

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 20 January 2022

SUBJECT: Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report

REPORT FROM: Cllr Tariq Tamoor, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

CONTACT OFFICER: Gemma Parkes, Virtual School Headteacher

1.0 BACKGROUND

- 1.1 This paper provides a summary of the work of Bury Virtual School to support the education of children in care in the academic year 2020 – 2021.
- 1.2 The Council is under a statutory duty to promote the educational progress and attainment of its looked after and previously looked after children. This duty is the responsibility of the Virtual School, which is managed by the Virtual Headteacher. Throughout 2020 – 21, the Virtual School was led by interim Heads, namely Paul Tinsley until December 2020 and Jen Mills from Jan – August 2021. This report summarises the work carried out by the team under their interim leadership periods. In September 2021, Gemma Parkes took up post as the new, permanent Virtual School Headteacher.

2.0 STATUTORY DUTIES

- 2.1 The statutory duties of the Virtual School as follows:

Duty 1: To maintain an up-to-date roll of Looked After Children (LAC) who are in school or college settings and gather information about their education placement, attendance and educational progress.

Duty 2: To ensure sufficient information about a child's mental health, SEN (Special Educational Needs) or disability is available to their education setting so that appropriate support can be provided.

Duty 3: To inform Headteachers and designated teachers in schools if they have a child on roll who is looked after by Bury.

Duty 4: To ensure social workers, designated teachers and schools, carers and Independent Reviewing Officer understand their role and responsibilities in initiating, developing, reviewing and updating the child's Personal Education Plan (PEP) and how they help meet the needs identified in that PEP.

Duty 5: To avoid drift or delay in providing suitable educational provision, including special educational provision, and unplanned termination of educational arrangements through proactive, multi-agency co-operation. Where this requires negotiation with other authorities, this should be completed in a timely manner and with the best interest of the child as paramount.

Duty 6: To ensure up-to-date, effective and high quality Personal Education Plans (PEP) that focus on educational outcomes and that all Looked After Children, wherever they are placed, have such a PEP.

Duty 7: To ensure the educational achievement of children looked after by Bury is seen as a priority by everyone who has responsibility for promoting their welfare.

Duty 8: To report regularly on the attainment of children in care through the Authority's corporate parenting structures.

Duty 9: For previously Looked After Children, to respond to parental requests for advice and information; from providers of early education, designated teachers in maintained schools and academies, and providers of alternative provision; and to make general advice and information available to early years settings and schools.

3.0 KEY ISSUES

3.1 Looked After Children (LAC) experience significant disadvantage compared to their peers. They are 2.7 times more likely to have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than the overall pupil population and more than 1.8 times more likely to require school-level support for Special Educational Needs (SEN). Their educational attainment and progress, nationally, is poor when compared to the overall pupil population. Although rates of permanent exclusion are not higher for LAC, they are significantly more likely to have a fixed-term exclusion from school than their peers. It is in recognition of these vulnerabilities that the position of Virtual Headteacher was made statutory for English Local Authorities in 2014.

4.0 VIRTUAL SCHOOL WORK DURING THE COVID-19 2020 SCHOOL CLOSURE

4.1 Schools were closed to all pupils except those considered vulnerable and children of key workers, from January – March 2020. Where possible, the advice was for LAC to continue to attend school. 86% of Bury LAC continued to attend school throughout this time.

4.2 Some children did not attend as they were clinically vulnerable, or their parents/carers were clinically vulnerable. These children were supported to engage in remote learning at home. 10% of the cohort continued to learn in this way.

4.3 2% of the cohort attended Alternative Provision and continued to attend this throughout the lockdown.

4.4 2% of the cohort did not engage with school or home learning in this period. Due to the size of the cohort, this equates to four young people. One of these was not engaged due to a placement move so the Virtual School met with Children's Social Care to expedite this. All of these young people were offered

access to counselling provided by the Virtual School. The Virtual School team met with them and their schools to see how they could help them to engage and attended all Personal Education Plan meetings.

