Nottinghamshire County Council

Report to Children and Young People's Committee

26th July 2021

Agenda Item: 5

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, EDUCATION, LEARNING AND SKILLS

ANNUAL REPORT ON THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Purpose of the Report

1.   To update Committee on the impact of the work of the Virtual School and its partners for the academic year 2020/21.

Information

Role of the Virtual School

2.   The Virtual School discharges the Council's statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of Looked After Children in all phases of education. It does this by working in close partnership with schools and other partners to build shared responsibility, and in particular to build capacity in schools.

3.   As a Virtual School, the importance of the language that is used around children and young people is recognised. Whilst the legislative language refers to Looked After Children and the Department for Education has moved towards using Children Looked After, where possible the Virtual School will use the term 'our children' or 'our young people' as the preferred term used by the young people themselves (TACT, Fostering and Adoption, March, 2019).

4.   The work of the Virtual School contributes to the achievement of the ambitions summarised in Nottinghamshire's Partnership Strategy for Looked After Children & Care Leavers 2018-21. The Virtual School is a key contributor to the Local Authority's Looked After Children and Care Leavers Partnership Board; this accountability board ensures that key partners come together from across and beyond the Local Authority to have collective responsibility for the education, health and wellbeing of our children.

5.   The work of the Virtual School, including its structures, processes, planned actions, and outcomes, are recorded in a working document referred to as the Annual Report and Development Plan. The Annual Report and Development Plan is informed by the current

Council's three commitments outlined in its Children and Young People's Strategy (2018-21), and the six ambitions outlined in the Council's Partnership Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2018-21. The Annual Report and Development Plan is reviewed and updated by the Virtual School's senior leadership team on a termly basis and will be updated during the Autumn term 2021-22 on the release of the new Children and Young People's Strategy.

6. 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 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.

7. 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.

8. Each publicly funded school is statutorily required to have a qualified teacher undertaking the role of Designated Teacher for Looked After Children, and previously Looked After Children. The Designated Teacher's statutory role is detailed in the legislation *The Designated Teacher for Looked After and Previously Looked After Children, February 2018*. Achievement Officers contribute to termly meetings with secondary schools and with primary schools if there are several of our children on roll. These meetings are facilitated by the link Achievement Officer for the school, and at these meetings *all* of our children are raised for discussion, with support and challenge provided as needed.

9. Much of the day-to-day work of the Virtual School team is providing support and challenge to the Designated Teachers in the schools where our children are on roll, with the aim of improving the attendance, progress and attainment of our children. The Virtual School uses pupil level progress and attainment data to support and challenge educational settings to maximise their impact on progress and attainment. The aim is to ensure that all initiatives to drive up attainment and progress are accessible to our children, regardless of whether they live in or out of County. The support to Designated Teachers may be direct from the Virtual School's Achievement Officers, or may come from other education support services, facilitated by the Achievement Officers.

10. In addition to the ongoing work of the Virtual School team, the current priorities for the Virtual School's strategic development include:

- continuing to develop the framework for partnership working to build capacity in what is a school-led approach. This includes ensuring that the Virtual School is able to inform the strategic discussions which are taking place at a district level in Locality Teams.
- collaborating with Children's Social Care colleagues to implement strength-based Personal Education Planning (PEP) for ages 3 to 18 years, and to improve the quality of this planning through an effective quality assurance process.
- securing, implementing and embedding a new data system which will enable the Virtual School to more rigorously monitor the attendance, progress and attainment of our children.
- continuing to develop the Virtual School website and training offer so that schools and other partners are better enabled to help themselves.

Improving attendance, progress and attainment

11. Where our children required a school place during national lockdowns due to Covid-19, the Virtual School supported conversations with schools, carers and social workers to ensure that they were provided with a place. Children who needed consistency and routine to meet their emotional needs were made a priority, as were those of our children living with foster carers who were key workers. Decisions were made collaboratively on a case by case basis to ensure that the child's best interests were at the centre of any decisions about whether they should learn in school, or learn at home. During the first lockdown 17% of our statutory school age cohort received their education in school. Throughout the whole of this Covid-19 period, the Virtual School has continued to provide advice, support and challenge to schools regardless of whether our children were learning at school or at home.

12. The Committee already receives updates on validated educational outcomes of Looked After Children through quarterly performance reports to Committee. Current Covid-19 arrangements have resulted in no published end of key stage outcomes for all children including looked after children and young people for academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21. However, the Virtual School continues to collect teacher assessment information to support identification of those of our children who will require support to achieve the very best they can. The Council's Performance and Review team works closely with the Virtual School Data Officer to provide support with accessing and analysing data sources locally, regionally and nationally.

