

June 2017

Dear Colin

VIRTUAL SCHOOL PEER CHALLENGE (PILOT): NOTTINGHAMSHIRE, JUNE 2017

Thank you for taking part in the first National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) peer challenge. The focus of this and future NAVSH peer challenges was around the efficiency and effectiveness of the Virtual School. More specifically, you asked us to look at the following:

How effective is the Nottinghamshire Virtual School in building capacity in a school led system and in working in partnership with others?

More specifically:

- How effectively are all partnerships represented within the Virtual Schools Improvement Plan? Are the collaborative priorities the right areas of focus? Is progress against priorities evidenced?
- In a sector led school system, is there evidence of schools accepting and embracing their role and responsibility towards LAC?
- How has capacity to meet the needs of LAC been developed to date across all four phases and with particular reference to early years and post 16 delivery/provision moving forwards?
- How effectively is the LAC Pupil Premium used to secure outcomes?

Your preparatory work for this Peer Challenge was extensive and was immensely helpful in enabling the Peer Challenge team to focus its activity appropriately. The team received a good welcome and excellent co-operation and support throughout the process. It was evident to us all that all those we met were interested in learning and continued development.

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. A team of peers used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented through documentation, conversation and observation. We hope their conclusions, captured in our final presentation to you and in this letter, will assist you in your on-going improvement.

1. Background

The NAVSH Peer Challenge business process has been developed through extensive consultation with its members and builds on the peer review model developed by the Local Government Association (LGA). It has also drawn heavily from the strongly embedded peer challenge process used across children's services in Yorkshire and the Humber. The business process is being piloted. Nottinghamshire is the first of several pilot activities.

2. Process

The Peer Challenge in Nottinghamshire was provided by a team led by Heather Sandy, Assistant Director, Children's Services, Lincolnshire County Council, Alan Clifton, Virtual School Head, North Yorkshire County Council and Sally-Ann Harding, Virtual School Head, Northamptonshire County Council. The Challenge was managed and coordinated by Rob Mayall, (Independent Children's Services SLI Specialist) operating on behalf of NAVSH.

The team spent a day and a half in the Local Authority collecting evidence with which to frame their findings and then drew together and presented their conclusions on the afternoon of day two of the Peer Challenge. This activity took place on Wednesday 7th June and Thursday 8th June 2017. Prior to the on-site activity, colleagues in Nottinghamshire shared a wide range of information with the team to support its preparations.

As well as a desk-based analysis of documentation, the Peer Challenge process included a range of interviews and focus group activities, with nearly 40 participants. We met officers at various levels within children's services, and a number of learning provider representatives.

As a result of this activity we identified over 180 strengths and areas for consideration, which have been refined and matched against the five broad headings of your scope, plus a 'headline' strengths and areas for consideration section. These headings form the basis of this letter.

It is important to note that:

- We can only report on what we saw, heard and read – and this was inevitably limited to what it is possible to achieve in a two day period
- Much of what we have identified will be familiar to you – and this was confirmed as we made our presentation on 8th June 2017.

3. Detailed Findings

3.1 Headline Strengths and Areas for Consideration Strengths

- A well established, widely respected and valued Virtual School (VS) team. This was frequently mentioned and reinforced through many of our conversations.
- You have a bold and forward thinking vision for the VS to be an integral part of and owned by a broader partnership system and we heard from a number of people of the signs that this is beginning to work.
- The VS is consciously being more strategic and proactive in the wider system. We heard of a move away from reactive responses towards more measured, targeted and focussed activity. This has been supported by visioning work undertaken in the team and facilitated by the Psychology Service.
- Significant strides have been made in developing real-time data to allow accurate priority planning and reflective practice. We were impressed with the progress you have made on this, supported by a dedicated resource, and can see immense potential in the data you now have, and intend to continue to develop.

Areas for consideration

- Identify ways of systematically measuring the effectiveness of Pupil Premium Plus (PPP). You do this well at an individual level – but you would benefit from looking at evidence of impact and outcomes over time and across the cohort to inform future decisions about best use of PPP
- Ensure the renewed vision for the VS is owned by all stakeholders and embedded in the system. The vision is taking hold – but it is at a stage in its development which requires it to be constantly communicated, modelled and embedded in processes and structures.

