



**Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection**

A role profile for a Virtual School Head Teacher in Scotland



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June 2025

DOI: [10.17868/strath.00092849](https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00092849)

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Thank you to the Virtual School Head Teachers' Network, CELCIS Consultants with lived experience, and colleagues from Education Scotland and the Scottish Government for sharing their time, experience, and voices with us.

Supported by the



Foreword

'Virtual Schools' for care experienced learners have existed in England since 2007 and in Scotland since 2015. Even at an early stage, several local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales recognised the potential of the model and developed their own provision ahead of any published research, national initiative or statutory requirements.

Of course, Virtual Schools did not arise from nowhere. Most local authorities across the UK already had teams dedicated to providing additional educational support to care experienced children and young people. The step change provided by the Virtual School model was to envisage a role that was more strategic, outward-facing and relational, taking a holistic perspective on children and young people's lives and situating their education within the wider context of home, care arrangements, health and wellbeing. Virtual Schools were tasked with advocating for children and young people and centring their education as a key feature of their care

experience – a protective factor and a pathway to improved life chances.

There is good evidence that Virtual Schools are working. Educational statistics rarely see seismic shifts, but there were incremental improvements in outcomes for children in care in England after 2014, when Virtual Schools became statutory, until they were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ However, the Achilles heel of the Virtual School system in England is that the policy framework is very limited. Beyond the existence of a responsible Virtual School Head, little is specified, and a diverse multitude of flowers has therefore bloomed. No two



“There is good evidence that Virtual Schools are working”

Virtual Schools are configured the same – staffing levels, organisational locations, professional experience, administrative systems and resourcing models vary widely.

This is manifest in the marked differences in educational outcomes between local authorities. For example, attainment at age 16 is twice as high in some local authority areas than others.² Perhaps surprisingly, these differences are neither related to levels

of deprivation nor outcomes for children who are not in care.³ Rather, our research indicated that care experienced learners often achieved better results in areas where there was greater deprivation, and their results were not closely tied to overall local authority performance. *Local factors including the nature and effectiveness of the Virtual School must therefore play the most important part.*

What this means is that the educational opportunities available to children in care are strongly linked to where they live – a classic ‘postcode lottery’. The moral implications of this are obvious. If we could raise outcomes to the level of the local authority with the highest, we would make significant inroads into the persistent attainment gaps. One pathway to achieving this would be to ensure that the Virtual School in every local authority has a strong platform and a clear set of expectations from which to work.

In our 2023 [KPMG Foundation report](#), we concluded that many elements of effectiveness derived from the actions of the Virtual School Head Teacher themselves – either the influence that they were able to exert internally *within* the local authority or externally in their relationships with ‘physical’ schools and other organisations. Our interviews suggested that Virtual School Head Teachers who had high expectations, understood the systems around the child, had access to key decision-makers and knew how to effect change were at the heart of effective Virtual Schools.

This is why the current work in Scotland is so important and so promising. There is a timely opportunity to establish clear expectations about the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher and how they are positioned within each local authority. This should lead to a more consistent and legible approach across the nation, making it easier for other agencies, schools, colleges, universities, families and young people to understand what Virtual Schools do and how to engage with them. Indeed, there are reasons to

hypothesise that Virtual Schools could prove to be more effective in Scotland than in England. The links that Scottish local authorities have with their schools are significantly stronger than in England, where the academisation programme has disrupted relationships and often made it harder for Virtual School Heads to advocate for children in care.

I congratulate the CELCIS team and the Scottish Virtual School Head Teacher’s Network on their work so far. I am delighted that our findings in England have proved useful in informing these developments in Scotland and I am hopeful that this work will now filter back into England and help inform efforts in Wales, where a Virtual School model is also being trialled.

Neil Harrison

Professor of Education and Social Justice, University of Exeter

Introduction

This report provides an evidence-informed profile for the role of a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT⁴) in Scotland. It has been written collaboratively by the [Virtual School Head Teachers' Network](#) in Scotland and researchers, practitioners and colleagues in Scotland, Wales and England. The VSHT Network is facilitated and hosted by CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde.