13. The current profile (*at the time of* writing) of our children who are of statutory school age, and their educational setting or alternative provision is as follows:

   - the number of our children who are of statutory school is 612
   - of these, 447 attend Nottinghamshire schools
   - by Key Stage: 23 are in reception, 202 are of primary age, and 387 are secondary age
   - 14 are living in Nottinghamshire, but are being educated in other local authority schools (13 are secondary age)
   - 145 are living outside of Nottinghamshire and are being educated in other local authority schools (3 being of reception age, 50 primary age and 92 secondary age).

14. The table below shows the percentage of our children attending schools by Ofsted category. Whilst the legislation charges all local authorities to seek good or better schools for their children, the equivalent data presented above is not published by all local authorities, so it is not possible to show how these figures compare with others.

	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
June 2021	18%	67%	12%	3%
Sept 2020	18%	67%	13%	2%
July 2019	18%	70%	8%	4%
July 2018	18%	74%	8%	1%
July 2017	14%	74%	10%	2%

15. Our children are not automatically moved out of their school if an Ofsted inspection results in the school receiving a less than Good judgement as changing a child's school can in itself impact negatively on attainment and progress. In such circumstances the Virtual School's approach is to monitor closely any of our children who are in less than Good settings and provide support and challenge where this is required to the school.

16. The current Years 12 and 13 cohort of our young people is 182. The Council's ambition is to make sure that all of our post-16 young people are placed on appropriate education, employment or training pathways:

- post-16 destinations reported in January 2021 showed 70% (199/283) of Year 12 and 13 young people were in education, employment or training. This compares to 68% (108/157) of Years 12 and 13 in education, employment or training in January 2020.
- for the current Years 12 and13 cohort who are in education, employment or training, 62% are studying level 1 to level 3 (equivalent of GCSE grade 1 - A level) qualifications. The remaining 38% are in employment, apprenticeships, specialist Special Educational Needs & Disabilities provisions, volunteering or in traineeships.
- there are currently 8 young people who have secured university places to start in September 2021 and 2 young people who have deferred university offers to September 2022. Care leavers destinations are varied including further education, training, employment. The leaving care team is proactive in supporting young people with their leaving care choices around education, employment or training.

17. The Virtual School is currently working with Futures (Career Service) on a project called 'Unlocking Potential'. The project is currently targeting a cohort of over 40 of our young people who are in Year 11+ where their situation means that they are at risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment of Training (NEET). These young people are given access to quality information, advice and guidance, as well as to a mentoring approach which supports their engagement with education, employment or training placements. The project brings together all relevant services around our young people including Children's Social Care, Virtual School, Leaving Care Achievement Advisors and post 16 settings to ensure quality planning is in place to maintain education, employment or training and achieve potential. Those of our young people in Years 12 and 13 who are not part of the Unlocking Potential project also have access to information, advice and guidance to support them in maintaining their chosen courses or to make decisions on whether the course they are currently undertaking is the most relevant and sustainable.

18. The size of the Pupil Premium budget which is overseen by the Virtual School varies each year depending on the number of eligible children. For the financial year 2020/21, the overall pupil premium budget was £1.6m. The value of the Pupil Premium Plus allocation

per eligible Looked After Child is £2,345. The number of children eligible for Pupil Premium Plus for the 2020-21 financial year was 670.

19. In order for the Virtual School to release the Pupil Premium Plus schools are required to return a detailed Pupil Premium Plan; the proposed use of funding is quality assured by the Assistant Head of the Virtual School to ensure that monies are appropriately focused on the particular educational needs for each eligible child. The Virtual School monitors the impact of this funding and has identified a number of evidence-based interventions which have a positive impact on progress, for example, Switch-on and Reading Recovery, Numicon (mathematics), Third Space Learning (English and mathematics) intervention, 1:1 tuition and relational-based support such as Emotional Literacy Support Assistants to overcome barriers to learning. This information is shared with schools and settings to support intervention planning for those pupils not making good progress.

20. Due to the Covid-19 situation last financial year a number of year groups were targeted to receive funds at the beginning of the new academic year 2020-21 without the need to submit a Pupil Premium Plan, namely for our children in Years 6, 10 and 11. The decision on this early release before approved plans were received was to enable schools to have maximum flexibility with the allocation of funding to identify need and target support for these key year groups.