- Consider how all partners will be held to account in meeting the educational needs of Looked After Children (LAC). A good starting point for this would be the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) for the Virtual School which has broad partner representation.
- Further develop the ability of the VS to measure and monitor the emotional wellbeing and needs of children in care. This will complement an existing understanding of educational progress and achievement and capture a more holistic view of individual children and the cohort more broadly.
- Develop a collaborative approach across social care and the VS to address performance in relation to Personal Education Plans (PEPs). Accountability for and ownership of current underperformance in relation to timescales needs to be shared. Our assessment is that the solutions are not with individual processes, schools, teams or services, but a combination of these and it is only through collaboration and each partner playing their respective part in addressing the challenge that it will be met.

3.2 How effective is the Nottinghamshire Virtual School in building capacity in a school led system and in working in partnership with others?

Strengths

- The Virtual School is increasingly intelligent in its influence on the systems impacting on the education of children in care. Head teachers reported that the operational and strategic insight of VS leaders adds value to the VS. Designated teachers spoke highly of the support they receive. Social workers reported good working relationships with the VS and of the value they place on the technical expertise of the VS team and how this informs their work.
- The VS has successfully established a shared commitment across the sector to meeting the needs of LAC within Nottinghamshire's schools. There is a clear recognition that the VS is rigorous and robust in holding schools and some internal partners to account. We heard from schools that the VS team make shrewd judgements about the application of support and challenge and have no fear in being robust where it is in the best interests of the child. They have a strong moral purpose which underpins their approach. This approach has created 'ways of working' – for instance Social workers reported that any planned LAC moves will always be discussed with the VS team in advance.
- Senior managers report strong senior officer and political commitment to prioritising the education of LAC. We were not able to have discussions with elected members, but heard of a Council wide commitment to this agenda. Senior officer sponsorship of this peer challenge and visibility at key stages is a tangible example of their commitment to the education of LAC. We also noted the tangible commitment of School Forum to this vulnerable group of children through its funding commitments.
- Visioning has begun to review and renew the profile of the VS both internally and with external partners. We heard of some powerful activity, led by the recently appointed Senior Education Psychologist, which has helped the team develop a clear and shared sense of purpose and mission.
- A rapidly developing data system allows staff to work proactively to address vulnerabilities. We were impressed with the live data now available to the team as a

result of a decision to invest in a data specialist. We also noted that the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) had influenced the nature of this data and that schools are conscientiously providing it. This concentrated investment and system ownership and commitment has produced a suite of live data previously unavailable and we saw evidence of the considered application of this data to inform conversations with schools about individual pupils.

Areas for Consideration

- Ensure the renewed vision for the VS is owned by all stakeholders and embedded in the system. This can be supported by an already evident commitment from SLT, members of which have welcomed the renewed vision and are keen to be part of shaping this as it evolves.
- Consider how a shared moral purpose will be established in the SLT. It will be important to secure a balance of members on SLT and ensure visibility and attendance. It was reported to us that more regular attendance of staff from social care would add value. Terms of reference would help to clarify to the SLT and others a sense of vision, purpose and perhaps expected behaviours.
- Consider how all partners will be held to account for building the capacity to meet the education needs of LAC. You might want to consider what further use could be made of the well-established school-led groups already in operation, such as head teacher groups, TSAs, Designated Teacher networks.
- Further develop the ability of the VS to measure and monitor the emotional wellbeing and needs of children in care, by engaging with current national developments. An emphasis on individual and cohort attainment is essential but underplays the importance of looking at children in a more rounded way. The influence that the VS has within the system puts it in a powerful position to promote broader use of tools which capture a more holistic picture of children. A starting point might be to attach Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) to Personal Education Plans (PEPs)
- Consider clarifying with all stakeholders the Officer with the title of Virtual School Head. It is unusual for there not to be a one designated VS Head. We understand your rationale for sharing responsibilities across two individuals, but this is confusing to the broader system. There was a variable consistency of understanding across the limited range of colleagues we spoke to about the respective roles of different managers and in particular, we think it would bring greater clarity to partners in and beyond Nottinghamshire if you designated one person as the 'VS Head', as is the case in most areas.
- Further develop the system-wide use of the real time data system to inform priority planning. Analyse and disseminate more widely data which describes progress in care. We see great potential in the real time data recently developed, some of which is being realised, (we heard of Achievement Officers (AO) using it to underpin conversations with DTs). We think there is potential for it to be used more systematically and for this and other data to be more widely disseminated and perhaps also for you to consider how to better capture data about individual progress from prior attainment. (This has links to the Rees report November 2015 and OFSTED's changing stance). You may also want to explore the combination of real time data with more well established data sets.