The development of this profile has been undertaken to promote consistency of practice and experience for the education of care experienced children and young people. The VSHT Network has a [vision](#), and, informed by the incorporation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child into Scots law, is contributing towards ensuring all care experienced learners are supported to access their right to education and ensure that Scotland keeps [The Promise of the Independent Care Review](#). Taken together, the profile, the sample job description and template advert, aim to create a framework that ensures that Virtual School Head Teachers can provide consistency in access to high-quality, needs-led education and support for care experienced learners, primarily for the Scottish context, with implications and learning across the UK.

A Virtual School Head Teacher is a senior member of education staff who works at a strategic level with a focus to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced learners.⁵ Their reach goes beyond academic learning and has an impact on children's rights,⁶ their wellbeing⁷ and stability,⁸ by working with people who live with, teach and support children and young people with care experience.⁹ The 'Virtual School' is the organisational framework that describes the children that the Head Teacher is responsible for, as if they attended a single school.



Context: why a role profile is needed

The role of the Virtual School Head Teacher is relatively new in the UK.¹⁰ The Welsh government launched a pilot in 2021 which will potentially see the VSHT role implemented in nine of its 22 local authorities.¹¹ In Scotland, there are 19 VSHT (or equivalent) in 32 local authorities. In England, the role of the Virtual School Head (VSH) has been statutory since 2014, with all English local authorities required to have a VSH in post.

In all local authority areas in Scotland, England and Wales, VSHTs work with a wide range of partners to support care experienced learners in a variety of ways on their journey through education and into further and higher education, training and employment. However, the role is developing differently in each of these nations, and each is on a different timeline due to variations in implementation and legislative context. Concerns have been consistently highlighted by practitioners, children's services leaders and VSHTs themselves, through professional discussion and in research literature, about variation between local authorities, the restrictions of time limited funding and infringements on the role. The children's services profession has raised concerns that the role's focused mission to support care experienced learners is at risk of being lost or diluted due to financial and operational pressures within local authorities.

A series of recently published research and policy papers - referred to in this report - have been consistent in the key messages of their findings and analysis. All point towards the strengths of the Virtual School approach as a model which is having a positive impact on care experienced learners. The publications echo previous research on the role and identify VSHTs as being particularly skilled

at creating relationships and connecting individuals and different parts of an organisation to influence positive systemic change. There is also a consensus amongst the research that points towards risks, which include variations between jurisdictions leading to unequal provision in different local authorities¹², described as 'territorial injustice'¹³ or 'the postcode lottery'. Other concerns include the dangers of scope creep,¹⁴ short-term financial funding,¹⁵ and a need to promote a better understanding of the work.¹⁶

"All point towards the strengths of the Virtual School approach as a model which is having a positive impact on care experienced learners."

This has led to the determination of the Scottish VSHT Network to work towards defining the core functions of the role. Members of the Network mapped provision in each of their local authorities to produce an output that would bring together a 'baseline' that defines the key tasks and activities that should be present in each of the roles held by members of the Network. This was regarded as being required to help future-proof the role against some of the risks identified and to promote a consistency for care experienced children and young people wherever they live.

Recommendations

These recommendations were informed by analysis and discussion with Virtual School Head Teachers and practitioners from across the UK, working alongside researchers who specialise in supporting the education of care experienced learners. They are a guide to be used alongside the advert and job descriptions to support the definition of the VSHT role.

1. The role of the Virtual School Head Teacher should be grounded in values of credibility, strong relationship-building across individuals and organisations, adaptability in the face of complexity, tenacity in championing children's rights, and the courage to speak out to drive systemic change.

2. Efforts should be made to raise awareness and promote a better understanding of the purpose and function of the Virtual School Head Teacher role, including further discussion and engagement with care experienced children and young people, families, carers and those who work with them.

3. The Virtual School Head Teacher should be line managed by a senior local authority education leader who understands the Virtual School model. The post-holder should be supported to have access to senior managers and local authority governance to represent the needs of care experienced learners and influence the culture the highest level.

4. Local authorities using or planning to use the Virtual School Model in Scotland should adopt the eight areas of responsibility to frame, advertise, recruit and describe the duties of the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher to maintain purpose and focus on care experienced learners.

5. The Virtual School Head Teacher has clearly defined tasks which empower them to make a significant impact for care experienced learners.