21. In line with the 'Conditions of Grant' guidance, Nottinghamshire's Virtual School retains some Pupil Premium funding (£345 per eligible pupil of the current allocation of £2,345) in order to commission and provide a range of additional development projects, all aimed at providing an enhanced offer to our children. The Letterbox club, the Multi-modal Literacy Project and the Relational Schools: Becoming Attachment Aware and Trauma Informed, are all examples of impactful use of Pupil Premium funding which are worthy of celebration.

22. The Letterbox Club, which is an initiative run by the Book Trust to promote reading for pleasure continues to be evaluated as being extremely positive, with many carers reporting that their young people are now enjoying reading. There was a small delay in sending the parcels out for the 2020 initiative due to Covid-19 which impacted on Inspire's staffing levels, however, there is no delay in this year's distribution for 2021. The current cohort consists of:

   - (Early Years) Year group 1   60
   - Year group 1   28
   - Year group 3   28
   - Year group 5   38
   - Year group 7   50

23. The Multi-Modal Literacy Project is a literacy initiative to engage those of our children whose literacy skills would benefit from improvements in confidence and progress. The Multi-Modal Literacy Project was impacted by Covid-19 which prevented the delivery of face to face training and support to schools. However, the Virtual School supported the practitioners commissioned to deliver the Multi-Modal Literacy Project, to move the work to an online delivery, aptly named as the Multi-Modal Hub. This Hub enabled students on the project to access live one hour teaching sessions three times a week which continued to build on the resources the pupils had from the project. By continuing in this way the schools, carers and

children have produced their project work for last academic year which will be showcased at the Harley Gallery in June & July 2021.

24. The development of the Multi-Modal Hub was a huge success and engaged some very hard to reach learners who had not been on the project previously. The intention is to maintain the Hub as a blended approach for the Multi-Modal Literacy Project and also as an offer to those learners that might find face to face teaching a challenge. Feedback from adults supporting the Hub included comments such as: 'a way for children to expand their literacy and technology skills, able to achieve, empowering – great for self-esteem and positive learning environment'.

25. From termly data collected from Autumn 2020 to date:

   - 25 of our children who have some of the most complex needs are currently accessing the Multi-Modal Literacy Project. There will be an additional cohort identified to start in the new academic year in addition to these pupils
   - 56% (14/25) of the cohort are making expected or more than expected progress in reading which is the focus of the project
   - one pupil who was meeting age related expectations in the autumn term has moved to exceeding age related expectations in reading in the spring term
   - two pupils from this cohort were making below expected progress in writing in the autumn term; spring term data shows they are now making expected progress in writing with one of those pupils also moving to expected progress in reading
   - another pupil who was making expected progress in reading and writing in the autumn term, was making exceeding progress in spring term
   - one pupil who was making below expected progress in reading and writing in the autumn term, moved to making expected progress in the spring term
   - there were upwards of 20 pupils each week accessing the Hub provision during lockdown with additional sessions being offered for those pupils who had accessed learning through the Hub that had not engaged with the Multi-Modal Literacy traditional face to face approach.

26. Qualitative data collected by the practitioners over two terms delivering the project from schools include that:

   - there was evidence of progress in literacy attainment
   - there was increased engagement in literacy activities
   - there was a strong sense of authorship and in authorial intent
   - children took pride in their work
   - there was a knowledge of how texts work
   - the work enhanced ICT skills and research skills
   - there was improved confidence and a 'can do' belief
   - there was an enthusiasm for books and creating texts
   - the work improved home school links
   - the work brought to light issues through interactions with texts and the creation of stories.

27. The Multi-Modal Literacy Project will be delivered again during the 2021-22 academic year with exciting developments to include an app to support the children and young people to access resources and reading activities.

Further development of Partnership working

28.   The Virtual School works in collaboration with a full time Leaving Care Achievement Advisor whose time is dedicated to supporting the post-16 cohort of our young people. The Virtual School shares information of those Year 11 young people who may be at risk of not securing an appropriate education, employment or training pathway. The Virtual School and the Leaving Care Achievement Advisor work collaboratively to support any young people who are at risk of underachievement or exiting courses early.

29.   The Virtual School 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 include West Notts College, Nottingham College and North Notts College. These meetings provide an opportunity to discuss those of our young people who may be requiring support to maintain their education, employment or training choices, to celebrate their successes, and to agree 'next steps'.

