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The role of the Virtual School Head Teacher and Care Experienced Team Network and its members, March 2019- December 2020

VSHT and CET Network: Interim Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

Several local authorities in Scotland have chosen to allocate funding from the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund towards the establishment and development of a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) role, or a Care Experienced Team (CET). These roles have a remit for supporting the education of all the looked after and care experienced children and young people within a local authority, through making connections with the 'bricks and mortar' schools they attend, as well as with others involved in their care and upbringing. The role is statutory in England, and has been found to make a positive contribution to the experiences and attainment of children and young people.

CELCIS, alongside the established VSHT in Aberdeen City, were approached by a number of VSHTs and CETs seeking information and advice on their developing roles. This led to the establishment in 2019 of the VSHT and CET Network, as a forum for support, information sharing, and discussion. CELCIS received additional funding from the Scottish Government in 2020 to formally support and develop the Network, which enabled the part-time secondment of the Aberdeen City VSHT to CELCIS, as well as access to evaluation support.

This interim evaluation report describes the developmental evaluation work which has been undertaken in support of the Network, and the findings in relation to the role of VSHTs and CETs both in the earliest days of the Network, and in the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Network members reported considerable diversity in their roles, including full time equivalence of posts and type of contracts, and in their position within the local authority, in relation to their level of seniority and the involvement of a wider team. This variability reflected that found in the English context. Access to management information systems by VSHTs and CETs was also identified as an area of variation across local authorities. Most VSHTs and CETs had an emphasis on the collection and use of data, both in relation to understanding individual children's experiences, and as a means of monitoring and evidencing change. Network members felt that appropriate use of data had important potential, but that there were challenges with ensuring robust and consistent data collection, analysis, reporting, and sharing.

Roles were found initially to have had a clear focus on looked after and care experienced children and young people, although for some there were specific remits within this around 'subgroups' such as children in kinship care, transitions (e.g. P7-S1), or pupils at risk of exclusion. Limited capacity within the role or team was the main reason for these more specific areas of focus. Several Network members reported that their roles became broader, for example in working with more families in need of support, as part of the pandemic response. This included supporting access to school places for children who were considered most likely to benefit, identifying sources of food and other provisions, arranging digital access, and providing one-to-one support for some pupils. Network

members reported that the circumstances were such that families who has not previously required these types of supports were increasingly in need of additional assistance.

Network members also had a role in supporting teachers and schools directly, including in relation to teachers contacting pupils at home (which is not a usual part of their role), highlighting the particular needs of care experienced pupils, and emphasising the impact on children and young people of being away from school. In addition, Network members provided support and advice to teachers as part of the national examination board's grade estimation process, particularly in relation to pupils who had not yet completed classwork which could be used to support estimates.

Remote working during the early phases of the pandemic, when schools were closed to most pupils, had a range of impacts on the development and maintenance of key relationships for VSHTs and CETs. While the support and connection offered to some families meant the development of good working relationships, for others the absence of face-to-face contact was a challenge. Network members raised concerns around their visibility and the connections they had begun to develop with other professionals, as well as with children and families, and the risk to these in the absence of direct or regular contact.

The Network was found to have provided a valuable resource for its members, both in the early stages of their roles, and particularly in offering support and guidance in the early stages of the pandemic. As well as sharing information with others in similar roles, members were able to participate in a 'feedback loop' with national bodies such as the Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which was welcomed by those involved.

The emerging roles of VSHTs and CETs in Scottish local authorities were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, in response to which post-holders demonstrated considerable flexibility while continuing to highlight the particular needs and experiences of looked after and care experienced children, and their families. When schools in Scotland fully re-opened in August 2020, Network members anticipated a re-focusing of their work on their original remit; however there was some concern about the ongoing uncertainties of posts and funding, and the impact of this on the connections and relationships being developed with young people and those who work with them.

The key features demonstrated by VSHTs and CETs so far were identified as their clear focus on education, and on looked after and care experienced children and young people; the connections and relationships they are able to initiate and develop; and their flexibility and adaptability. The importance of these in supporting care experienced young people's education was already emerging, and has been emphasised by the rapidly changing circumstances since early 2020. The Network must continue to support VSHTs and CETs in maintaining these, and particularly their sharp focus on individuals with care experience, as we begin to emerge from the 'crisis response' context.