- 4.5 The Virtual School team monitored the attendance of Children in Care in school every week and liaised closely with social workers, carers, the fostering team and school staff to ensure either attendance in school or engagement with home learning.
- 4.6 Lists of students who were not engaging were shared with social workers and managers who also provided support in addition to the Virtual School weekly Caseload meetings which continued to be held in the pandemic. Contact was made with schools/carers and changes to school schedules were discussed as well as other barriers to attendance which the Virtual School then tried to remove.
- 4.7 The Virtual School arranged appropriate tuition where this was required, finding suitable venues when buildings were closed and writing risk assessments where appropriate.
- 4.8 The Virtual School sourced, ordered and delivered 23 laptops to carers' homes for their children to use, before the commencement of the DfE laptops scheme.
- 4.9 The team provided transition support for all children moving to the next phase of their education, with a higher level of intervention for those who were deemed particularly vulnerable.
- 4.10 The team worked with Connexions, CSC colleagues and post-16 providers to ensure appropriate pathways were in place for Year 11 students.
- 4.11 An additional £500 per Looked After Child was provided to schools in the Spring term to support with COVID-19 educational and mental health recovery.

5.0 OTHER WORK OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL IN 2020-21

- 5.1 The Virtual School provided support and in several cases completed and submitted a number of Education Health and Care Plan requests, resulting in a plan being issued and the needs of children and young people being met in appropriate educational provision.
 - 5.2.1 The Electronic Personal Education Plan (PEP) system is now in place for Reception to post-16.
- 5.3 An increased focus on Personal Education Plan (PEP) completion and quality enabled robust reporting systems to be developed, enabling greater oversight and challenge from the virtual school to both schools and social workers in continuing PEP improvements.
- 5.4 The Virtual School Governing Body is now established.
- 5.5 The Virtual School deployed a school counsellor who worked with 8 young people. She attended their Personal Education Plan planning meetings and remained in weekly contact with them. She worked with them over the summer to support them with transition into the next academic year.

- 5.6 A student Youth Worker supported the Virtual School team and increased its capacity.
- 5.7 The Virtual School now has social media pages where advice, employment and training opportunities and relevant information is shared.
- 5.8 The Virtual School launched a Transition project, involving care leavers working on story work around their own key transition points to create better support for younger children.
- 5.9 Health training: the Virtual School co-ordinated training by young people on how to talk to teenagers which was delivered to 200 staff at Tower Health as preparation for Care Leaver work experience and better service provision for Children in Care.
- 5.10 The Virtual School signed up for the Imagination Library project, enabling pre-school children to receive a book every month until they turn five years old. It also ran its own Lending Library of books at the New Kershaw Centre.
- 5.11 Internships offered paid work experience through the council for Looked After Children and Care Leavers in Summer 2021.
- 5.12 The Virtual School Praise System was established; over 60 certificates and awards were sent out to acknowledge the hard work and effort young people put in to their education, together with praise postcards that were sent home throughout the year.
- 5.13 The Prince's Trust course for Care Leavers was brought to Bury. Four young people attended who were not ready for Education Employment or Training. The programme offered developmental opportunities to help them and two subsequently went on to education or training..
- 5.14 Care Leavers were involved in a Christmas event. Those who would otherwise have been alone on Christmas Day came for an alternative Christmas Day to reduce isolation and maintain contact.
- 5.15 Closer working with the fostering team was established, to be part of their social media and information sharing.
- 5.16 A consultation was carried out with foster carers to shape the Virtual School approach to training and support and improve relationships.
- 5.17 Personal Education Plan compliance systems were established that demonstrably improved compliance rates.
- 5.18 New structures for monitoring Pupil Premium Grant spending were devised and tracked.
- 5.19 Involvement in the Barclays LifeSkills project: all Year 9 and 10 Children in Care in Bury schools were offered the opportunity to participate in monthly sessions focussed on CV writing, job applications, interview skills etc. All accessed a mentor who the Virtual School trained on impact of trauma and loss.
- 5.20 Involvement in the Education, Employment and Training (EEt) forum: a multi-agency partnership approach to look at young people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) and devise plans to move them into

EET – monthly meetings held to discuss the entire NEET cohort.