6. Virtual School Head Teachers in Scotland will have qualified teacher status, a leadership qualification and current registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

7. The Virtual School Head Teacher will have operational and strategic experience of offering academic, social and emotional support to individuals and groups of learners in an education setting.

How did we compile this profile?

Members of the Scottish VSHT Network have had regular debate and discussions, underpinned by research and evidence, about a shared desire to create a universally agreed description of their role, which could be described as 'core requirements for success.' This was underpinned and further reinforced by a presentation to Network members by CELCIS, which summarised a series of national and international peer reviewed research and policy publications, cited above, which reflected their concerns. These included:

- A lack of understanding and misconception of what VSHTs are and a real understanding of the valuable support they offer.
- A risk of regional variation leading to unequal access to provision and resources between different local authority areas.
- The dangers of 'scope creep', that is, additional responsibilities being added to the role, potentially threatening and diluting the original focused mission.
- Accounting for the impact of work that often happens behind the scenes

What we did

There were three phases to the creation of this job profile:

Phase 1: Evidence review and practice mapping

Phase 2: Research practice partnership

Phase 3: Evidence synthesis and co-creation

Evidence review and practice mapping

In the first phase, members of the VSHT Network were informed by the KPMG Foundation report, [Improving the effectiveness of virtual schools](#), a substantive piece of research on the role, structure and models of virtual schools in England. CELCIS carried out a mapping exercise of provision from answers to questions that were put to members of the VSHT Network, resulting in the identification of similarities and differences in the features of Virtual Schools in Scotland, including in structure, staffing, approach and funding in sixteen local authorities. CELCIS also analysed the job descriptions of ten current post-holders and shared this with Network members. Together, post-holders were tasked to carry out up to 200 duties sitting under 20 thematic areas

of responsibility. From this evidence, colleagues noted the broadening range of responsibilities, which expanded to encompass an increasing number of policy areas. Whilst there was a logical link to certain policy areas, there was a consensus that, in many cases, job descriptions had, and continued to, evolve beyond the initial scope of the role.

Research practice partnership

In the second phase, CELCIS convened a face-to-face 'research practice partnership' event, bringing together 15 VSHTs from Scotland, Wales and England. The lead author of the KPMG Foundation report, Professor Neil Harrison, presented the paper and participants discussed how the research findings and experiences of those in England and Wales were relevant to the Scottish context. These included:

- Mission drift and identity
- The status of Virtual School Head Teachers
- Variation in outcomes according to local authority
- Different models and structures of Virtual Schools
- 'Principles of Effectiveness', which included:
 - Skills and experience of the post-holder
 - The stability of funding
 - Relationships with key decision makers
 - The impact that VSHTs make on where children live



The questions and observations posed at the meeting for participants to consider were:

1 Research articles have suggested that the Virtual School Head Teacher job title is confusing and does not do justice to the role. Do you think the job title should be changed? If yes, what do you think it should be changed to?

2 To be most effective, who should line manage this role and where in Children's Services should it sit?

3 What are the key areas of focus for this role?

4 How can we best demonstrate how we have made a difference for children, young people, their families and carers?

5 What qualifications, experience and attributes are required for this role?

Evidence synthesis and co-creation

In the final phase of the process, contributors to the process worked together to input into, comment on, write and edit the role profile and accompanying resources, namely the sample advert and job description. Throughout the process, we have sought to gain consensus but acknowledge that this has not meant absolute agreement from everybody we have engaged with. There are necessarily regional and national variations in the role of the VSHT, but our focus and steer has

been on inviting participants to focus on joint commonalities to prevent 'mission drift' and enable a clear focus on the needs of care experienced learners. This final profile represents the best possible synthesis bringing together the range views of practitioners, consultants with lived experience, researchers and policy makers.

Virtual Schools were tasked with advocating for children and young people and centring their education as a key feature of their care experience – a protective factor and a pathway to improved life chances.



