Joining the dots

Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network Summary of 2020-2021 Evaluation Report

Michael Bettencourt, Education Consultant, CELCIS, and Dr Leanne McIver, Research Associate, CELCIS

> **"I am grateful to our partners at CELCIS and the sixteen local authorities involved for their leadership, enthusiasm and commitment in driving this work forward."**
>
> - **Scottish Government Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville**

Context

As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, funding was made available to local authorities to provide additional support for the education of children and young people with care experience. At present, 16 of Scotland's 32 local authorities have chosen to allocate this to funding the establishment of a post or team with a focus on improving the educational outcomes and experiences of children and young people with care experience. These posts or teams are often referred to as Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHT) or Care Experienced Teams (CET). The VSHT or CET has a responsibility for all children and young people with care experience within a local authority, regardless of what physical school the children and young people attend.

The Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' (CET) Network (the Network) was established by CELCIS in March 2019 to support and connect those working in the role. The aim of this evaluation was to consider the development, impact and work of virtual schools and the Network.

Methodology

In a facilitated discussion in May 2019, Network members were asked to reflect on their aspirations for their roles. An analysis of their responses identified themes which were used as a frame to consider the impact and success of their work. These themes were used as the basis for semi-structured interviews conducted online with 14 of the 16 Network members in summer 2021. This report refers to the 14 members who participated in the evaluation interviews.

Findings

The Network

- **Members described benefits to being part of the Network, including access to peer support, having a safe space for discussion, opportunities for collaboration, personal development, and influencing local and national agendas.**
- **VSHTs and CETs made substantial connections both within local authorities and with external partners to link up different parts of the system (care and education), and promote collaborative working.**
- **Network members, without exception, showed passion and commitment to the children and young people they are responsible for supporting.**

The Network started with nine members and at present has 16 members, representing half of Scotland's local authorities, and covering an estimated two thirds of 'looked after' children and young people.

The purpose of the Network is to:

- Share practice
- Improve education
- Influence nationally
- Measure impact

Members described benefits including peer support, making links with Scottish Government colleagues, having connections with identified contacts for information sharing, being able to respond to and shape national policy areas, raising awareness of issues of equity for children and young people with care experience, and developing the credibility of the role:

> **"...Making you feel as if you're kind of not on your own and being able to pick up the phone and speak to somebody about, about something that actually no one else in [this local authority] would really probably get, because no one else is doing this role."**
>
> **- Member of the VSHT Network**

Variations between local authorities

- **Network members worked in different ways and at different levels of the system, using challenge and support to bring about change in practice, culture and ethos.**
- **Network members struck a balance between strategic and operational work, with each taking a purposeful approach based upon the context. Roles which were situated within both education and social work were felt to be more effective at promoting collaborative working.**

Members highlighted the importance of initiating and developing relationships as the foundation of their work. They spoke about membership of the Network being beneficial to them in terms of building relationships with each other, and between local authorities. They described how their roles and position within the local authority enabled them to create and strengthen connections between education and social work, and other partner agencies:

> **"I was based in the education office but spent as much time in the social work office"**
>
> **- Member of the VSHT Network**

Due to the organic way that the role had developed, there was some variation between local authorities in how the role was being developed and implemented. A common area of variation included members' job titles, job family, and level of seniority. These differences meant that there were variations between whether the role had a focus on system change or operational practice. All members spoke of moving easily between strategic and operational tasks according to the support required by learners or colleagues. As a result of these variations, some members had responsibility for line management of staff, budgets and commissioning of services where others did not.

Data

- **Good progress towards accessing robust and accurate data gave participants increased confidence that they identified pupils within their remit. Network members were actively working to address data challenges.**

Members reported knowing children and young people with care experience to different degrees and difficulties in keeping track of changes in their circumstances. Some were developing a deeper knowledge of their profiles but this depended upon the nature of the service VSHTs were providing, the geography of local authorities, and challenges presented by the pandemic. Members had a range of approaches to access and manage the information needed to support their work. Most had created their own databases, some had specialist staff including data analysts, administrators and IT specialists who were working with them to access or align different systems.

Support and Interventions

- **Network members described working closely with families, carers, schools and social workers to understand and respond to need. Support and interventions were offered at an individual, school, cluster and local authority level, according to local context.**

Members described a range of supports offered by their team and local authority. VSHT and CET targeted interventions at different levels of the system. Most members described services as being increasingly collaborative and joined up working being accelerated both by the COVID-19 pandemic and their remit.

Visibility and Accessibility

- **Network members reported that visibility and accessibility to local authority colleagues had improved. The substantial number of connections made by post holders improved visibility as well as increased understanding of the educational needs of children and young people with care experience.**

Members, or those with teams, who were based jointly in education and social work, or those who worked closely between the two, spoke about the benefits of increased visibility and accessibility, including promoting joint working, raising awareness of the role, developing credibility, and accessing information to plan support for learners.

Capacity building and legacy

- **Network members identified advantages and disadvantages of home working and remote learning. They used a range of creative approaches to maintain connection, engagement and offer support during pandemic restrictions.**
- **VSHTs and CETs were able to identify and adapt to the changing emotional needs of children, young people, families, and schools at different stages of the pandemic.**

Members' main focus was around enabling schools to better understand their role in recognising and meeting the needs of children and young people with care experience. Participants described multiple instances where support from the VSHT or CET had made a difference to children and young people with care experience and staff. Direct work in schools had been impacted by restrictions but also created opportunities for greater depth of support. Some raised concerns around the sustainability of additional support financed through pandemic recovery funding:

"There is one lad who wasn't in school for two years and in the last year he hasn't gone to school, but he had an alternative timetable and he's got seven qualifications. He is my pride and joy. So I have improved one child's attainment this year. Not just one, but that one really matters. That was really deep work and hopefully transformative in that lad's life."

- Member of the VSHT Network

Conclusion

The virtual school model is being implemented in half of local authorities in Scotland. Network members have reported progress towards goals identified in May 2019 and in relation to findings, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was little which had been put on hold, although the work did not always take place to the extent that had been intended.

VSHTs and CETs are inhabiting the space between policy ambition and the reality of practice. Members of the Network have met consistently to support each other, grow organically and respond dynamically to local and national need. Together, they are playing a key role in shaping a system where all children and young people get a quality education. Virtual schools are one example of an innovation that is making connections, building capacity and bringing energy to create opportunities for children and young people with care experience. Findings from this evaluation further demonstrate the importance of making, building and sustaining these connections as a means of driving improvement and supporting the ambitions of The Promise.