3.3 How effectively are all partnerships represented within the Virtual School's Improvement Plan? Are the collaborative priorities the right areas of focus? Is progress against priorities evidenced?

Strengths

- There is a clear narrative in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) of accountability across the system coordinated by the Virtual School. The Virtual School is held to account well by senior officers. Councillors too were described as committed to better educational outcomes for LAC. They are
'Inquisitive, interested and challenging'
We heard that the VS Coordinator and AOs are well respected in the system and have good relationships with schools. We noted some good examples of them providing robust and effective challenge to schools where it was felt that schools were not being as inclusive as desirable. AOs also shared case studies which demonstrated their ability to coalesce the system around the needs of individual children. AOs use data in school to inform and challenge. DTs reported that there is good communication and clear expectations from the VS. Relationships with social care have led to the VS being routinely consulted on placement moves to allow planning and all school moves are reviewed by the VS coordinator.
- The SIP is monitored by an SLT which has representation from all key partners. SLT has great potential to bring alive your aspiration, described to us as
'The system being responsible for the Virtual School' (Senior LA Officer)
- All head teachers value and spoke of enjoying their role on SLT and could articulate the balance of support and challenge. Although we have suggested (3.2) that you might want to invest in developing a clearer vision and terms of reference for SLT, we heard that the foundations are strong in terms of behaviours, spirit and focus on both support and challenge.
- Key priority 2 of the SIP demonstrates the multi-agency approach to improving outcomes, reinforcing once more your commitment to a system wide ownership of this agenda.
- The SIP is reviewed termly at SLT and progress is monitored. Collaborative priorities are based on effective self-evaluation and actions outlined are appropriate. For example, the collaborative actions detailed under Section 1.8 relating to the development of post-16 are focused and helpful.

Areas for Consideration

- Undertake activities to strengthen joint working across the range of partners who could potentially support LAC in schools. This could be at both strategic and operational level. SLT creates a good opportunity to strengthen strategic partnerships. Full opportunity should be taken in senior officer meetings in the LA to further strengthen social care and education linkages
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- At operational level, we felt that there would be value in practitioners, perhaps at locality level, having a broader and more current understanding of teams around schools so that the support of the 'operational system' around a school, for the achievement of LAC, can be galvanised to best effect.
- Check that collaborative priorities in the SIP are owned by relevant services and partners. It would be worth checking that there is a broader ownership of SIP

priorities, by checking that those relating to other partners are being addressed in their own strategic/work plans.

- Develop more systematic engagement with social workers to ensure they can play their full part in supporting the needs of LAC. We heard of good relationships between social workers and the VS, but nevertheless felt that links could be further developed. There were several references in our conversations with partners to less visibility of social workers than they felt desirable. This may, in part, be due to different and/or unrealistic perceptions of the role of social workers, or to social worker capacity or, perhaps turnover(although we heard of a stable LAC team).An analysis of this perception could lead to a more measured response, which might possibly include a focus on:
 - awareness: social workers helping schools through advice and training and others to understand their roles(see bullet point 1 in this section) We noted that some schools said they would welcome a better understanding of the role of social workers, so this action is pushing at an open door. Social workers also indicated to the review team a willingness to support the work of schools to meet the needs of LAC
 - Consultancy: social workers sharing their professional insights with schools, through workshops/training activity to help better support the progress of LAC.

3.4 In a sector led school system, is there evidence of schools accepting and embracing their role and responsibility towards LAC?

Strengths

- There is clear evidence of schools recognising and meeting their responsibilities towards the education of LAC and beginning to contribute strategically to the leadership of this agenda across Nottinghamshire, not least through SLT, where head teachers have appreciated data developments which they believe help them to fulfil their challenge role more effectively. The Teaching School Alliance has recently appointed a Specialist Leader in Education (SLE) for LAC who is keen to establish closer links with the VS. This post holder will be a champion in the system and the conduit for practice transfer.
- All partners articulated a commitment by Nottinghamshire's schools to inclusive practice. There was evidence of schools challenging one another where this was not the case. We heard examples of schools having a total commitment towards meeting LAC needs without referral or removal. The high level of involvement (78 schools) in the Attachment Aware programme is further evidence of commitments to more inclusive approaches. This is a positive development which has enthused participating schools who have valued the training and its impact and are now talking of how learning and practice might be shared across schools. The VS also provides robust challenge as a matter of course through their analysis and feedback on PEPs but more specifically, AOs talked of providing individual challenge to schools where practice is not inclusive.
- Children and young people's success is celebrated and there is evidence of their voice influencing practice. All PEPs/LAC reviews have a 'what about me?' section capturing children's voice. We heard of how the views of children and young people influenced practice. We also heard of the annual LAC Celebration event, which is cross phase and recognises a wide range of achievement and progress.
- There is a clear continuum of opportunities for schools to bid for funding to maintain placements. Some of these bids are evaluated by the schools themselves. This is allowing further development of inclusive practice.