1. Introduction

In 2018, the Scottish Government awarded additional funding to local authorities through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund¹, as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, to develop services to support the education of care experienced children. A number of local authorities used this additional funding to develop the role of a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT), or Care Experienced Team (CET), with the goal of raising attainment and achievement for care experienced children and young people.

Many of these local authorities sought advice from CELCIS, as a national organisation striving to create and sustain positive change for care experienced children and families, and from the existing VSHT in Aberdeen City, about how to effectively develop the role in their local authority area. In response to this, a roundtable meeting was hosted by CELCIS and the Aberdeen City VSHT in March 2019. Participants felt that it would be helpful for them in their developing roles as Virtual School Heads or members of Care Experienced Teams to have an established group of individuals in similar roles in Scottish local authorities, for support, discussion, and learning. The VSHT and CET Network emerged from this clear need for a peer support forum.

In 2020, the Scottish Government awarded additional funding to CELCIS to formalise and strengthen the support provided as the host of Scotland's VSHT and CET Network. This enabled access to a range of further resources, including evaluation support. This interim evaluation report outlines the approach to evaluation, describes the work of the VSHTs and CETs as the roles have developed in each of the member local authorities, and discusses the role of the Network. The unanticipated changes to these roles as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic are also explored. This report draws on information from Network meetings, existing Network reports, and two surveys of Network members.

A further evaluation report at the end of the funding period will focus more closely on the extent to which the Network and its members have progressed towards their intended aims, including:

- Convening and facilitating the national Network,
- Exploring, understanding, and articulating the developing role and its influence,
- Sharing learning, raising awareness and supporting readiness,
- Planning for sustainability.

1.1 The 'Virtual School' model

A Virtual School is an organisational framework to help plan and deliver education support to care experienced children. The concept of the Virtual School for children and young people in the care of a local authority ('Looked After') was first introduced in

¹ Further information is here: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/care-experienced-children-and-young-people-fund-operational-guidance/>

England. While the term has increasingly become associated with remote and online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the term 'Virtual School Head Teacher' (VSHT) here refers to an individual within a local authority who has responsibility for the educational progress of 'looked after' and care experienced children and young people². These pupils also remain the responsibility of their own 'bricks and mortar' school, and will usually attend classes there and have their learning led by the teachers in that school. The VSHT is an additional support, whose remit includes supporting the educational experience and progress of all care experienced pupils within their local authority.

A two-year pilot of this approach was reported on by Berridge et al. (2009), and in a report on the early impact of the role, OFSTED (2012) described that the role seemed to have an impact on attainment, attendance, and reducing exclusions, particularly for younger pupils. The role of Virtual School Head later became a statutory one in all local authorities in England through the Children and Social Work Act (2017) (Rivers, 2018), and in a review of support for vulnerable children, the Department for Education in England described that:

'Virtual School Heads already play a key role in raising aspiration and promoting the educational achievement of Looked After Children and since 2018, previously Looked After Children. The best Virtual School Heads bridge the gap by convening schools and social care, offering support and constructive challenge to both. For Looked After Children, the role provides advocacy for individual children in admissions, exclusions and the development of Personal Education Plans; this is different for previously Looked After Children, where the role focusses on supporting understanding and awareness of the cohort. In doing so, Virtual School Heads ensure there is always a focus on education as the path to successful adult lives.' (DfE, 2019)

The Virtual School framework has been used in one local authority in Scotland since 2015, and similar roles have been introduced more recently in a further 12 of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

1.2 The Virtual Schools and Care Experienced Teams Network

The first VSHT role in Scotland was introduced in December 2015, with a remit which largely aligned with the model in England. More recently, additional local authorities have chosen to use funding from the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, to introduce their own VSHT. In some local authorities, a team with a specific focus on the education of care experienced children and young people has been introduced instead, and these are referred to in this report as 'Care Experience Teams' (CETs).

² Further explanation of these terms is available here:
<https://education.gov.scot/media/gymf322m/childrenyoungpeopledefinitionsdoc.pdf>

In response to a range of queries from those responsible for implementing the role, CELCIS and the established VSHT in Aberdeen City hosted a roundtable meeting in March 2019, at which local authority representatives taking forward these roles, and the Head of the Pupil Equity Funding team at Scottish Government, discussed the emerging role. Local authority delegates suggested it would help them in their roles to have a forum for discussion and sharing ideas. In response to this, an informal Network of Virtual School Head Teachers and members of Care Experienced Teams ('the Network') was established, hosted by CELCIS. Subsequently, more local authorities chose to allocate funding from the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund to this role, and in 2020 the Network received funding from Scottish Government. This enabled the secondment of the original VSHT in Aberdeen City to CELCIS for 0.2FTE in the role of VSHT National Advisor, to support the Network and share expertise.