Components of the role profile

1: Values

Few research papers explicitly considered the professional skills needed for the role of a VSHT, but there are allusions and points of reference within some research. One paper from the United States makes a bid for the adults in children's lives to 'aggressively' pursue educational supports as a required strategy for supporting care experienced learners.¹⁷ Another suggests that a high degree of tenacity and resolve is needed to ensure all agencies deliver on their commitment to care experienced learners.¹⁸ A thread that runs through almost every paper on Virtual Schools underscores collaboration, pre-existing professional relationships and post-holders as the glue,¹⁹ crossroads,²⁰ and as speaking both the languages of education and social care.²¹ VSHTs are described as having system wisdom, knowing how to make things happen, merging an ability to navigate the complexity of the system whilst advocating for and representing the needs of care experienced children and young people.

The professional traits needed for a job and the values of organisations inevitably differ and most could be used generically to describe parallel caring and teaching roles. Whilst all participants in the

development of the profile subscribed to the General Teaching Council for Scotland values, they pointed towards attributes that they considered were also required, in addition, for the post of a VSHT. The values that attendees considered most pertinent to this role were summarised as:

- Integrity: being credible, warm and engendering trust.
- Collaboration: building relationships and connections between diverse parts of the children's services sector.
- Adaptability: creativity, inventiveness and being able to adapt to complexity.
- Persistence: tenacity, resolve and a sense of social purpose in championing and securing children rights.
- Courage: politically wise and willing to speak out, advocate and have high expectations to bring about systemic change.

Recommendation one

The role of the Virtual School Head Teacher should be grounded in values of credibility, strong relationship-building across individuals and organisations, adaptability in the face of complexity, tenacity in championing children's rights, and the courage to speak out to drive systemic change.

2: Perceptions of the role

The Virtual School model is an approach for supporting the education of care experienced learners by appointing a person or team to have overarching responsibility for a group of learners as if they attend one single school.²²

Questions and concerns have been raised by those in post about the Virtual School Head Teacher job title causing confusion.²³ For some post-holders, the term 'Virtual' does not capture the nature or complexity of the role and the breadth of practical support that is offered to children, families and the services around them. In a digital era, the term is arguably more aligned with online desk-based working and conjures a remote image.²⁴

Research on the structure and the impact of the role is emerging and, although it is evolving in different ways, there is a consistency in the description of the key features of the model. It:

- Is led by an individual or team with specific responsibility for the education of all care experienced learners in the local authority, regardless of which physical education establishment learners attend.²⁵
- Aims to bring about positive and sustainable change in policy and practice.²⁶
- Works across all levels of the care and education 'systems'.²⁷
- Emphasises the building of collaborative relationships internally and externally between different agencies.²⁸
- Focuses on education but addresses wider societal factors such as poverty, psychological well-being and children's rights.²⁹

Practice experience, reinforced by a series of articles and research publications, suggests a misunderstanding of the role and function of Virtual Schools. This is further complicated by the title 'virtual' and the mental image of online learning that it suggests. The word 'virtual' in relation to this model is currently more prevalent in England, where it is the form of wording used in statute despite reservations and reported frustration from those in post. 'Virtual School Head Teacher' is the term that has evolved and is more commonly used in Scotland. There was a split in consensus on whether the name should be changed in Scotland amongst participants involved in developing the role profile. Many wanted the name to remain unchanged given that it is the term that is now in general currency. Others called for a revision of terminology. Both agreed that there was a need to ensure the role was more accurately understood.

Recommendation two

Efforts should be made to raise awareness and promote a better understanding of the purpose and function of the Virtual School Head Teacher role, including further discussion and engagement with care experienced children and young people, families, carers and those who work with them.

3. Place in organisational structure

There are differences across Scotland in where the Virtual School is located within the Children's Services' organisational structure. There are also significant differences in terms of seniority of the post in local authorities across in England. There are local authorities with one person in post and others who have a team. To date, no one model has been found to more successful, in improving children's outcomes, than another; however, effectiveness was impacted by the stability of funding, the skills of the VSHT and their relationship with key decision makers.³⁰

Whether the service was line managed or located within a particular discipline was less important than empowering the post-holder to create effective links both internally and externally. VSHTs were found to be most effective when positioned to make changes, implement policies and influence the ethos of the local authority and the wider organisations that support children and their families.³¹

In some local authorities the service is co-located both in education and social care services or line-managed by a Chief Education and Social Work Officer. The practitioners consulted for the development of this role profile pointed towards an integrated mindset that views children holistically and bridges



the gaps that can exist between services. Most of them agreed that there were sound strategic reasons for a VSHT to be strategically located within education but links with social care are fundamental. The research literature indicates that the role benefits from access and lines of communication with senior leadership and governance that goes onto influence decision making and the culture of the whole local authority.^{32 33}

Recommendation three

The Virtual School Head Teacher should be line managed by a senior local authority education leader who understands the Virtual School model. The post-holder should be supported to have access to senior managers and local authority governance to represent the needs of care experienced learners and influence the culture at the highest level.