Areas for Consideration

- Encourage the majority of schools to embrace the Attachment Aware schools programme. It may be that resources do not permit expansion of the current programme, but feedback from participating schools suggests the impact is such that consideration might be given to how learning might be applied across the whole school system – perhaps using participating schools as the catalyst for this.
- Consider better use of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) in PEPs and across all schools and/or the application of a bespoke assessment tool in relation to emotional health. This letter has already referenced recommendations to better capture the emotional health and development of children. There are a range of tools which the VS might wish to evaluate and promote as appropriate, but a relatively straightforward starting point might be to capture the information in SDQs and consistently utilise it in PEP documents and processes.
- Consider further scrutiny and challenge of the LAC curriculum diet in order to improve the progress measures where appropriate. There was some feedback from one head teacher that alternative provision (AP) for secondary age pupils may be used more readily than might always be appropriate. We recognise the close monitoring and scrutiny of pupils on whole time AP, but this point is more in relation to those pupils where *part* of their school time is in AP. Taking into account the degree to which participation in AP might detrimentally affect progress measures, there should be a closer analysis of this provision to provide reassurance that it is being targeted appropriately.

3.5 How has capacity to meet the needs of LAC been developed to date across all four phases and with particular reference to early years and post 16 delivery/provision moving forwards?

Strengths

- The VS draws on the developmental expertise of the wider school improvement team to recommend and share national and local best practice across statutory school age. The structural location of the VS in a broader school improvement team is beneficial to its ability to reach beyond its own influence and expertise. There is evidence of the wider team promoting the educational achievement of LAC. – it is not considered to be simply the remit of the Virtual School
 - We heard that the post 16 Education Adviser has been commissioned to work with colleges to secure data sharing and to undertake some work around barriers to learning for post 16 LAC.
 - We also heard of a collaborative bid to the Local Enterprise Partnership, to improve information advice and guidance and which has been jointly developed by the Educational Psychology service, internal and external partners and the VSThese are further, recurring examples of *'the system being responsible for the VS'*
- The Early Years' Service has developed capacity to meet the needs of Early Years LAC. The Early Years PEP has been developed jointly by Early Years colleagues and the VS and there is a plan to jointly review the effectiveness of the newly agreed mechanism for distribution of EY Pupil Premium.
- The VS considers carefully key transitions and plans effectively to minimise disruptions. Transition planning is considered in its widest sense: school and placement moves; across phases and across year groups. Planning is child centred and the VS is central to it. This work reflects the work of the Children's

Commissioner around creating a stability index - noting changes to school, social worker as well as care placement.

- There is Local Authority recognition of the need to move forward plans to further develop Early Years and post 16 activity. Although this is an area for development, the strength is that this is a good example of an issue about which you are fully aware and on which there are some actions already in place.

Areas for Consideration

- Further develop plans to build your approach to post 16 and early years. A number of people spoke about the short-term negative impact created by the disestablishment of a post 16 transition adviser and there is still work to be done to clarify how coherent and systematic support can be provided to LAC post 16.
- Ensure that the early years and post 16 PEP/Pathway Plan are included in PEP outturn analysis. The Council is clearly aware of the statutory requirement for PEPs, but we are not sure that you are recording and measuring your PEP performance for early years and post 16 PEPs (we understand that you have introduced pathway Plans post 16, which are compliant with the expectations of PEPs). It is important to be compliant and ensure that these groups are included in your PEP completion performance.
- Early Years transition is undertaken by the Early Years team. Consider joint planning and practice to ensure all reception children in care make a good start. There is potential for a higher level of engagement of the VS in pre reception activity.