Nine of Scotland's 32 local authorities were represented at the initial roundtable in March 2019, and 13 are now members of the Network. These are:

- Aberdeen City
- Aberdeenshire
- Argyll & Bute
- City of Edinburgh
- Dumfries & Galloway
- Dundee City
- East Lothian
- Fife
- Glasgow City
- Midlothian
- North Lanarkshire
- South Ayrshire
- Stirling

Membership is open to representatives of any Scottish local authority which has or plans to have a Virtual School or Care Experienced Team, and the Network includes representatives from relevant national bodies such as the Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

An early focus of the Network was on supporting the developing VSHT and CET roles across Scotland, and on establishing the priorities and ways of working for the group. Network meetings took place every four to six weeks, and tended to have a key theme or focus for discussion.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant that from March 2020, all meetings were held online, and there was an increased focus on mutual support and sharing ideas around the pandemic response. The Network continued to meet online throughout the summer of 2020, although there was no expectation on members to attend. Following the start of

the new school year in August 2020, 'virtual meetings' continued, and these began to revert from the 'crisis response/pandemic support' nature of the group, to the more routine focused meetings and original aims.

2. Evaluation Approach and Aims

The overarching goal of the evaluation work at this stage is to support the Network and its members in making their roles as effective as possible. This involves recognising, understanding, and explaining the ways in which these are emerging in Scotland, and identifying what is working well and less well in the Scottish context.

A developmental evaluation approach 'is designed to be congruent with and nurture developmental, emergent, innovative, and transformative processes' (Patton, 2006, p.28), and to support continuous improvement. This approach is used here to describe and explain the emerging roles of the Network members, to identify and explore contextual features which have led to different choices or approaches in different local authorities, and to assist with identifying how impact might be evidenced as the roles progress.

This evaluation considers both the roles of the individual VSHTs and CETs in their local authorities, and the role of the Network in supporting them. The overarching aims of the evaluation are:

- 1 To record, describe, and explain the development of the VSHT/CET role in the relevant local authorities, including remits and responsibilities, and any early indicators of change.
- 2 To describe and explain the development and role of the Network.
- 3 To evidence and explain the extent to which the Network has met its aims.

Research and evaluation on the Virtual School model in England has highlighted the importance of understanding the role and function of Virtual School Head Teacher. A number of features are considered likely to influence the effectiveness of the role, such as the position or level of seniority of the VSHT within the local authority, and the extent to which collaborative working with other professionals and services can be undertaken (e.g. OFSTED, 2012). The emerging evidence base suggests that the role of VSHT can have a significant and positive impact on all levels of the system, and address wider psychological factors and relationships, as well as care experienced pupils' experiences and attainment at school (e.g. Berridge et al., 2009; Drew & Banerjee, 2018; Rivers, 2018; Sebba & Berridge, 2019).

For the purposes of this evaluation, the development of the Network so far is described in four broad 'phases'.

Dates	Network Phase (for evaluation purposes only)
Mar 2019 – Mar 2020	Phase one: Organic and responsive development
Mar - Aug 2020	Phase two: Initial COVID-19 response
Aug - Dec 2020	Phase three: Regrouping – the first part of the new school year
Jan - Aug 2021	Phase four: Anticipated return to responsive development - second part of the new school year

The information on which this report is based includes:

- Notes and minutes of Network meetings (in person and online) from March 2019 to the end of 2020.
- Internal reports and papers resulting from Network discussions and activity.
- Network publications³
- The report from a workshop in January 2020, in which Network members discussed their roles and responsibilities. (Deeley & O’Neill, 2020c).
 - Two papers from a facilitated workshop in October 2020, in which Network members reflected on their role during the early stages of the pandemic response, and on their involvement in the Network. (Deeley & O’Neill, 2020a; 2020b).
 - The findings from a telephone survey of Network members (n=12) in October 2020, ‘the phone survey’. (McIver & O’Neill, 2021)
- An online questionnaire in January 2021 (n=6), ‘the questionnaire’.

