

1st November 2021

Agenda Item: 12

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, LEARNING AND SKILLS

EXTENDED DUTIES OF THE HEAD OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Purpose of the Report

1. To seek approval of the proposed use of the Extended Duties Grant by the Virtual School.

Information

Role of the Virtual School

2. The Virtual School's Senior Leadership Team oversees the strategic and operational working practices of the team. This leadership team currently comprises the Head of the Virtual School, who is also the Local Authority's Group Manager (Psychology Services), the Assistant Head of the Virtual School (job share) and the Senior Educational Psychologist for *Our Children*. The term 'Our Children' refers to the cohort of children and young people who are in Care to the Local Authority. It is synonymous with 'Children in Care' and 'Looked After Children', and is the preferred way that *Our Children* like to be referred to. The wider team includes a Virtual School Data Officer, and five Achievement Officers. The number of Achievement Officers has been increased from four to five as a consequence of the statutory extended duties supporting previously Looked After Children.
3. When compared with other local authorities, Nottinghamshire's Virtual School team remains relatively small in size. This is both the justification and the rationale for the Virtual School to be focused on building capacity in schools through strong partnership working, rather than the Virtual School carrying primary responsibility at an individual child casework level. Within an increasingly 'schools-led' and academised education system, it is essential that the Virtual School promotes a clear, shared vision for developing systems capacity and accountability through strong partnership working, thereby securing good quality educational provision and outcomes for Our Children. Headteachers and governing bodies retain the responsibility for the educational outcomes of Our Children, and the Virtual School holds them to account when progress stalls or provision is not meeting need.
4. In 2019 the role of the Virtual School was extended to include the provision of advice to the parents of children who had previously been in care. In Nottinghamshire the strategic response was to develop a website of resources which not only Designated Teachers in

schools could access, but also which young people and their parents and carers could access independently. This website provision was supplemented by additional Achievement Officer capacity so that advice and guidance could be sought during the week in office hours by phone and by email. The response to these requests for advice and guidance then informed the resources made available on the Virtual School website. Finally, the additional grant funding which came with these extended duties was used to extend the training offer made available to Designated Teachers.

The further extension to the role of the Virtual School (Head)

5. The extended duties of the Virtual School as they relate to promoting the educational outcomes of the cohort of children who were assessed as needing a social worker at any time due to safeguarding and/or welfare reasons, which includes all those subject to a Child in Need plan or a Child Protection plan. This includes children aged from 0 up to 18 in all education settings. At the time of writing this report, there are 1,058 children and young people subject to a Child in Need plan and a further 656 children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan. Currently, Nottinghamshire's Virtual School has 988 0 to 18 children and young people on its roll. The new regulation will result in the Virtual School having responsibility for the education of 2,702 children and young people.
6. This came into effect from 1st October 2021. The guidance which accompanies the notification of this extended role refers to the Virtual School as being 'well positioned to enhance partnerships between agencies and raise aspiration for this cohort of children'. As such, the extended role is seen to be strategic, rather than operational, and is more in line with the extended duties to provide advice and guidance regarding children who have previously in care, than it is to the duties regarding children currently in care, i.e. Our Children and Young People.
7. The rationale for the extended role for this cohort of children with a social worker is described as: '...children with a social worker do worse than their peers at every stage of their education and poor outcomes persist, even after social worker involvement ends. Experiences of adversity and trauma can create barriers to education that affect attendance, learning, behaviour and wellbeing. However, with the right support in place, children can overcome these barriers to reach their potential.'
8. The extended role of the Virtual School will encompass early years settings, schools, colleges and social care leaders:
 - to make visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities to help all agencies hold high aspirations for these children
 - to promote practice that supports children's engagement in education, recognising that attending an education setting can be an important factor in helping to keep children safe from harm
 - to level up children's outcomes and narrow the attainment gap so every child can reach their potential. This will include helping to make sure that children with a social worker benefit from support to recover from the impact of COVID-19.

