



**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 1 JUNE
2021**

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL HEAD (VSH)

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of data relevant to the academic year 2019-20 (August 2019 to July 2020) and an overview of Virtual School (VS) practice up to 31 March 2021.
2. National benchmark data for 2019-20 was published in March 2021 and is taken into account in this report.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

3. The Children Act 1989 places a duty on the Local Authority (LA) to promote the educational achievement of children looked after by them, wherever they live or are educated.
4. In an effort to narrow achievement gaps over time for children in care, the 2014 Children and Families Act stated that every LA must have a Virtual School Head (VSH) for children in care in order to:
 - Discharge the LA's duty to promote the educational achievement of children in care wherever they live or are educated;
 - To work in partnership with all agencies to ensure appropriate education provision;
 - Ensure quality Personal Education Planning (PEP);
 - Manage the Pupil Premium Plus funding for children in care.
5. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 added the duty to promote the educational achievement of previously looked after children. These duties are set out in the February 2018 statutory guidance 'Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children'.

Background

6. VS practice and structure is evolving to ensure capacity is maintained to meet its statutory duties and those it dispenses in support of wider Leicestershire Children and Family Service aims, for example support for Post-16 and care leavers.

Contextual Information (2019-20)

7. Across the 2019-20 academic year the number of Leicestershire children entering care continued to rise and at the end of the year in July 2020 there were 416 children of statutory school age in care compared with 400 the year before, an increase of 4%. At the same point in 2016 there were 315, which means there has been an increase of 32.1% in 4 years.
8. Whilst 107 of the 416 (25.7%) were on roll at out of authority schools, 309 (74.3%) were on roll at Leicestershire schools, an increase from the previous year when 70.25% were being educated in Leicestershire.
9. Compared to the general school population, a high percentage (55%) of Leicestershire looked-after children have Special Educational Needs (SEN). 29.08% of the full Leicestershire VS cohort had Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP); the rate for all children nationally in 2019 had been 3.1%.
10. 314 of the 416 (75.5%) children were placed with foster carers; this includes agency foster placements and foster placements with a connected person. Appendix 1 of this report details the contextual information for 2019-20.

Personal Education Planning (2019-20)

11. The Virtual School has a duty to ensure the quality of Personal Education Planning (PEP) and arranges PEP meetings for Early Years children attending a nursery or setting, in primary and secondary schools and in post-16 education.
12. The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic was felt across the whole of the education sector from March 2020 onwards, with all aspects of the Virtual School's operations affected. The planning and running of PEPs was delayed due to school closures, staff absence and technological issues.
13. The promptness of arranging first PEPs was also affected. When a child enters care, a PEP meeting should be arranged within 10 days; in 2019-20, 75.4% of requests for the child's first PEP were received within the 10-day window, a decrease from 76.4% in 2018-19.
14. Prior to lockdown the VS was trialling PEP meetings conducted over Skype, and each Education Improvement Officer (EIO) had been tasked with leading at least one virtual meeting by the end of the autumn term 2019. This had been achieved but then the Coronavirus lockdown in March 2020 had forced all PEP meetings onto a remote platform..

15. With the onset of Coronavirus in March 2020, the PEP cycle continued, but the focus was turned towards whether pupils were continuing to attend school or isolating at home, and how they were being supported with their education during lockdown. All PEPs were completed, but the disruption caused by the pandemic had an impact on the percentage of meetings being held within the statutory timeframe of six months, dropping from 99.6% in 2018-19 to 98.5% in 2019-20. Appendix 2 details the PEP completion report for the academic year 2019-20 and Appendix 3 shows the quality assurance analysis.
16. The VS promotes the participation of pupils in their education planning, either by attendance at the PEP meeting or by completing a pupil views document.
17. The number of PEPs held during 2019-20 for statutory school-age pupils rose to 1,271 from 1,116 the previous year, but the percentage of pupils contributing to those meetings fell from 85% in 2018-19 to 70.26% in 2019-20. This is attributable to the change from face to face meetings for the first term and a half, to remote meetings during the second half of the spring term and summer term. Appendix 4 gives an analysis of PEP attendance and pupil views completion.

Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) Allocation to Schools (2019-20)

18. The VSH manages the Pupil Premium for looked after children and monitors closely its use and impact, ensuring that schools allocate funding to interventions that support the individual needs of the child.
19. Schools are held accountable for the results of children in care and for using the PPP grant appropriately and effectively to support and improve their educational outcomes.
20. Schools complete a PPP plan within the SMART Targets section of the PEP which is monitored by the VS, who support and challenge PPP decisions on an ongoing basis via termly progress review meetings and data returns.
21. The impact of PPP allocated to schools during one term is monitored at the PEP meeting in the following term, i.e. PPP allocated in the final term (summer) of 2019-20 was reviewed in the autumn term of 2020-21.
22. Analysis shows that 80.5% of targets linked to PPP spend during 2019-20 were successfully achieved, although this is a reduction from 89.2% the previous year. This is in part explained by the fact that, with children not being in school for the latter part of the year, school-based interventions funded by PPP could not be implemented. Schools allocated PPP in these circumstances were able to postpone the intervention until pupils returned to school, but could not state the aims of intervention had been met or partially met. Appendix 5 details the use of the Pupil Premium Plus during the 2019-20 academic year.

Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) – Pooled Resource (March 2021)

23. The PPP grant is set at £2,345 per eligible pupil and is allocated for the Leicestershire VS to manage on behalf of its looked-after children. £400 per allocation is top-sliced by the VSH to support pupils whose educational needs exceeded the per capita grant. When the termly PPP allocation is insufficient to meet a child's needs, additional funding can be applied for from this pooled PPP funding.
24. The VS encourages schools to take on the responsibility for arranging the support required for pupils. This means that more pooled funding is allocated to schools for them to commission provision for complex cases. This might typically be for higher-cost ongoing provision such as employing a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) to provide support for effective transitions, academic progress and emotional stability in class, ongoing 1:1 tuition or agreed therapeutic input where needs do not meet CAMHS thresholds.
25. The VS continues to use the pooled resource to commission provision for pupils temporarily not on roll of a school and to fund VS book parcels, participation activities, incentives and rewards, newsletters for children and young people, contributing to the Corporate Parenting laptop scheme and to fund a bespoke service from Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service.

Book Parcels

26. Monthly book parcels are sent out to all Leicestershire looked-after children from birth to school year 7. The increase in the number of children in care in that age range means that the cost of providing parcels to every child has increased year on year.
27. The Dolly Parton Imagination Library provides books to all looked-after children aged 0 – 5 years for which there is no charge to either Leicestershire County Council or carers.
28. The Book Trust was successful in tendering for the provision of monthly Letterbox book parcels to all children in Years 1, 3 and 5 and provide parcels between May and October.
29. The VS purchases books for Bookworm parcels which go to children in reception and Year 2 between November and April and Boomerang parcels which go to children in Years 4 and 6 between May and October.
30. Comments from children and carers about the books reflect the value they put on them:
 - *“The books with maps are the best! I like reading, I would like more books.”*
– TH Year 3

- *“I would also like to say ‘thank you’ for the book parcel, it is very nice for you to send it. I hope you are doing good especially with this coronavirus going around and hope to see you again soon. I am really excited to go to school in the summer”* NT Year 4
- *“I love reading books and chapters. My favourite book is Judy Moody. It tells you about different moods”* AR Year 3



Participation Events, Incentives and Rewards

31. The Virtual School plans, staffs and recruits for aspirational educational trips and events for children in care. Many activities planned prior to the Covid-19 pandemic had to be cancelled due to lockdown, but the VS youth worker and participation officer were able to maintain contact with the children and young people they had been working with before and also organised virtual activities which took into account all the restrictions.
32. The Leicestershire Communities and Wellbeing Heritage Service arranged a series of events called 'Terrible Tales in Leicestershire' for Looked After Children and their foster-siblings across Leicestershire museums. These had started in summer 2020 but had to be put on hold due to further lockdowns. They are now due to re-commence from 17 May 2021.
33. Foster carers and their children were invited to the VS Forest School sessions which took place in Loughborough on 5 and 19 December. The two sessions were attended by 14 children, who were delighted to attend and enjoyed all the activities on offer.
34. The feedback was very positive from carers and children:
 - “Loved making popcorn and Peggy people”

- “Enjoyed being around other people and a range of activities for the children”
 - “Range of child-centred activities and very well run”
 - “Den building, hammocks, hot chocolate, thank you so much.”
 - “Camp fire, cooking, enjoying the wildlife, loved it thank you”.
35. The VS Community Support Officer has run an online Year 5 Reading group to help the children develop their comprehension and inference skills. This has been so successful that sessions have been extended and a new book will be selected to read. The first book shared was “The Boy at the Back of the Class” by Onjali Q Rauf. The children engaged well, taking turns to read aloud, and discussing what they had read and predicting what might happen next.
36. Reports on activities can be viewed on the VS website in the Latest News section: <https://resources.leicestershire.gov.uk/leicestershire-virtual-school>
37. The VS provides reward shopping vouchers to all pupils who have achieved qualifications in the preceding year. These are distributed, along with a letter from the Assistant Director for Children’s Social Care and a card from the VSH and Head of Corporate Parenting.