This interim evaluation report focuses on Phases one, two and three of the Network timeline - that is, from the roundtable in March 2019 which initiated the Network, to the end of 2020, including initial response of the members and the Network to the COVID-19 pandemic – and on Evaluation Questions one and two. A further evaluation report at the end of the funding period will reflect in more detail on Evaluation Aim three, and on the activity and development of the Network in the remainder of the 2020-21 school year (Phase four).

³ Reports and papers published by the Network can be found at: <https://www.celcis.org/our-work/key-areas/education/virtual-school-head-teachers>

3. VSHT and CETs in Scottish Local Authorities

The first VSHT role was established in Aberdeen City in 2015, as a full time, permanent post with the overarching aim of supporting the achievement of looked after children. The post-holder was joined by an Education Support Officer in 2019⁴.

Following the announcement of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge⁵, in July 2018, more local authorities began to explore how to use this funding, and to introduce VSHT or CET roles. Several Network members came into post in late 2018 and through 2019:

- Dundee City in August 2018
- Midlothian in October 2018
- Argyll & Bute, Dumfries & Galloway, East Lothian, Fife, Glasgow City, North Lanarkshire, and Stirling in early 2019 (January-June)
- Aberdeenshire and City of Edinburgh in August 2019
- South Ayrshire in October 2019

At the initial roundtable meeting in March 2019, each local authority was at a different stage in the development of the VSHT or CET role. While some had begun work on strategic planning, others were at an earlier stage. The focus of the Network in its early meetings was to set out the purpose of the Network itself, and begin to understand the development of the roles, responsibilities and remits in each local authority.

3.1 Role and Team structures

Network members reported considerable variations in their own posts, and in the local authority and team structures of which they are part. In the telephone survey in October 2020, for example, 11 of the 12 respondents reported that their post was full time (1.0FTE), while one was 0.2FTE (McIver & O'Neill, 2021). Nine of the respondents indicated that theirs was a temporary contract, and for some there was a clear end date, but others did not have this. Eight of the respondents reported having a formal team, six of whom described the team as 'multi-agency'. There were variations in team size, as well as in the professional backgrounds of team members, which included Educational Psychologists, Education Welfare Officers, and Data Analysts. Four respondents who reported not having a formal team described that they instead had a range of informal connections and supports.

There were also variations and sometimes a lack of clarity around the position of the role within the local authority. Network members explained that it was sometimes not clear whether they were able to attend particular meetings, and the extent to which they could question or challenge practice. Variations in local authority structures mean that there

⁴ <https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/services/education-and-childcare/virtual-school>

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/>

are different relationships between Education, Social Work, and Health and Social Care Partnerships. This, combined with ongoing departmental mergers and reconfigurations in some local areas, has given additional complexity to the context. Network members felt that the priorities of the VSHT or CET should be aligned with local planning frameworks, but this was sometimes considered challenging due to the complexity of planning structures.

These variations may to some extent reflect the wide variations in the local authority contexts, for example in relation to population size, geographical size, mix of urban and rural areas, and socio-economic differences. The number of team members or full-time equivalent (FTE) posts did not however appear to be directly related to the number of care experienced children and young people in the local authority. The diversity of structures and practice of Virtual Schools in Scotland reflects the variability found in England, where local authorities have developed organically to configure services according to the local context (Sebba & Berridge, 2019; Read, Macer & Parfitt, 2020).

The roles of the Network members, and the relationships between different local authority departments as well as other agencies, were impacted by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the immediate national and local government responses. These impacts are discussed further in Section Five.

4. Phase one: March 2019 – March 2020

A priority for the Network from the outset was to explore the ways in which the roles and remits of members were developing in the different local authorities, and to identify key features and commonalities. The Network meeting in January 2020 focused on this, and a range of tasks undertaken as part of the VSHT's role were identified (Deeley & O'Neill, 2020c). Participants reflected that some of their day-to-day work was formally recognised in their job description, while some was informal or in direct response to the needs of the children and young people for whom they were responsible. Ten Network members reported having a formal job description, while two did not; and developing the role was a formal responsibility for some members (McIver & O'Neill, 2021).

