

Virtual School Head

The role of the virtual school head

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INTRODUCTION

Care Matters: Time for Change announced that the Department for Children, Schools and Families would test the role of 'virtual school head'.

The virtual school head will have responsibility raising the attainment and ensuring the progression of children in care in their local authority area.

This document sets out initial thoughts on the role of virtual school head.

I hope this will be a 'living document' that is of on-going use for us and that it will be informed and updated by the thoughts, experiences and practice of others in the Children's Services Team.

Overview of the virtual school head

1. The virtual school head should be a senior individual in the local authority whose role is to raise attainment and ensure progression for all children in care.
2. The Virtual school head needs to have sufficient authority to influence wider procedures and practice within the authority, as well as directly implementing improvements to the education of children in care.
3. The Virtual school head will need to be able to work both strategically and operationally, in the case of individual children or groups of children, across the authority and with schools in the authority.
4. The Virtual school head should be a highly informed source of expertise, with capacity to broker arrangements and make recommendations for where the local authority and its partners need to develop their provision in order to improve the education of children in care.
5. However, the virtual school (and therefore the virtual school head) is not a “teaching” institution. It is a model by which the authority can provide services and support for the education of children in care and a constructive challenge to those providing the services. It remains the case that education provision for children in care should be taken to mean a full-time place in a local mainstream school unless the circumstances of the child – such as their particular special educational needs – make this provision unsuitable, in which case suitable alternative provision must be found.
6. The virtual school head has responsibility for raising the attainment of children’ ensuring that all children and young people progress by:
 - monitoring the educational progress of all children in care who are being educated within their authority, including those who are placed in their authority wherever the setting (school and 14-19 further education settings), as if they were attending a single school.
 - monitoring the educational progress of their authority’s own children placed out of area.
 - analysing available data and ‘soft’ information on the educational achievement of children in care to identify priorities for improving their education, both for individual children and for the overall cohort;
 - working alongside school improvement partners, to support and challenge schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and provision for children in care. In particular working with school heads and designated teachers
 - working across the local authority, and with its partners, to ensure high quality support for the education of children in care to remove the barriers to their learning.

Working across the local authority, and across local authority boundaries

7. Children in care face a range of barriers to their learning. It is vital that all services work together to improve their education, and that different services understand the importance of education and the impact that their work has on it.

8. The virtual school head will work directly with School Improvement Partners, head teachers, designated teachers and social workers, to raise the attainment of children in care, reduce absence, tackle the need for exclusion and ensure that provision meets their learning needs.

9. They will also work strategically across the local authority and its children's trust partners, and with schools and FE settings providing 14-19 to champion the educational needs of children in care and spread effective practice. In particular they should improve working between education and social care.

Actions:

- Sit on currently established groups: Education protects, MALAP, LAC offending
- Develop progression with FE
- Consider the team structures of people already working with LAC
- Develop a coherent LAC virtual school team

Monitoring performance

10. One of the most important roles of the virtual school head will be in monitoring performance. This will include performance of individual children in care, as well as schools and the authority itself. The use of data is very important it gives the virtual school head benchmarks from which to assess progress, a comparison to other authorities and ways to identify the actions for improvement that need to be taken.

11. At individual child level it will be important to measure the child's *progression* and ensure that they are (through their personal education plan) set short, medium and long term educational goals that are both ambitious and have a clear description of how they will be achieved.

Actions:

Using data and other qualitative information the virtual school head should clearly set out:

- the improvement priorities for the education of children in care, or

groups of children in care; the authority; and schools or groups of schools;

- the actions that will be taken to make these improvements, including time-bound milestones by when these actions should occur;
- an explanation of how success will be measured, including the a description of what change should have occurred.
- produce an annual self evaluation (SEF) setting out an assessment of the progress of all children in care in the area and a plan for future improvements.
- establish a robust pupil level database
- link Education, Social Care and Health for LAC.