3.6 How effectively is the LAC Pupil Premium used to secure outcomes?

Strengths

- Clear Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) Plans link to the individual child and there is an identification of specific PEP targets which link to PPP spending. Some examples were provided to us of creative use of PPP funding which has had marked and positive impact.– for example the appointment of a health mentor for a child in primary school which has had a significant impact on his attendance and engagement in learning.
- The full PPP allocation is devolved to schools in return for an annual PPP Plan. There are clear processes in place for the allocation of PPP against PEP targets and there is support available for schools if applications are unsuccessful
- School led developments have enhanced the PEP process in Special Schools and head teachers feel fully engaged.
 - We heard that the PEP SEND document was recently redesigned in partnership with special schools enabling it to be better tailored to children in care with SEND. -
 - We heard that PEP targets for pupils with Education Health and Care Plans are more meaningful than before as a result of development work.
 - The progress and impact of PPP spending is evaluated against PEP targets for Special School pupils.
 - Special schools work collaboratively to moderate PEP targets.
- Early Years PEPs for children in care are undertaken by an Early Years specialist on the Early Years team and are quality assured by the VS Coordinator. Early Years

PPP is allocated individually to all CIC and is approved by the VS coordinator, building in some consistency to the process.

- Local and national evidence-based practice around the use of PPP is shared with key stakeholders by the school improvement team. There are regular briefings for head teachers and other partners, including briefings for social workers and Early Years specialists have provided support, in settings, for PEP writing.

Areas for Consideration

- Quality assurance of every PEP is completed but strategic intelligence is not collated. A systematic approach is essential to allow more strategic evaluations. We were impressed by the thorough and diligent approach to QA, but feel that you could capitalise on this by reflecting on the learning that comes through a more strategic analysis. What approaches seem to be working? Is practice more advanced in certain phases/certain geographies? What is worth disseminating in terms of practice because it could be replicated? You may also want to consider whether it is the most effective use of the VS Coordinator's time to be solely responsible for this QA process. There is an advantage of consistency, but over-reliance on one person creates a system weakness and there might be an argument that distributing the responsibility helps to inform a broader range of people about PEPs to inform daily practice

Other issues raised in relation to PEPs:

- Examples given of PEPs not been completed until the day of Reviews – so VS staff are unable to look at these in advance
- Ensure that the VS supports and challenges relevant services for all children without PEPs. (When asked, VS staff were not articulate who would challenge social workers if PEPs were not completed)

- The VS is not yet able to evidence effective use of PPP strategies systematically. Again, there is a significant resource invested in overseeing individual PPP processes, but what messages are emerging about creativity? Which tactics and strategies seem to be delivering greatest value for money/impact?

Other points raised about PPP

- Social workers have a limited understanding of how PPP works – perhaps some briefing sessions?

- Consider process changes required to improve return of draft PEPs from schools (suggested as a reason for poor PEP performance). This might be something which can be progressed from somewhere in the system other than Social Workers or the VS. You may however feel that before you examine this issue that a more forensic analysis for the reason for poor performance on timeliness of PEP completion is a more appropriate first step. We heard from some that there was not a pattern to the low performance and from others that there may be issues by team. It may be by geography, by phase or even individual social worker. Some of this intelligence is in the system, for instance we heard of the LAC team having weekly meetings to discuss timeliness of PEPs and a good understanding of performance by team and by worker. Perhaps this intelligence needs to be shared and scrutinised in the spirit of continuous improvement.

- SLT do not feel the VS provides them with the right information to allow them to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of pupil premium. Here is an important part of the system keen to provide support as well as challenge. You should consider how you might respond to this aspiration.

- SLT has not yet had the opportunity to discuss the evaluation of termly progress data for LAC which the VS is now in a position to generate through the new data tracking system. Head teachers felt this would add depth to their discussions and decision making whilst noting that outcomes overall must still be monitored.
- Consider how the multi modal intervention captures progress. Currently the project lead reports this is difficult to evidence. We have little doubt that this is a valuable programme but felt that there was limited evidence to back up the continuing levels of investment over a long period of time.

4. Next Steps

You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you incorporate the team's findings into your improvement plans. We hope that you find our reflections helpful.

It is important that this letter describes accurately what we have observed and analysed and that it provides you with an appropriate summary to facilitate change. If this letter contains any factual inaccuracies, or if you have any concerns or comments about the analysis or recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact Rob Mayall in the first instance and he will liaise with myself and the team to make amendments as appropriate. Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "H. Sandy". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Yours sincerely" text.

Lead for Peer Challenge in Nottinghamshire