- 5.21 Work with Greater Manchester on increasing support for Children in Care in criminality: better access to prisons, increased information sharing, enhanced support when due out. The Virtual School also built closer relationships with the Youth Offending Team.
- 5.22 The Virtual School attended the Greater Manchester post-16 group to increase support for this cohort, resulting in better holistic working, reciprocity, increased provision, and work to remove barriers to Education Employment and Training.
- 5.23 The creation of the post 18 action plan (using the Personal Education Plan format) so that those turning 18 during the academic year are still supported.
- 5.24 The Virtual School worked closely with the Job Centre and was involved in initiatives such as KickStart.

6.0 **PRIORITIES FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2021–22**

- 6.1 Recruitment of an Education Employment and Training Personal Adviser. Support for Year 12 on access to provision / learning programmes following GCSE.
- 6.2 Explore models to develop and expand the Virtual School team to increase our capacity and improve the service we can offer to our young people.
- 6.3 Commissioning of Speech and Language Therapist and Educational Psychologist services to support understanding and practice in meeting the individual and educational needs of LAC.
- 6.4 Through partnership working, reduce those young people Not in Education, Employment of Training and improve participation rates for Post-16.
- 6.5 Support continued development of trauma-based practice, leading to better understanding of the needs of Children in Care, early identification and prevention leading to improved inclusive provision, improving attendance and reducing exclusions for Children in Care.
- 6.6 Further strengthen partnership working across Education, Children's Social Care and partners to ensure that the educational needs of Children in Care are understood and addressed.
- 6.7 Work with Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure appropriate educational challenge and support.
- 6.8 Further develop the training offer to schools, carers and social workers, utilising the skills and expertise of professionals through commissioned services, key partners and the Virtual School Team.
- 6.9 Implement monthly multi-agency meeting to review children in Care cases that are a cause for concern, using education data ie. attendance, exclusions to target support and resources appropriately.

- 6.10 Develop information about Bury Virtual School, both web-based and as documents to ensure that partners and our young people have accessible information available to all.
- 6.11 Review and continue to improve the Personal Education Plan documents and ensure that we are able to use them to run reports and efficiently manipulate data to show the progress of the cohort.
- 6.12 We will continue to work with our colleagues in Social Care to emphasise the importance of stability in education, particularly for pupils in Key Stage 4.
- 6.13 Continue our work regarding Children in Care with identified Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) at local authority, Greater Manchester and regional level to strive to reduce the barriers our children in SEND experience with education.
- 6.14 Work with colleagues in Childrens Social Care to set aspirational targets for attendance within Personal Education Plans.
- 6.15 For those who are persistently absent, create attendance action plans in conjunction with the Education Welfare Service, and secure appropriate intervention for those who are persistently absent.
- 6.16 Integration of the Personal Education Plan and Education Health and Care Plan annual review processes.
- 6.17 Ensure that Personal Education Plans focus on the voice of the young person and that their wishes and feelings are known.
- 6.18 Work closely with the Children in Care Council to ensure effective co-production with our young people.
- 6.19 Embed the Bury Virtual School Alternative Provision Policy and ensure that all Children in Care who access Alternative Provision are reviewed every three weeks as a minimum, work towards clear targets and that there is a plan for reintegration into appropriate school provision.
- 6.20 Develop the role of the Virtual School to oversee the education of all children with a social worker, as set out in the extension to role duty with effect from September 2021.

7.0 EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES 2020-21

- 7.1 As in 2020, there is no validated external data to report for qualifications this year. Our own collected, invalidated data is detailed here.
- 7.2 There were 25 young people in the Year 11 cohort at the school leaving date 25/06/21. 22 were in care for the whole year (01/04/20 – 31/03/21) and so are the qualifying cohort.
- 7.3 21 out of 22 achieved a recognised qualification including Functional Skills or Unit Awards (95%) - above the target of 90% (national Children in Care figure 2019: 73%)
- 7.4 7 out of 22 (32%) achieved GCSE passes in English and Maths, as detailed below:

- 7.5 5 out of 22 achieved GCSEs in English and Maths at standard pass grade (4-9) which is 23% – 2021 target 25% (national CIC figure 2019: 18%)
- 7.6 2 out of 22 achieved GCSEs in English and Maths at strong pass grade (5-9) which is 10% – 2021 target 15% - (national CIC figure 2019: 7%)
- 7.7 Contextual factors affecting the results:
- 7.8 There were 4 students with EHCPs; 2 for Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH), one for moderate learning difficulties and one for a specific learning difficulty.
- 7.9 13 students were in mainstream schools and 9 in specialist or alternative provision.
- 7.10 Many of these students received additional support in the form of tuition paid for with PPG and support from the Virtual School Learning Mentor. There were some fantastic examples of personal successes, including:
- 7.11 The two students who achieved Grade 5s in English and Maths achieved above their target grades with tuition and support from the Learning Mentor. One had been through family bereavement, placement and school changes and overcame many personal barriers to achieve her final grades.
- 7.12 A young person who lived in a residential care home and struggled to motivate himself; he was on the cusp of giving up but with proactive multiagency support from his carers, social worker and the Virtual School, he managed to complete his exams and pass English plus other subjects.
- 7.13 A young person who experienced extremely difficult personal circumstances in Year 11, including a placement breakdown. She received lots of support and is now engaged in Post-16 study.

8.0 ATTENDANCE INFORMATION 2020-21

- 8.1 It is impossible to compare the attendance of Children in Care in 2020 - 21 with that of previous years; many were sent home to self-isolate during periods of school bubble closures, and many tested positive themselves or had to self-isolate as a result of a household member testing positive.
- 8.2 This data also includes some young people who have been in care for brief periods and therefore only a snapshot of their attendance data for the period that they were in care was collected.
- 8.3 The Virtual School uses Looked After Call to track the attendance and exclusions of Children in Care pupils on a day to day basis, intervening early where appropriate. Looked After Call produces twice daily alerts; any unauthorised absences or fixed term exclusions are allocated to the relevant case worker.
- 8.4 School attendance is monitored and intervention plans put in place, based on weekly caseload meetings, where there are concerns. This is particularly the case for pupils who fall into the Persistent Absence (PA) category. The PA cohort data below, applies to pupils whose school attendance is below 90%.

8.5 Persistent Absentees (PAs)

	Non-Qualifying PAs	*Qualifying PAs
2016-2017	14.3%	13.6%
2017-2018	16.7%	13.8%
2018-2019	10.1% (23 pupils)	9.7% (22 pupils)
2019-2020	3.2% (6 pupils)	12.1% (23 pupils)
2020 - 2021	4% (9 pupils)	37.1% (83 pupils)

8.6 Pupils with 100% Attendance

Table 2	
2016-2017	13.6%
2017-2018	15%
2018-2019	7.4%
2019-2020	21.1%
2020 - 2021	11.2%

8.7 Average attendance of Children in Care (CIC) with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities by category

	EHCP	SEN Support	No SEN
2017/2017	93%	92.5%	96%
2017/2018	92%	94%	96.5%
2018/2019	92.4%	94.6%	93.5%
2019/2020 (to end of March 2020)	94.4%	96.3%	93.2%
2020 - 2021	84.2%	89.3%	86.8%

8.8 Average attendance of CIC in mainstream and non-mainstream settings

	Mainstream	Non Mainstream
2017	94.6%	90.96%
2018	96.7%	89.8%
2019	94.5%	91.4%
To end of March 2020	95.1%	90.1%
2020-2021	89.7%	76.9%

8.9 Attendance of CIC educated inside and outside of the Borough

Table 5		
	Educated in borough	Educated out of borough
2017-18	91.8%	95.4%
2018-2019	94.98%	93.7%
Up to end of March 2020	93.5%	95.5%
2020 - 2021	87.4%	86.1%

9.9 Overall Attendance By Year Group, 2020-21

Year Group	% Attendance
Rec	94.2%
Y1	92.5%
Y2	91.6%
Y3	97.4%
Y4	92.6%
Y5	92%
Y6	91.2%
Y7	90.1%
Y8	85.9%
Y9	86.2%
Y10	78.2%
Y11	71.5%
Totals	86.9%

10.0 CONCLUSION

- 10.1 The Virtual School made considerable improvements to its operation last year, in particular with regard to the Personal Education Plan process and compliance rates. Children in Care were well-supported throughout the year, including during the COVID-19 school closure period.
- 10.2 Clear priorities have been identified to take the work of the Virtual School forward. Particular challenges are presented by the extension to role to include other children with a social worker. This will require expansion of the Virtual School team.

List of Background Papers: The 2020-21 Annual Report of the Virtual School Headteacher

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Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____