 The preparation of CLA for key educational transitions such as moving schools remained a focus during 2020/21 but sadly saw some cancelations in planned events in the same way as many wider events because of COVID. A summer school for pre-reception children took place in August 2021.

4.8 The VS continued to work closely with Bede's school to further develop the Springboard boarding project. Three students have taken up residential places this September, two in year 12 and one in year 7. We now have nine students attending Bedes school. One of our young people was made Deputy Head Boy and two others Heads of their boarding houses and school prefects.

4.9 The Children in Care Awards took place virtually last year. 80 young people aged 5 - 25, received awards in the categories of: educational achievement, positive contribution, personal achievement and skills and talents. There were 8 winner awards and 72 highly commended awards given.

4.10 The VS has continued to work closely with other services to develop the support for children's Social and Emotional Health across the Authority. Regular messages were sent out to Carers and Designated Teachers during lockdown, sharing strategies and resources to support mental health. The VS jointly ran a virtual summer conference on Mental Health with the Schools Mental Health Co-ordinator, and the Educational Psychology Service. Two of our young people presented at the conference along with VS staff. The VS has recently run its live attachment training to schools and the VS has funded over 60 places on an extended course in Attachment and Trauma.

4.11 Designated teacher training has taken place online and we held Designated Teacher support sessions with our link Educational Psychologist.

4.12 The VS funded a 10-week training programme for foster carers on 'The Empowerment Approach' led by Kitt Messenger. 100% of the reviews rated the training as excellent.

4.13 The VS has been involved in the STrAWB (Shared Training and Assessment of Well-Being for Looked-After Children) project feasibility study. This project will deliver a training and assessment package for foster carers and schools, designed to identify and support those

children who are at greatest risk of developing mental health difficulties, as well as those who are most resilient following maltreatment. It is led by researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Sussex. COVID caused a delay in the project but plans are now in place for it to go ahead later in the year.

## **5. The wider National context**

5.1 The Virtual Head Teacher (VHT) worked collaboratively with the national cohort of VHT's on a range of national priority areas.

5.2 In September 2021 the Head of the VS was given extended duties by Government to provide a strategic lead to improve the educational outcomes of children with a social worker and those who have previously had a social worker who are aged from 0-18. This was in recognition of the impact that they have had on improving the outcomes of looked after children and care leavers.

5.3 The role is a strategic one. In the first phase of this extension, VS staff are meeting with school Head Teachers and with Social Care managers to identify areas of good practice as well as areas for development and to recommend a best practice model of working.

5.4 The VS continued to work to develop better communication with local authorities across the country where ESCC CLA were placed out of the county. This remained an area of key challenge, particularly for those children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or those awaiting assessment for an EHCP. In June 2021 we were successful in our application to the Secretary of State to direct an Academy Trust in another area to admit one of our young people. The VS has continued to work closely with ISEND to develop policies and procedures to address this issue and continued to reduce the timescales for school admissions. This year we have developed provision for young people with the highest level of need who require a transition period before joining a school or college or who are awaiting a special school place. The VS has also worked with the English as an Additional Language Service and with Post 16 providers to further develop provision for Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers.

5.5 East Sussex has been successful in becoming part of a pilot for funding Post 16 provision. We are one of 30 LAs in the country and three in the south east who will receive funding based on the number of young people enrolled in Further Education Colleges. The pilot will include training for staff in FE colleges and in the Through Care Team, the development of guidance for teachers and social workers re post 16 provision and effective education planning as well as an offer of additional English and Maths lesson and personal coaching. It will also include the development of a clear policy on delivering education to UASC from the point of entry to the Authority and the provision of English as an Additional Language, language for Maths and for ICT lessons. There will also be funding for young people to take part in extracurricular activities which will support their inclusion in college life and their general wellbeing.

## **6. Governor priorities for the Virtual School 2021/22**

6.1 The Governor priorities for the Virtual School for 2021/22 are:

- To further improve the educational and wider outcomes for Looked After children
- To make a strategic contribution to the development of policies and practices that will improve outcomes for children and young people with a social worker
- To raise the profile of LAC/care leavers in FE.
- To improve attendance of LAC/care leavers at FE colleges
- To better support delivery of PEPs/pathway plans at individual/cohort level.

## **7. Conclusion and recommendations**

7.1 The Virtual Head Teacher, together with the national group of Virtual Head Teachers, to make an active contribution to the national debate regarding the ongoing DfE commitment to funding Pupil Premium Plus for CLA and PCLA, through the post 16 pilot, and to other issues impacting CLA such as the SEND policies, admissions and exclusions.

7.2 The VS to review the priorities above on an ongoing basis in response to the impact of COVID 19 on education and wellbeing in the longer term.

7.3 The Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to comment on and note the report.