Newsletter

38. A combined Corporate Parenting and Virtual School newsletter is sent to all children and young people to promote their involvement in aspirational and educational experiences and to celebrate their successes. The Spring 2021 Virtual School and Corporate Parenting newsletter is attached as Appendix 6.

Corporate Parenting laptop scheme

39. The VS transfers some PPP funding to Corporate Parenting to support the allocation of laptops to children and young people in care who would otherwise not have access to one.

Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service

40. The VS commissions dedicated Educational Psychologist work from Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service (LEPS); this work supports timely EHCP assessments and delivers individualised advice to schools on specific strategies.

VS Support for Previously Looked-After Children (2019-20)

41. The number of requests for advice and information relating to the education of previously looked-after children has risen steadily since the introduction of the role in 2017.

42. During the academic year 2019-20 the VS recorded 223 contacts relating to the education of previously looked-after children, almost one every working day of the year:
 - a. 154 telephone calls
 - b. 54 emails
 - c. 15 meetings
43. Meetings took place in school and aimed to resolve situations that had reached a critical point. The VS role was to facilitate effective and cordial communication between the school and parents and provide advice and information relevant to the situation, so that appropriate strategies could be agreed and implemented to support the child.

VS Support for Early Years (2019-20)

44. The VS took on the role of supporting Early Years looked-after children from the Early Years Team at the start of the 2019-20 academic year. The increase in the number of children in this cohort since then reflects the rise in numbers across the age range, increasing from 38 children in settings at the start of the academic year to 68 at the end. This cohort is supported by a 0.5 fte VS Primary Officer.

VS Support for Post-16 young people and Care Leavers (2019-20)

45. Priority is given to ensure all young people at the end of KS4 (age 16) have an identified destination and remain in Employment, Education or Training (EET) during subsequent years.
46. Leicestershire County Council careers advisors from the Education Quality and Inclusion service are invited to the spring term PEP meetings of pupils whose destination is not yet confirmed.
47. College Designated Persons (DP) for looked after children are invited to the summer PEP meeting of Year 11 pupils whose college destination is known to ensure that plans are in place for a smooth transition into college.
48. Transition plans for young people moving from school to college for the new academic year starting in September 2021 were disrupted by Covid-19, with access to college sites and physical visits being restricted, leading to young people being unable to get to know colleges and key members of staff who provide support.
49. After the uncertainty around exam results, much support was delivered to young people needing help with their choice of course and subsequent college enrolment.

50. As a result of social distancing requirements, a lot of college-based, practical courses have not been able to accommodate the same number of students as before, so places have been reduced and it has been harder to get on courses. This also has an impact on opportunities to change to a different course should the original choice not be working out.
51. Post 16 Education Improvement Officers (EIO) were involved with a lot of troubleshooting and addressing difficulties and there has been much more demand for post-16 PEP meetings early in the term.
52. Close links have been established with all local colleges and the VS arranges and chairs termly meetings attended by Designated Persons (DP) from them all. The DP role is not statutory; however colleges see the benefit it accords their looked after children and support their staff in attending DP forum meetings arranged for them.

VS Support for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) (2019-20)

53. The VS has the same responsibilities for UASC as it does for any other Leicestershire looked-after child or care leaver, starting with the identification of appropriate education provision and monitoring of progress once enrolled.
54. The numbers of UASC entering care each year has remained consistent since 2017-18, when 19 young people entered care. In 2018-19, the figure was the same and in 2019-20 it was 17. In total, at the end of academic year 2019-20, there were 69 UASC in care and care leavers.
55. The VS has now produced a booklet to help schools to understand the experiences and needs of UASC entitled 'Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children at School'. The UASC Virtual School leaflet is attached at Appendix 7.