9. The expectation is that the Virtual School will ensure that these outcomes are achieved by:
- enhancing partnerships between education settings and the local authority so agencies can work together
 - identifying the needs of the cohort and addressing barriers to poor educational outcomes and ensure pupils make educational progress
 - offering advice and support to key professionals to help children make progress, including through increasing their confidence in using evidence-based interventions.

Funding to support the extended role of the Virtual School

10. Nottinghamshire Local Authority has been allocated £139,430 under Section 31 grant rules in recognition of these extended duties. The Department for Education (DfE) will be commissioning research into how different Virtual Schools have met the challenge of these extended duties, but the DfE does not expect formal reporting of the use of this grant funding, nor is there an expectation that any unspent funds will be returned.
11. As the extended duties of the Virtual School are more strategic than operational, it is appropriate that the strategic capacity of the Virtual School is enhanced. Increasing strategic capacity will be achieved by:
- increasing capacity at the level of Assistant Head of the Virtual School from 1.0 fte to 1.6 fte. The current role of Assistant Head of the Virtual School is carried out on a job-share basis, split 0.6/0.4. The person providing the 0.4 fte capacity is in a position to increase their capacity to full-time. This increase in strategic capacity would cost circa £39,000
 - providing backfill capacity of 0.6 fte for an Achievement Officer role. As this is already part of the Virtual School establishment, there would be no additional costs
 - increasing strategic capacity (to provide support, advice and guidance to professionals supporting children who have had a social worker) across the team of five Achievement Officers by 20% each, backfilling the operational capacity by creating a further Achievement Officer role. This would cost circa £40,000
 - further developing the Virtual School website so that it can be readily used by a wider range of professionals, and especially by social workers. This would entail collaborative work with Children's Social Care colleagues to ensure that the content was accessible and useful to them. This would cost circa £10,000
 - further developing the Virtual School training offer to professionals working with the wider cohort of children, including to Designated Safeguarding Leads. The training offer with social workers would be co-created with social work teams. This would cost circa £20,000
 - extending the training offer to include consideration of collaboration between, if not combining, the Designated Teacher networks and the Designated Safeguarding Leads networks for the delivery of some training.

12. The approach taken by the Virtual School in its work with schools has a strong focus on the development of capacity in schools to better understand the needs of Our Children, and to have greater resilience and self-confidence in meeting the needs of Our Children. This is an approach which stands alongside schools in a supportive and at times challenging way, so that schools are able to exercise their primary responsibility for the attendance, progress and attainment of Our Children.
13. The proposal for the use of the extended duties grant builds on this approach in that:
 - it is not about direct work with or for named individual pupils, or
 - tracking of their progress through the Personal Education Plan and school data returns, or
 - of direct monitoring of educational interventions, for example in the use of Pupil Premium.

Rather, it is about:

- making visible the disadvantages of this cohort of pupils, by developing a shared understanding within schools of the need to be proactive in making provision in advance of this cohort experiencing failure
- promoting 'best practice' with schools and other colleagues, including the use of evidence-based interventions, and
- enabling those involved with this cohort of children to better support and challenge the quality of education they receive.

The proposal for enhancing partnerships

14. The Virtual School focused on promoting partnership working with educational settings over the last five years. This has been through the development of a consultation approach to the work of Achievement Officers, the establishment and development of Designated Teacher networks, and more latterly the extension of the termly monitoring meetings in secondary schools to local college settings.
15. A key role of the Virtual School has often been a 'bridge' between Children's Social Care teams and schools. An important tool in the facilitation of this bridging role has been the Personal Education Planning process. Over the last year the Virtual School has been working with Children's Social Care colleagues to shape the Personal Education Planning framework as a means of enhancing partnership working between schools and the wider group of Local Authority teams.
16. The Virtual School currently works with the Leaving Care Achievement Advisor, meeting termly with the further education college settings in Nottinghamshire where most of Our Young People are on roll. These meetings would provide an opportunity to raise awareness of the needs of the wider cohort of pupils for whom proactive consideration of their needs might support them to maintain their education, employment or training choices, to celebrate their successes, and to agree 'next steps'.
17. The Virtual School works with the University of Nottingham to organise webinars about going to university and the support which would be available to them. The aim of the

sessions is to raise aspirations for Our Young People, to share the support available at universities, and to hear from student ambassadors about their personal experiences of university. Again, this work would provide an opportunity to raise awareness of the needs of the wider cohort of students who have or who have had social worker involvement.