4. Areas of focus

The analysis of job descriptions shared at the research practice partnership convened by CELCIS highlighted up to 200 different tasks and activities that, post-holders in Scotland may have as part of their role, sitting under 20 thematic areas of responsibility. Policy and planning, collaborative working and managing data were the most common.

The following were agreed as the eight areas that post-holders should be responsible for:

- Listening to the views of care experienced learners and to the people who live with, support and teach them to ensure that views of all are represented.
- Overseeing, co-ordinating and ensuring appropriate support to care experienced learners, their families and carers, education providers and partners.
- Collecting a range of information to analyse and report on the journey of care experienced learners through education to understand and describe progress and the difference that is being made for them.
- Interpreting and developing policies specifically related to the needs of individual and groups of care experienced learners, ensuring that policies and initiatives relating to care experience are effectively implemented and sustained in practice over time.
- Offering a range of professional growth opportunities, consultation and advice to education providers, families, carers and relevant partners on the support that care experienced learners need to succeed.
- Contributing towards the stability of care experienced learners' home life and school life.
- Working with a range of partners and services both internally and externally to lead and manage educational initiatives for care experienced learners.
- Managing, influencing and deploying budgets, finance and resources and contributing towards decisions around commissioning.

Recommendation four

Local authorities using or planning to use the Virtual School Model in Scotland adopt the eight areas of responsibility to frame, advertise, recruit and describe the duties of the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher to maintain purpose and focus on care experienced learners.

5. Core tasks

The work of VSHTs can influence how care experienced children and young people are taught, the environments where they live and learn, their psychological safety and contribute towards the stability of their home life and school life. However, a key finding from the KPMG Foundation report, [Improving the effectiveness of virtual schools](#) that resonated with participants consulted for the development of the role profile is that post-holders are routinely held accountable for areas of work which are beyond their control or which they are only able to indirectly influence. For example, participants told us that collating and analysing key metrics, performance indicators and targets about the education of care experienced learners are a key part of their role. However, they were also keen to underscore the complexity of the context and the need for a nuanced understanding of factors that can influence the education of care experienced learners, including moving home or experiencing a traumatic life event. Factors such as these can mean that traditional metrics may not capture the impact that VSHTs make on the journey of care experienced learners through education nor be able to adequately reflect the development of care experienced learners' skills or progress. The qualitative aspects and the importance of building relationships are key and should be built into any narrative or analysis of headline measures.

In the research partnership meeting CELCIS convened, participants were asked to think about what they considered to be the core functions of the role that they *could* directly and positively influence and

that would appropriately align with the purpose of the role. The core tasks were identified as:

- Listen to care experienced learners, their families and carers.
- Build relationships with individuals and services that promote a joined-up approach and promote the rights of care experienced learners.
- Offer a range of academic, social and emotional support to individuals and groups of care experienced learners
- Ensure the wellbeing of care experienced learners, including promoting their enjoyment and attendance at school.
- Share narratives that describe the difference that is being made to children and young people and those that live with, teach and support them.
- Ensure that care experienced learners are engaged and stay in education provision for as long as possible, and that they are supported in their transition from statutory to further and higher education and onto employment.
- Collect and monitor data and key metrics including attendance, attainment and exclusion of care experienced learners to identify support.

Recommendation five

The Virtual School Head Teacher has clearly defined tasks which empower them to make a significant impact for care experienced learners.

6. Qualifications

In Wales and Scotland, there is a presumption that the VSHT role is held by a qualified and experienced teacher in a promoted post or who has experience of headship in a school. In England, the role started with an expectation that the post-holder would be a head teacher, which led to many pursuing relevant headship qualifications. The role, however, has evolved in England, and whilst most post-holders are qualified teachers (including previous head teachers of physical schools), some VSHTs have a background in related fields such as social care, youth work or educational psychology.

