

The Virtual School: Multiple Levels of Support

Context

All children require a degree of support on their journey through education. Children and young people with care experience are more likely to live with a degree of complexity in their lives and can benefit from bespoke support that is able to change and adapt according to their unique circumstances and needs. Research is pointing towards the Virtual School as a comprehensive approach that offers multiple levels of support to children, families and schools,ⁱ with the potential to bring about change and improvement to the education system.ⁱⁱ

North Lanarkshire Council is a local authority in central Scotland, which borders the northeast of Glasgow, and has approximately 1400 care experienced learners enrolled in over 150 primary, secondary and Additional Support Needs (ASN) schools. The post of Virtual School Head in North Lanarkshire was created in January 2019, with Mary Jane Hunter recruited in May 2019. This case study describes how Mary Jane grew and developed a new Virtual School service over three years in response to the needs of children, families and those who teach and support them.

What were the circumstances?

Mary Jane came into post with a broad brief to improve the education, health and wellbeing of care experienced learners and their families. She acknowledged that there was no blueprint for the role and the reality of the scope and reach of the role felt like, in her words “being fired out into the stratosphere.” Whilst North Lanarkshire Council had taken advice on adopting the Virtual School model, they were very much at the beginning of the journey. The first issue that struck Mary Jane was a lack of clarity on who the care experienced children locally were, as there was a mismatch in lists held by education, social care and schools. The second was that her team included two highly skilled members of social care staff seconded to distribute care experience funding but who did not have the relevant data, information and experience of the education system to make the most effective use of these resources.

What did the VSHT do?

Mary Jane took a three-pronged approach to her broad remit. These were inevitably interlinked, ran parallel and fed into each other. A priority was to understand who their children were and collect accurate up-to-date data. This was a journey that took six months and required getting to grips with the complexity

of creating a bespoke database for the Virtual School. The challenge was to bring together both education and social care information and for this to interact dynamically with schools and others so that it both informed and was updated by them.

In order to further understand her role and to collect data and create connections with colleagues, Mary Jane went on a self-styled 'publicity rodeo', akin to an informal consultation process. She met with a range of professionals within the complex ecosystem that surrounds care experienced young people in North Lanarkshire. This included attending head teacher meetings and individual visits to secondary schools, as well as meetings with local authority senior managers, social work teams, children's houses and with carers. She shared a short presentation, describing her role and remit and posed the question 'what service do you need?' Mary Jane really wanted to understand from all the individuals and services who support, teach and live with care experienced young people what an additional layer of support could actually mean to them.

Running alongside this, she was recruiting staff to a new Virtual School service using findings and reflections from meetings with partners, schools and carers to inform the process. As staff were recruited, they were involved in these discussions and meetings and were therefore getting an insight into the expectations, hopes and needs of care experienced learners as well as those who support and teach them.

What difference did this make?

Since coming into post, Mary Jane has grown and substantially developed an education support service from an initial team of three, to a core staff team of thirteen, which includes support staff, four teachers and administrative support. The service moved from being reactive and allocating support based on requests, to being proactive and being able to base action and decisions on live data as well as need. Whilst there were inherent difficulties in keeping up with changes, the team have designed and developed a database that holds information on both traditional attainment and wider measures of achievement, wellbeing and development. The Virtual School systematically sends information to [designated managers](#) in schools so that care experienced learners can be identified and supported. This raises awareness of the cohort in each school and facilitates mutual data sharing, and perhaps more importantly, it encourages collaborative discussions between the Virtual School and teaching staff. Mary Jane has seen a shift in mindset, with more schools having an increasingly empathic understanding of their care experienced learners and their families and taking a strength based, as opposed to a crisis-based, approach. They look to the Virtual School to

consult, seek advice and solve problems collaboratively rather than provide a quick fix solution.

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The Virtual School team are networked into and attend a number of key meetings at every level of the ecosystem around their care experienced learners. This has created links in and between departments, for example social care and education, as well as between individuals such as kinship carers and teachers. This strategic, web-like oversight, coupled with relevant, accurate, up-to-date data has facilitated and mutually reinforced the reach of both operational and strategic interventions which are delivered at child, family, school and local authority level.

Mary Jane produces an annual self-evaluation of the Virtual School which attempts to capture the difference that the service is making for children and families that it supports, and in the local authority. It includes quantitative measures, for example 35 young people achieving a national qualification, as well as qualitative measures such as feedback from families on how holiday activities supported a family's finances and wellbeing. She is keen to be able to give a nuanced account that captures the impact the service is having that takes into account both traditional metrics as well as articulating changes in attitude and ethos.

Implications for practice

The VSHT in North Lanarkshire came into post feeling both daunted and freed by a remit to impact on a group of over fourteen hundred learners and their families. A reported strength of the role for many VSHT in Scotland has been the freedom to develop a service organically, responding to the local context and adapting as they go to follow the education trajectories of individual learners.ⁱⁱⁱ This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as the Virtual School model demonstrated a flexibility to adapt to prioritise the education of care experienced learners as well as being on the front line of practical, emotional and financial support for families.^{iv} Perhaps what is most significant is the potential of the model to have a strategic impact across the complex ecosystem that surrounds care experienced learners by raising awareness of

their needs and promoting new creative initiatives, as well as 'tackling systemic problems'.^v

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ⁱ Drew, H., & Banerjee, R. (2019). Supporting the education and well-being of children who are looked-after: what is the role of the virtual school?. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 34(1), 101-121.

ⁱⁱ Jackson, S. (2015). The virtual school for children in out-of-home care: A strategic approach to improving their educational attainment. *Children Australia*, 40(4), 327-334.

ⁱⁱⁱ McIver, L. (2021). [Joining the Dots: Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' Network 2020-2021 Evaluation Report](#). Glasgow. CELCIS.

^{iv} Deeley, S., & O'Neill, L. (2020). [Exploring the unique role of the Virtual School Head Teacher or Care Experienced Team in relation to supporting children and families during COVID-19](#). Glasgow. CELCIS.

^v Berridge, D. (2012). Reflections on child welfare research and the policy process: Virtual school heads and the education of looked after children. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(1), 26-41.