The proposal for identifying the needs of the cohort

18. Over the last five years the Virtual School has promoted an understanding of the needs of many of Our Children in terms of *trauma* and of the need to develop *trauma-informed* practice. Latterly this is referred to as a *relational approach*.
19. The organisational positioning of the Virtual School team within the wider group of Psychology Services has meant that where schools are educating any of Our Children, there is easier access to a range of additional educational support services.
20. The framework of Personal Education Planning is an essential tool for collaborative working around the needs and voice of Our Children. Colleagues in education support services have developed equivalent tools to shape the planning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disability. The proposal would be to co-create with social worker colleagues tools which they might use with the parents of children in need, an example of which is the Understanding Behaviour in Schools toolkit.

The proposal for offering advice and support

21. Over the last two years the Virtual School has provided a telephone and email consultation service for those responsible for the education of children and young people who were previously in care.
22. This consultation service was supplemented by the development of a comprehensive training offer, primarily focused on the professional development needs of Designated Teachers. By working hand-in-glove with colleagues from the Educational Psychology Service this training offer has expanded both in terms of content but also in terms of the range of people who impact on the lives of Our Children.
23. Over the last three years the Virtual School has developed a website as a source of resources for those involved in the education of Our Children.
24. Again, over the last three years the Virtual School developed, piloted and established support networks for Designated Teachers as a means of enabling them to learn from each other's experiences.

Other Options Considered

25. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

26. The report seeks approval for the proposed use of the Extended Duties Grant to enable the Virtual School to fulfil its duties by:

- increasing capacity at the level of Assistant Head of the Virtual School from 1.0 fte to 1.6 fte to provide strategic leadership to ensure Nottinghamshire County Council fulfil their duties to support the education of children who have or have previously had involvement with a Social Worker.
- creating an additional Achievement Officer role to enable shared capacity across the Virtual School Achievement Officer team to provide daily support, advice and guidance to Children's Social Care colleagues, education settings and other partners through a dedicated duty phoneline and emails. In addition to extending website resource, training and network meetings to support Designated Safeguarding Leads in their role to support children who have or have previously had involvement with a Social Worker.

Statutory and Policy Implications

27. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

28. These proposals will be fully costed from within the additional duties grant provided by central government, and as such the staffing changes will be made on a fixed term basis. There are no financial implications arising from these proposals for the County.

Human Resources Implications

29. The implementation of the proposals in terms of recruitment and staffing will be made subject to advice from Human Resources.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Committee approves the proposed use of the Extended Duties Grant by the Virtual School as follows:
- increasing the capacity of the Virtual School leadership team from 1.0 to 1.6 fte Assistant Head of Virtual School role
 - increasing the capacity of the Virtual School team by 1.0 fte Achievement Officer role
 - improving access to information and guidance by the provision of a dedicated advice line run by the Virtual School team, and the development of the Virtual School team's website, and
 - extending the training offer to Designated Safeguarding Leads alongside the existing Designated Teachers.

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Constitutional Comments (KK 14/10/21)

30. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Children and Young People's Committee.

Financial Comments (NC 22/10/21)

31. Nottinghamshire Local Authority has been allocated £139,430 under Section 31 grant rules for the extension of the role of Virtual School Head duties. The additional costs are projected to be covered by the funding until March 2022. At the date of writing this there has been no announcement regarding funding for 2022/23 therefore these roles are fixed term positions.

HR Comments (BC 20/10/21)

32. The staffing implications are contained within the body of the report. Any new posts will be recruited to in line with the Council's vacancy control and recruitment procedures.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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