Within the development of the role profile, discussion also included whether a standard needed to be set in Scotland which specified that the post needed to be filled by a qualified teacher. Whilst the role of the VSHT can be like that of a school-based Head Teacher, Network members have described it as being much broader in both scope and remit.

Participants in the research for the development of the profile also acknowledged the need for professional registration for safeguarding, regulation

and in the interests of quality. Although there was not a unanimous view, there was general agreement that a teaching qualification was necessary to promote consistency and a baseline knowledge and understanding. It was also acknowledged that in addition to this, there should be an adherence to the General Teaching Council for Scotland's core values.

Qualifications

The following were deemed to be essential standards or qualifications for the role in Scotland:

- Teaching qualification.
- General Teaching Council for Scotland Registration.
- Leadership qualification (or working towards).
- Membership and adherence to the core values of the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

Recommendation six

Virtual School Head Teachers in Scotland will have qualified teacher status, with, or pursuing a leadership qualification and current registration with, the General Teaching Council for Scotland.



7. Experience

The experience required for the role of a VSHT analysed in the job descriptions varied in language but was consistent in content. All the Virtual School Head Teachers who participated in the co-development of this profile, came from a teaching and education background. All had pastoral experience with varied specialisms and expertise in supporting children with additional support needs or in supporting care experienced learners. This included being 'attachment aware', and familiarity with trauma-informed and nurture approaches. The job descriptions mirrored how colleagues described their role as being on a ladder between operational and strategic levels of education, with some experience inevitably falling in between the two.

Operational

- Working in a school.
- Offering pastoral support.
- Monitoring and offering support to individuals and groups of learners.
- Supporting learners with a range of additional support needs.
- Working and engaging with parents, families and carers.
- Providing a range of pedagogical, curricular and pastoral education initiatives.

Strategic

- Experience of leadership (middle, depute and head in school or local authority).
- Managing complex projects.
- Leading and managing teams.
- Multi agency and partnership working.
- Policy implementation.
- Advocating and representing the needs of individual and groups of learners.



Recommendation seven

The Virtual School Head Teacher will have operational and strategic experience of offering academic, social and emotional support to individuals and groups of learners in an education setting.

Implications for practice

This profile provides a timely reflection on the development of Virtual Schools in England, Scotland and Wales. It contributes to the growing body of evidence on the work of Virtual Schools, drawing on both the Welsh and the English experience to further understanding of what works in the Scottish context. However, as Virtual School Head Teachers know only too well, learning does not go in only one direction, and the opportunity for local authorities in Wales and England to learn from this report should not be overlooked.

The profile highlights the importance of national and local variation in services and provision across the UK. The setting out of eight areas of responsibility grounded in research evidence, observation, informed discussion and practice experience allows for wider consensus and a mitigation of 'territorial injustice' for children served by Virtual Schools without imposing a rigid model

of practice which may not work in every context. These areas of responsibility have the potential to act as a framework for Virtual Schools to provide consistency for care experienced learners, wherever they live and increasing an understanding of the role.

One context often overlooked, which this profile throws into sharp focus, is time. What is necessary whilst the Virtual School model is being developed may change as the work progresses and the role becomes more established. Initial requirements - such as Virtual School Head Teachers holding a teaching qualification to ensure parity with Head Teachers of physical schools - may be necessary during the early stages of implementation to prove credibility and influence. However, as is beginning to be felt in England, this may inadvertently limit diversity and exclude unqualified but experienced Virtual School practitioners,

These areas of responsibility have the potential to act as a framework for Virtual Schools to provide consistency for care experienced learners, wherever they live and increasing an understanding of the role.

particularly those from the global majority and those with care experience, who may have non-linear career paths. As the Virtual School model matures and specialist knowledge grows, well-intentioned professional criteria risk creating barriers for capable leaders and reinforce existing inequities.

Virtual School Head Teachers develop fluency in the languages of both



education and social care and navigate across both complex systems. This necessitates much work 'behind the scenes', meaning that the Virtual School Head Teacher and their work are not always visible. This profile characterises this as a vulnerability within local authority cultures, where value for money and metrics-based indicators can often be synonymous with visibility. Virtual School Head Teachers across need to develop confidence in our role and be clear about not just what we do, but why we do it; with discretion being a strength when working with children who are so often made to feel different from their peers.