30.   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. These sessions were available in June 2021 to our young people who are in Years 10-13. 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. Four of our young people aged 16-18 years have accessed mentoring from Nottingham Trent University to support their applications and planning for university.

31.   The Virtual School team works in close partnership with other Council service areas, including the Fair Access Team, to ensure that there is a robust joined-up approach to identifying and monitoring those of our children who may be vulnerable to experiencing difficulties in their education provision. This process is delivered through the work of the Vulnerable Children's Education Committee, Children Out of School Group and the Children Missing Education Panel. These processes provide a clear escalation process when our children are at risk of not receiving an appropriate, full-time education, or where they require a different type of education to what is available in a mainstream setting. *All* of our children are currently receiving education whether in a mainstream school, alternative provision or via a bespoke package. *None* of our children are currently the focus of discussion at the Children Out of School Group or Children Missing Education Panel meetings.

32.   The Virtual School works closely with colleagues in the Education, Learning and Skills division in areas where there are shared responsibilities, for example in providing schools with advice regarding the use of the Early Years Pupil Premium, specifically how to select interventions which are likely to have the greatest impact for the child.

33.   The Virtual School team also works closely with colleagues across Children's Social Care and especially with the Children's Placement team to minimise disruption in education should placement moves be required. There is a robust decision-making process involving senior colleagues in the Commissioning and Placements team which is followed when any education placements are required as part of residential placements for our children.

34.   The Virtual School, together with other strategic partners, has continued to develop the Work Readiness and Career Ambition Programme. The Virtual School continues to work

with all partners both outside and inside the Council to maintain the programme through an online delivery via the Virtual School website. Colleges, Futures and other providers have all delivered their workshops through this method and there are activities available to support these virtual workshops. This will be kept up to date regardless of whether the programme is delivered on a face-to-face model again as it gives all children and young people the ability to draw on the resources, advice and guidance provided by the project.

Improving Personal Education Planning

35.   Personal Education Plans are an evolving record of what needs to happen for our children to enable them to make at least expected progress and to fulfil their educational potential. Personal Education Plans are an integral, statutory part of a young person's Care Plan and should be reviewed three times a year (termly). Nottinghamshire Personal Education Plans have been updated for the academic year 2020-2021 to ensure that the Personal Education Plan reflects the type of strength-based approach which is being promoted across the Local Authority's children's services. The strength-based approach ensures successes and achievements of our children are at the centre of the Personal Education Plan, alongside the child's 'voice', meaning their view of their situation, their aspirations, and what they think is needed to support them. The Personal Education Plans are age and phase appropriate i.e. from age 3 to 18 years, requiring SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic & Timely) target setting so that educational progress can be readily monitored.

36.   The documents which support the Personal Education Plan process have been co-produced with Children's Social Care colleagues, including guidance to support high-quality person-centred meetings and effect record keeping.

37.   To support the Personal Education Plan process, a collaborative quality assurance process is undertaken through multi-agency forums which includes Children's Social Care colleagues. These mechanisms help to maintain a focus on the quality of Personal Education Plans processes. Training on Personal Education Plans continues to be delivered to schools on a termly basis, and training is also now being offered to Post 16 settings, alternative provisions and social care teams. Typically, termly training is being accessed by 30+ delegates.

38.   The quality assurance process for the current academic year has evidenced that the new strength-based Personal Education Plans are enabling schools to identify and record our young people's strengths and needs well. This is having a positive impact in more clearly identifying what support is needed for identified areas of need than was the case with the previous Personal Education Plan documentation.

Implementing an improved data system

39.   The demands on the data systems used by the Virtual School have significantly increased to the point whereby new, more powerful data systems are required to carry out increasingly sophisticated yet robust analysis of the data which the Virtual School holds. This will enable the Virtual School to continue to challenge schools and other education providers when those of our children do not make educational progress.

Developing the Virtual School website and training offer

40.	The Virtual School has a responsibility, as detailed in the guidance for local authorities *Promoting the Education of Looked After and Previously Looked After Children, Department for Education, February 2018*, to:

- ensure that all governors and school leaders are aware of their requirement to appoint and train a Designated Teacher for our children
- work closely with, and provide training and support for all Designated Teachers to ensure that they understand and fulfil their statutory role for our children
- provide regular updates for governors, school leaders and Designated Teachers in terms of current outcomes for our children, and to provide good practice examples.

41.	Good links are in place with Designated Teachers in Nottinghamshire schools through a regular email service, which provides Designated Teachers with up-to-date information and guidance on all aspects related to provision for our children.