Using data

12. Analysing data on the attainment of children in care, their learning and development needs, and the services provided to them is a vital part of work to improve the education of children in care. Important sources of data will be social work teams, local authority teams responsible for the education of looked after children, designated teachers and School Improvement Partners.

My first impression is that there is a lot of data on looked after children but it fragmented across services and the different software packages do not allow for effective interrogation of the data to inform specific actions and interventions.

Amongst other factors, the virtual school head should analyse data on:

- attainment at Key Stages 1, 2, 3 and GCSE;
- the progression of children in care;
- special educational needs;
- the wider educational needs of children in care;
- attendance;
- exclusion;
- education, training or employment status at end of Year 11;
- access to extended services;

Actions

- Establish a robust data set which is updated regularly
- work with (data) colleagues to ensure availability of robust data;
- analyse data on attainment and need in full range of educational settings for:
 - individual children;
 - the overall cohort of children; and
 - children placed out of authority;
- use data to identify where action needs to be taken, both for individual children and in terms of service provision, and work with schools, the local authority and other children's services; and
- use data to contribute to the statutory target setting exercise for the attainment of children in care
- use the data to devise intervention programmes
- establish benchmarking and identification of progress
- identify the learning needs of individual children
- identify support and intervention
- develop the role of LAC data officer
- Link to PEP

Target setting

13. There are three statutory children in care targets that authorities will need to consider for their 2008/2009 cohort:

- Achievement of level 4+ English at key stage 2;
- Achievement of level 4+ maths at key stage 2; and
- Achievement of 5 A*-C GCSE (including English and Maths) (or equivalent) at key stage 4

Working with schools and School Improvement Partners

14. It is vital that the virtual school head develop good working relationships with individual schools. Schools and designated teachers are critical to improving the attainment of children in care; being at school and maintaining a school placement can be the most stable factor in their lives. The most effective schools will be those that ensure that appropriate teaching

and learning provision is put in place and that their policies and practices are fully inclusive of the needs of children in care. The virtual school head will need to consider how well a school addresses the needs of children in care, both at an individual level, as well as across the whole school.

15. The virtual school head should work with SIPs to support and challenge schools on how they improve the attainment of children in care.

Actions:

- presentation to secondary head September '08
- organise meetings with designated persons in schools
- ensure systems are in place to notify schools when a child in care starts at their school or when a child on their school role enters care;
- identify areas of the education of children and young people in care where a school's performance needs to be challenged / investigated;
- work through SIPs to ensure that a school's performance in relation to education of children in care is discussed as part of the single conversation, focusing on the areas of identified need;
- broker arrangements across schools, the local authority and its partners, and, where a child is placed out of authority, across authorities, that will improve outcomes for children in care.

School admissions

16. Children in care have the highest priority in normal school admissions. In addition, where they are not the admission authority, local authorities have the power to direct a school to admit a child in care, even when the school is full. These measures should be used to ensure that those in care get places in high quality schools that best suit their needs.

Actions

- raise awareness amongst carers, social workers and across the local authority to ensure that these new provisions are used;
- work with local admission forums to help them promote needs of children in care in school admissions; and
- monitor school admissions of children in care to ensure that they get places in high quality schools that best meet their needs.

Designated teachers

17. All schools should appoint a designated teacher for children in care.

Having a teacher who understands the needs of children in care; who takes lead responsibility for raising their educational attainment; and who identifies their learning needs and puts in place appropriate teaching and learning provision, can have a marked impact on their education.

18. Designated teachers should work to ensure the progression of all children in care in the school, leading work with colleagues to make sure that provision is put in place to aid continual progress, as well as working with children's carers and promoting good home-school links. Local authorities should provide training for designated teachers and ensure that they are provided with the support needed to effectively carry out their role.

19. A good relationship between designated teacher, social worker, primary carer and the child will be fundamental to improving outcomes. The virtual school head will need to ensure that these relationships are encouraged and developed.