Virtual School Training (March 2021)

56. The VS has a portfolio of training that improves school and college staff (including governors'), social workers', carers' and adoptive parents' understanding of the needs of children and identifies strategies to support them.
57. The attachment and trauma and emotion coaching training is well-received by attendees and demand for it is high. However in the year to March 2021 the VS delivered fewer sessions of whole school Attachment and Trauma training, as adapting to delivery via online platforms took some time whilst software and connectivity issues were addressed. Using Microsoft Teams has made things easier and training is now delivered on a regular basis.
58. Between September 2020 and March 2021, the VS delivered training as follows:

- Attachment and Trauma training to nine schools/mixed staff groups (2 x one-hour sessions) *
- Induction Training for Designated Teachers of looked-after children and previously looked-after children in October and February
- Emotion Coaching training to foster carers
- Training to governors
- Training to social workers in October and January
- PEP workshop for DTs

* Staff were invited from any Leicestershire school there has been enquiries from regarding adopted children.

59. The VS has further bookings for the summer term for Attachment and Trauma training, Early Years training, Emotion Coaching to foster carers, Transition to School training and DT Induction training.
60. Whereas in face-to-face sessions, all participants would complete an evaluation form before they left, the VS is now reliant on attendees completing online evaluation forms which are not completed so comprehensively. However, feedback continues to be positive for all training with 99.9% judging it 'useful' or 'very useful' and would recommend it to others.
61. The VS continuously updates its training and has devised a resource booklet which will be sent out after all Attachment and Trauma training.
62. "Key Adult" and "Principles of Theraplay" courses are very practical and cannot be delivered effectively via an online platform and so training sessions have been postponed until they can be delivered face-to-face.

Virtual School Regional and National Work:

63. The VSH has strong peer support mechanisms in place through the regional East Midlands Virtual School Heads forum. The Leicestershire VSH remains the regional representative on the board of the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) which works closely with the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted and other government institutions to shape national policy, practice and legislation.
64. The NAVSH network enables the VS to seek from, and give support to, any of the other 151 local authority virtual school heads across the country, particularly in relation to children placed out of authority.

Key Stage Test and Examination Results for Children in Care (2019-20)

65. National curriculum assessments and review outcomes at key stage 2, including measures of progress between key stages 1 and 2 were cancelled due to Covid-19.

66. The DfE publication “Outcomes for Children in need, including children looked after by Local Authorities in England - March 2021” offers the following advice when viewing 2019-20 examination data:

“The cancellation of summer 2020 GCSE exams and the new method of awarding grades has led to a set of pupil attainment statistics that are unlike previous years. Each of the pupil level attainment statistics have increased - more than would be expected in a typical year.... This reflects the change to the way GCSE grades were awarded rather than improvements in pupil performance. As a result, the 2019/20 data should not be directly compared to attainment data from previous years for the purposes of measuring changes in student performance.”

67. References to VS children in care include pupils being educated in schools both within and beyond Leicestershire (the VS cohort) and figures are for those in care continually for at least 12 months as at 31 March 2020.
68. Instability, high levels of complex needs and length of time in/point of entry into care remain key factors influencing GCSE attainment at Key Stage 4. High numbers of pupils with SEND and the small numbers within cohorts also need to be taken into account when attempting comparisons with other groups.

2019/20: Headline Summary Children in Care Attainment against Key Measures:

	2019/20
KS4 Attainment 8	23.9
KS4 Achieving a pass in English and Maths GCSEs (Grade 9-4 pass)	27.9%
KS4 Achieving a pass in English and Maths GCSEs (Grade 9-5 pass)	16.3%
KS4 English Baccalaureate Average point score	1.44

69. As in previous years, there are many individual examples of success at key stage 4, and a good proportion of students achieving grade 9–4 in both English and Maths. Final exam data for 2019-20 is attached at Appendix 8 and the national and regional looked after children exam results for 2019-20 are attached at Appendix 9.

Attendance and Exclusions (2019-20)

70. Reporting is prompt and supported by the use of Welfare Call alerts; weekly and ongoing attendance and exclusion reports allied to termly Social, Emotional and Mental Health RAG reports from schools enable the VS to robustly monitor and support this agenda and respond to issues arising. The

latter end of the academic year was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and impacted both attendance and exclusion data, rendering it impossible to make comparisons with previous years.