42.	The Virtual School's website has been developed, and continues to be updated, to provide a reliable source of information and resources for not only partners but for parents, carers of previously looked after children. There has been positive feedback received and the intention is to develop this further. At the time of writing the website has been viewed over 1,500 times by over 1,100 different users, during the past year.

43.	The new duties extended to the Virtual School to those previously looked after has been effectively managed through an advice and guidance phone line and email service, and also through workshops delivered by both the Educational Psychology Service and Virtual School Achievement Officers. These workshops have been well attended with over 100 parents accessing the sessions this academic year. Evaluations of the workshops have been very positive. Further workshops to support this cohort of children and young people will continue and collaborative working with the East Midlands Regional Adoption Agency will further support this area of work.

44.	The Virtual School offers free 'new to role' or 'refresher' training to all Designated Teachers on a termly basis. During the academic year 2020/21 over 112 Designated Teachers have received this training. In addition, the Virtual School has developed a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) offer for Designated Teachers, with a menu of training modules, including understanding trauma, executive functioning, and emotion coaching. These courses are offered at no cost to schools and settings and if not delivered by the Virtual School team, are commissioned through the Educational Psychology Service. Over the last year all training has been delivered online: to date, 106 school colleagues have attended training, 98% reporting that the training was useful or very useful.

45.	Following a successful pilot project whereby a network for Designated Teachers was set up in the Mansfield area, this model of facilitating peer support between Designated Teachers has become an established way of working for the Virtual School. Networks now operate across the County giving all Designated Teachers access to peer support and sharing good practice; the networks have also become another forum for the delivery of training. The network meetings are facilitated by the Virtual School, following an agenda co-created with the Designated Teachers.

46. Relational Schools: Becoming Attachment Aware and Trauma Informed continued to run throughout the Covid-19 period via a virtual webinar approach. A key aspect of the project is sharing good practice that schools develop and this remains an expectation of the participants; this is shared widely through either designated teacher networks or through other training forums that the Virtual School will facilitate to continue to develop the Designated Teachers' knowledge and confidence throughout Nottinghamshire.

47. In partnership with Nottingham Trent University the Virtual School hosted a virtual Designated Teacher conference as it was still not possible to host a live event in April 2021. Over 120 delegates signed in for the conference with workshops delivered by schools on their work as part of the Relational Schools project, Education Psychologists on approaches to support the needs of vulnerable children and Nottingham Trent University staff and students on experiences in higher education. The feedback was very positive, with 100% of evaluations (54 received) giving the experience and content 5 stars. A new date is booked for 2022 once again in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University with the hope of this being face to face. Some comments received through the evaluation included 'this is the best training I have ever received' and 'looking forward to the next event'.

Celebrating success

48. The Virtual School hosts an annual achievement event to celebrate the success of Nottinghamshire's children and young people. This is usually attended by our children and young people, their carers, their teachers, their social workers, and various senior officers of the Council as well as the Virtual School team. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 situation it was not possible for the event to be held under normal circumstances at the Albert Hall in Nottingham City Centre. However, 132 Looked After Children received their certificate, book token and letter to acknowledge their achievements. Colin Pettigrew, Corporate Director, also recorded a congratulatory message that was accessible through the Virtual School website and the inspirational speaker, Fabrice Muamba, recorded his speech for children, young people, carers and professionals to listen to. The achievements range from graduation from university to overcoming huge barriers in personal and social lives.

Other Options Considered

49. No other options have been considered.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

50. The report provides an opportunity for the Committee to consider any further actions arising from the information contained within the report.

Statutory and Policy Implications

51. 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

52.   There are no financial implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION/S

That the Committee:

1)   considers whether there are any actions it requires in relation to the information in the report on the impact of the work of the Virtual School and its partners for academic year 2020/21.

2)   agrees that further annual reports on the work of the Virtual School be presented to the Children and Young People's Committee.

Marion Clay
Service Director, Education, Learning and Skills

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

Charles Savage
Head of the Virtual School
T: 0775 362 5277
E: Charles.savage@nottscc.gov.uk

Sue Denholm
Assistant Head of the Virtual School
T: 0115 804 0629
E: sue.denholm@nottscc.gov.uk

Constitutional Comments (ELP 15/07/21)

53.   The recommendations fall within the delegation to Children and Young People's Committee by virtue of its terms of reference.

Financial Comments (MDN 07/07/21)

54.   There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

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.

Promoting the Education of Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children (Department for Education, February 2018)

Nottinghamshire's Partnership Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2018-21

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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