The role of the Virtual School Head Teacher in supporting children's and young people's wellbeing and rights is made explicit in this profile. This should be particularly welcomed in both Wales and England, where much work is undertaken to challenge educational inequality, promote trauma-informed practice and provide young people with the emotional support they need to achieve their academic potential. Locating this work as a key part of the Virtual School Head Teacher role and not a by-product of education promotion is an important step in framing the work through the lens of the promotion of children's rights.

Discussion of 'scope creep' serves as a warning against the potential dilution of the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher through an ever-expanding remit. In England significant additional responsibilities have been formally added to the role and Scottish colleagues are already reporting a push to expand their role to other groups of learners. It should be an ongoing discussion for all nations on a regular basis and serves as a call for future research to understand the extent to which the Virtual School Head Teacher, and the Virtual School model can effect change for children and young people.

Measuring the efficacy of Virtual School Head Teacher is also explored in the profile through broad consideration of impact including traditional targets,

relationships and impact on people and places. These serve as useful exemplars of how qualitative data can demonstrate effectiveness, and are no less rigorous than quantitative data, which is often too blunt to capture nuance. Explicit guidance for local authorities and children's services inspection bodies around how the effectiveness of Virtual Schools can be measured could be a useful joint step towards the recognition of meaningful work which does not fit neatly into a graph.

This profile is the first Virtual School Head Teacher report to set out guiding principles for the role of the VSHT whilst recognising that a 'one-size-fits all' approach is unlikely to produce the best outcomes for children. It is important to recognise that principles formed at the beginning of a journey, whilst appropriate and necessary, may risk hampering development as the role progresses over time. It is therefore essential for these guiding principles on the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher not to be fixed in stone, but to be regularly reviewed through asking the question: *Does this bring about the best for our children and young people?* It is this message running through this profile which resonates the loudest for Wales and England; do not be afraid to be agile, adaptive and flexible. After all, it's what Virtual School Head Teachers do best.

Fay Blyth

Virtual School Headteacher
Waltham Forest Council

Deborah Williams

Virtual School Headteacher
Cardiff Council

Summary

This role profile synthesises an evidence-informed framework for a job role that is still evolving and has been identified by practitioners and the research literature as being at risk of scope creep. The educational landscape has been described as cluttered and we know from practical experience, research and listening to care experienced people that stability and consistency are needed particularly during times of change. We consider that one step towards ensuring that Scotland fulfils the commitment to deliver on The Promise of the Independent Care Review is to create consistency in the role of VSHTs in Scotland.

The Scottish VSHT Network recommends that all local authorities who have or plan to introduce the role of VSHT in Scotland use this profile as a guide. We acknowledge that this document may have implications for those already in post. We would encourage all local authority areas to reflect on how they might align their posts with the principles and expectations that have been set out. The profile alongside the template job description (Appendix One) and job advert (Appendix Two) is proposed as a guiding framework to promote consistency for care experienced learners to 2030 and beyond.



Appendix 1: Recommended job advert

Job Title: Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT)

Location: Various Local Authorities across Scotland

Position Type: Full-Time

Be the Change Maker for care experienced learners

Are you passionate about transforming the lives of care experienced children and young people? Do you thrive in a role where you can make a tangible impact on educational outcomes? If so, we have the perfect opportunity for you!

We're looking for a dynamic and innovative leader to join our team as a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT). This unique role is crucial in supporting the educational journey of care experienced learners across Scotland, ensuring they receive the tailored support they deserve to succeed.

Why Join Us?

At [insert name of local authority], we're committed to making a real difference in the lives of care experienced people. As one of the largest local employers, we work to support care experienced children and young people as well as those who live with, care for and teach them. Our mission is to drive positive, sustainable change, and we need someone like you to help us achieve it.

Key Responsibilities:

- **Lead with Vision:** Strategically manage and develop the Virtual School model, advocating for care experienced learners at the highest levels.
- **Connect and Collaborate:** Build and maintain strong relationships with and between education providers, social care, health services, and families to support a holistic approach to learner wellbeing.
- **Drive Impact:** Monitor and report on data including attendance and attainment, ensuring the educational progress of care experienced learners is monitored, understood and celebrated.
- **Empower Growth:** Offer professional development opportunities to educators, carers, and families, fostering nurturing trauma informed environments.