Actions

- act as a source of advice and information for designated teachers and school heads;
- act as a point of contact within the local authority for designated teachers;
- oversee the provision of training for designated teachers, ensuring that it is of high quality and that it is taken up by all schools; and
- help to spread good practice, for example by setting up networks of designated teachers.

Personal education plans

20. A fundamental part of the care planning process for children in care is their personal education plan (PEP). The PEP is part of the statutory care plan and forms the basis for discussion between the child, carers and school about his/her educational needs. All children in care should have a PEP covering their record of achievements, identification of their educational and developmental needs, clear attainment targets and long-term aspirations. It should set out what is needed to ensure the progression of each child or young person in care.

21. When a child comes into care it is the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that the PEP process has been initiated. However, the involvement of the designated teacher in the design and delivery of PEPs is crucial to ensuring it meets children and young people's learning needs, that appropriate teaching and learning strategies are identified and that it is implemented by the school.

22. PEPs need to be used proactively as a tool for developing and implementing an appropriate education package for a child in care.

23. The virtual school head has an important role in working with social workers and designated teachers to ensure that PEPs are high quality and meet the needs of children in care.

Actions

- put in place a system to quality assure the authority's personal education plans;
- work with social workers to ensure they understand the importance of the input of the designated teacher in the developing and implementing the PEP, and putting in place appropriate teaching and learning strategies;
- work with schools, and designated teachers in particular, to ensure they understand the importance of their input into the PEP; and
- ensure that PEPs are assessed as part of a child's statutory review, that they are kept up to date to and reflect a child's learning needs.

School attendance

24. Children in care experience higher rates of absence than other children. In 2006, 13% of children in care had 25 or more day's absence from school (National). Evidence shows the detrimental effect that this has on their education.

Actions

- ensure rates of absence for different schools and for individual children are monitored and take action where necessary;
- work with schools to identify the reasons for high rates of absence and establish ways in which it can be addressed, helping schools to develop strategies to improve the attendance of children in care;
- work across the local authority to ensure other services support ways to improve the attendance of children in care;

School exclusion

25. Children in care are around eight times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers (National figures). Exclusion from school – and permanent exclusion in particular – further increases the disruption to their education. It can place great strain on care placements and lead to even more disruption in a child's life.

26. Exclusion of children in care should be an absolute last resort. It is vital that schools and local authorities take every practicable means to maintain children in care in school. Before excluding, schools, in conjunction with the local authority, should first consider alternative options for supporting the child or young person. No child in care should be excluded from a school without discussion with the local authority to ensure that there is suitable alternative provision available elsewhere.

27. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires full time education to be provided from the sixth day of exclusion. However, such a break in education will impact on the education of children in care. To ensure there is minimal disruption to their education, it is the Government's view that, for children in care, schools or local authorities (as appropriate) should arrange alternative provision from the first day of exclusion.

28. Schools which are most successful in preventing exclusion have policies which tackle underlying causes of poor behaviour with strategies such as pastoral support programmes and intervention from behaviour support specialists.

Actions

- monitor rates of fixed period and permanent exclusions for children in care;
- work with schools to identify the reasons why an exclusion is thought to be necessary, the particular needs of the child or young person, and ways in which those needs can be addressed and the need for exclusion reduced;
- where appropriate / needed, help organise provision from other children's services to reduce the need for exclusion, including identifying how schools working in partnership can help remove the causes of exclusion; and
- ensure that where a child or young person in care is excluded the school or local authority (as appropriate) has organised appropriate high quality provision.

Special educational needs

29. 28% of children in care have statement of special educational needs compared to 3% of all children (Nationally). Meeting these needs is central to ensuring that they receive a high quality education. This may require partnership working between schools, the local authority and health services to ensure that children or young people's needs are met.