71. Even after some pupils returned to school in the summer term, the closure of individual “bubbles” in schools affected data and had an impact on learning.
72. Each VS EIO is responsible for monitoring and challenging attendance and exclusions of their own caseload of pupils. After the March 2020 school closures due to lockdown, the VS cross-referenced data provided by Welfare Call with that collected directly from schools by Leicestershire County Council. The VS EIOs then contacted schools and carers to record what education was being accessed by looked-after children whether in school or at home and sign-posted other appropriate resources.
73. In lockdown, looked-after children were in the category of “vulnerable children” for whom schools would remain open. As corporate parents, the local authority had a duty to make a judgement on whether a child should physically attend school, depending on what was in the best interests of each individual child. The priority was the stability of care placement and ensuring that all children and young people remained safe, healthy and happy. The decision, taken in consultation with carers, social workers, schools and the VS, assessed the emotional well-being of the child, their health and that of their carers and foster siblings.
74. There have been no permanent exclusions of children in care for several years – this is the result of collaborative work across schools/settings and Behaviour Partnerships with the VS.
75. The VS continues to work closely with schools and education services to address concerns around exclusions and behaviour management, developing understanding of children’s needs and strategies to address them. The VS promotes its attachment and trauma training to school senior leadership teams and advises on alternatives to exclusion. Attendance and exclusion analysis for the 2019-20 academic year is attached at Appendix 10.

School Admission (March 2021)

76. The VS and Leicestershire Admissions Service have collaborated to produce a Leicestershire looked after children Admissions protocol. This sets out the Admissions process for Leicestershire Looked-After Children without an EHCP applying for school places in Leicestershire mainstream schools and academies. It sits in line with the DfE Admissions code (including the draft new guidance) and clarifies timelines and the local authority’s expectations of

mainstream schools and academies when an in-year application for a school place is submitted for a Leicestershire looked after child.

77. The aim of the protocol is to inform people of where responsibilities lie so there is a clear understanding of what actions will be undertaken by whom and by when so that delays in accessing school places for Leicestershire looked after children are minimised. It has been shared with social workers and Leicestershire schools.
78. It promotes good practice established over the years and highlights the importance of speaking directly to a prospective school about the pupil's needs and the support the VS can offer. The process works well where staff and senior leadership have a good understanding of attachment and trauma issues and are able to work collaboratively with the VS. The LCC looked after children admissions protocol is attached at Appendix 11.

Future Planning

Leicestershire Virtual School Priorities

79. The VS Service Delivery Plan reflects the ambitions and ethos of the Children and Family Service Departmental plan. The five priorities and actions underpinning them are under constant review throughout the year.
- i. To raise the aspirations of and for looked-after children (LAC) and previously looked-after children (PLAC)
 - ii. To narrow progress and attainment gaps
 - iii. To improve stakeholders' understanding of the educational needs of children in care and those adopted from care and strengthen their support of education
 - iv. To ensure the views of children and young people are heard, recorded and inform decisions regarding their education.
 - v. To maintain a vibrant, informed and knowledgeable team
80. National developments in the education landscape will always have implications for virtual schools and their support for vulnerable children, for example changes to the Ofsted framework for the inspection of schools; Timpson review of exclusions; Review of Children in Need, Post-16 PPP, all of which have been put on hold during Covid-19.
81. Problems arising over the past year have been dealt with in a creative manner and it is important that the solutions implemented are not discarded with an easing of measures. Therefore the VS will be pursuing the opportunity to retain its use of technology to increase efficiency and promote its continued use in schools where it is to the benefit of pupils.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Contextual Information 2019-20



Appendix 1 VS
Contextual Informati

Appendix 2: PEP Completion Report for Academic Year 2019-20



Appendix 2 PEP
Completion Report fo

Appendix 3: Quality Assurance Analysis



Appendix 3 Quality
Assurance Analysis -

Appendix 4: Analysis of PEP attendance and pupil views completion



Appendix 4 Analysis
of PEP attendance an

Appendix 5: Use of Pupil Premium Plus Academic Year 2019-20



Appendix 5 Use of
Pupil Premium - Acac

Appendix 6: Spring 2021 Virtual School and Corporate Parenting Newsletter



Appendix 6 2021
Spring Virtual School

Appendix 7: UASC Virtual School leaflet



Appendix 7 UASC
virtual school leaflet C

Appendix 8: Final Exam data 2019-20



Appendix 8 Final
Exam Data 2019-20 -

Appendix 9: National and regional looked-after children Exam results 2019-20



Appendix 9 National
and Regional Childrer

Appendix 10: Attendance and exclusion analysis Academic year 2019-20



Appendix 10
Attendance and Exclu

Appendix 11: LCC LAC Admissions protocol



Appendix 11 2020-12
LCC LAC Admissions |

Background Papers

Statutory Guidance – Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked-after children:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

Circulation Under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

Equality and Human Rights Implications

There are no equality or human rights implications arising from this report.

Officer to Contact

Tony Barnard

Virtual School Head,

Leicestershire Virtual School,

Children and Family Services,

Leicestershire County Council.

Tel: 0116 3056460

tony.barnard@leics.gov.uk