What We're Looking For:

- **Qualifications:** GTCS Registration or equivalent, a teaching qualification and a willingness to pursue advanced leadership qualifications.
- **Experience:** A background in both strategic leadership and operational management, particularly in supporting children with additional support needs, trauma-informed practice, and multi-agency collaboration.
- **Values:** A commitment to doing what parents do. You should be persistent, resourceful, solution-focused, and dedicated to making a difference.

Make Your Impact:

- **Transform Lives:** Ensure care experienced learners are supported through their educational journey, from early years, through school and on to further and higher education and onto employment.
- **Lead Change:** Influence policy and practice at local and national levels, contributing to the fulfilment of The Promise and other key initiatives.
- **Inspire Others:** Be a beacon of hope and support for care experienced learners, their families, and the professionals who work with them.

Why Apply?

This is more than just a job—it's a chance to be part of a movement. Change is happening, and we need you to be a part of it. Together, we can create a brighter future for care experienced children and young people.

Funding for this post: This position is initially funded for 12 months, with the potential for further funding. The local authority is committed to ensuring funding until 2030.

Ready to Lead the Change?

If you're ready to take on this challenging yet rewarding role, apply now and join us in making a lasting impact on the lives of care experienced learners. Together, we can achieve great things.



Appendix 2: Job description

Job Title: Virtual School Head Teacher

Location: Various Local Authorities across Scotland

Position Type: Full-Time

Overview: The role of Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) is a strategic position focused on improving the educational outcomes of care experienced learners. This position is critical in ensuring care experienced children and young people go to, enjoy and succeed in their education. It contributes towards fulfilling the commitments to meeting the aspirations of The Promise and ensuring equity and a consistency of experience for all children locally and nationally.

Key Responsibilities:

1. Leadership

- Lead and manage the virtual school, ensuring the educational needs of care experienced learners are understood and met effectively.
- Listen to care experienced children and young people and their families and act on what they say to influence and advocate at senior levels in schools, the local authority and with partners.
- Implement and sustain relevant evidence-based policies and practices across the education and care system.

2. Collaboration and Connection

- Develop and maintain collaborative relationships with internal and external partners, including education providers, social care, health services, and families.
- Promote a holistic approach to children's learning and their journey through education, bridging education, social care, health, and other relevant services.
- Ensure that care experienced learners' journey through education and onto further study and employment is seamless.

3. Operational Management

- Ensure the wellbeing of care experienced learners, supporting their educational journey from school to further education and employment.
- Oversee the delivery of direct support to care experienced learners, their families, and education providers.
- Monitor and track data such as attendance, attainment, and exclusion rates, and report on the progress and impact.

4. Professional Growth

- Provide consultation, advice, and professional development opportunities to education providers, carers, families, and relevant partners.
- Influence the culture of education providers, carers and the local authority so that the environments where children live and learn are attachment aware and trauma informed.

Values and Personal Attributes:

You will have a strong sense of social purpose and an urgency and purposefulness to get things done. You will understand the legislative and policy context and the need to be creative, flexible and persistent. You will be driven by the principles of corporate parenting and a commitment to do what parents do to support their children.

Qualifications and Experience:

Qualifications

- GTCS Registration.
- A teaching qualification.
- A leadership qualification (or working towards).

Experience

- Offering pastoral support in an education setting.
- Record of leadership, multi-agency collaboration, and policy implementation.
- Managing complex projects and leading educational initiatives.
- Supporting children with additional support needs, attachment approaches, and trauma-informed practice.

Key Deliverables:

- Ensure accurate identification and oversight of the needs of care experienced learners.
- Offer a range of academic, social and emotional support to individual and groups of care experienced learners.
- Create and nurture relationships that promote a joined-up approach and uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of The Child and the rights of care experienced learners.
- Collect and analyse data to report on educational progress and the impact of support, interventions and initiatives.
- Create/develop narratives that describe the difference made to individual learners, groups, and those who live with, support and teach them.
- Provide support to care experienced learners transitioning from school to further education, higher education, and employment.



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