Action

- working with School Improvement Partners, SEN governors, SENCOs and/or the designated lead on SEN and disability issues on a school senior leadership teams, act as champion for children in care with SEN or a disability across schools, the local authority, health and other services to help ensure that necessary services are provided – resolving problems as they arise; and
- align one of the personal education plan (PEP) reviews with the review of statements of SEN (as recommended in paragraph 9.27 of the SEN Code of Practice) and ensure that provision for SEN is factored in to the design and delivery of personal education plans

Extended services

30. Evidence shows that participation in extended services helps to improve the education and development of children and young people. It can be particularly beneficial to those in care who may need additional support with their learning and social and emotional development.

31. *Care Matters: Time for Change* sets out a range of measures to improve children and young people in care's access to extended services, including: free part time access to extended schools (two hours a week and two weeks during the holidays); free music provision; priority in local authority youth work; and encouraging local authorities to make their leisure provision free for children and young people in care.

Actions

- identify whether there are particular issues in the local authority in relation to children and young people in care accessing extended services.
- work with those developing extended services to ensure that they meet the particular needs of children and young people in care;
- work across the local authority, and its partner organisations, to ensure that access to other leisure and youth services, including school trips, are made available to children in care; and
- monitor the take up of extended services, school trips and leisure activities by children in care; where take up is low the virtual school head should investigate why and act to remove barriers to participation in these services.
- develop personalised programmes for extended activity
- develop the "super camp" or "accelerated school" model

Working with carers

32. Evidence shows the importance of the home learning environment – what parents and carers do has one of the biggest impacts on the education of children and young people. Foster carers and residential social workers are central to creating a culture where children in care aspire to achieve, to supporting their learning and to developing wider interpersonal and social skills, which are vital to raising attainment.

Actions

- Develop and work with programmes designed to help parents / carers to improve their literacy skills - eg family literacy and numeracy

programmes - to ensure that foster carers access these services;

- work with schools to ensure that they proactively engage carers – eg in attendance at parent’s evenings – and that *Home School Agreements* work effectively for foster carers and residential care workers

Setting up the virtual school model

It is the intention to develop a coherent and co-ordinated approach through the use of the “school” model; the virtual Headteacher will therefore set up a strategy which will model good practice in a “real” school including governance, accountability and student voice functions

Actions

- develop a school improvement plan
- develop a virtual “school council” or “advisory body” from the students
- set up virtual school governing body
- develop the role of virtual school SIP
- write an annual SEF
- develop a virtual school web presence

“Virtual potential”

We have the technology to provide an enhanced experience through web based applications and opportunities for our LAC students.

Actions:

- develop a school web presence which includes:
 - a personalised learning environment,
 - e portfolio,
 - messaging services
 - wider Children’s services
 - academic mentoring
 - social and emotional support

Educational Attainments for Looked After Children 2007/08

CLA Attainment

CLA comparison with the National and Sunderland 2007

All children

	%	%	%
key stage 1 level 2	Sunderland	National LAC	Sunderland LAC
Key stage 1 reading	82	56	45.45
Key stage 1 writing	77	50	18.18
Key stage 1 maths	88	67	63.64
key stage 2 level 4	Sunderland	National LAC	Sunderland LAC
Key stage 2 english	79	44	41.38
Key stage 2 maths	77	41	31.03
Key stage 2 science	88	62	48.28
key stage 3 level 5	Sunderland	National LAC	Sunderland LAC
Key stage 3 english	69	30	31.43
Key stage 3 maths	74	34	28.57
Key stage 3 science	69	29	31.43
GCSE based on OC2 Children in care	Sunderland	National LAC	Sunderland LAC
One + AG	98	62	68.42
Five + AG	91	41	50.00
Five + AC	59	11	21.05
GCSE based on PAF A2 – 2008 Care leavers	Sunderland	National LAC	Sunderland LAC
One + AG	98	62	78.00
Five + AG	91	41	34.40
Five + AC	59	11	6.25