Network members reported having an overall focus on the educational experiences and outcomes of looked after and care experienced young people, but specific areas of focus varied between local authorities. Some VSHTs and CETs had their focus on particular ages and stages (for example, the transition to high school), while others focused on children and young people living in particular settings or placement types (such as those in kinship or residential care). Others gave priority to working with specific groups, such as children at risk of exclusion or with poor attendance. Some Network members described that their work had a narrow focus, but that there was no capacity to widen the scope of their work. Instead they sought to make formal and informal links, and to signpost to others where appropriate.

'The challenge is capacity. The role is a 35 hour a week post but similar to a HT in a school, to be able to deliver what is expected / required /

needed, an average of 55+ hours a week is needed for the VSHT. Having a team as part of the Virtual School is also a challenge as there is little funding available. This can be overcome to a certain extent as there is an expectation that others deliver on their corporate parent duties by supporting the work of the Virtual school. I would however, advocate for at least a small team to be aligned to the Virtual school. This team could be multi-agency and include health for example.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

4.1 Relationships and Visibility

Network members described that they worked with others in a range of ways, including directly with children, young people and families, as well as with a range of education and social work staff, and other professionals. In some instances this was to provide direct support; in others, to provide training and information, build capacity, or to establish relationships and increase the visibility of the role (Deeley & O'Neill, 2020c). There was some concern that the title 'Virtual School Head' did not clearly convey the purpose of the role to others (McIver & O'Neill, 2021), and that the role was not understood as an additional support to that already provided by the school attended by the child, and others. This issue may have been further exacerbated by the increasing use of 'virtual learning environments' for remote and home-based learning throughout 2020.

Visibility of the role was also supported through the links that Network members made with colleagues in and beyond Education, and through the use of websites and social media accounts (which were sometimes shared with other related local authority services). At a meeting in summer 2019, all group members agreed to have their contact details made available on the area of the CELCIS website relating to the Network⁶.

Children, young people, and families

Seven Network members reported that their role involved direct work with children and young people. Six indicated that children and families could contact them directly for information or support, and where this was not available, contact was usually through education or social work (McIver & O'Neill, 2021).

Knowing who the care experienced young people in the local authority are, and where they are, is considered a 'key operational area' for Virtual School Head Teachers (NAVSH, 2018, p.11). Members of the Network discussed the importance of this particularly in relation to children in 'out of authority placements'; that is, children whose education was taking place in a different local authority from their 'home' local authority. Network members highlighted a move towards reducing the number of out of authority placements. Any change for a child or young person must be needs-led, based on

⁶ Virtual School Head Teachers Network web page: <https://www.celcis.org/our-work/key-areas/education/virtual-school-head-teachers/>

individualised assessment, and appropriately supported, but Network members expressed concern about a lack of understanding nationally around the number of children and young people placed 'out of authority', and about a lack of consistency in the implementation of local and national policy to support their education. They felt that VSHTs were ideally and uniquely placed to know the circumstances of individual children, and to scrutinise and support consistent policy implementation.

Developing a good relationship with the care experienced children and young people in the local authority was also considered important by Network members whose remit involved developing the role, in relation to seeking the views and participation of young people in shaping the future work of the Virtual Head. Some VSHTs had started to build these relationships through making links with local residential settings, membership of local Champion's Boards⁷, and working directly with individual children and young people.

Other professionals

Network members also discussed their work around relationships and visibility with others in education, including with Designated Managers, and with other Corporate Parents⁸. The Designated Manager is a senior member of staff in each educational establishment who has overall responsibility for the looked after children and young people in that establishment. A recent survey has however suggested a variable level of understanding and implementation of this role (O'Neill et al., 2017), but respondents to the online questionnaire suggested that most of the local authority nurseries and schools with which they worked had an identified Designated Manager. Network members also largely reported that it was part of their role to work with and support Designated Managers in individual establishments, but few indicated that they were involved in identifying Designated Managers in establishments which did not yet have someone in that role.

One of the key tasks for Designated Managers is around preventing exclusions; to monitor exclusions from school in relation to looked after children, to ensure that school policy reflects current national legislation and policy, and to highlight the negative impact that exclusion may have on care experienced pupils (Scottish Government, 2008). Involvement in discussions and other work around preventing exclusions was also identified by Network members as a feature of their role. Current policy states that exclusion of looked after children from school should be used as a last resort, following full consideration of the child's circumstances (Scottish Government, 2017), and Network members in some areas have reported that Head Teachers are now obliged to notify the VSHT that exclusion is being considered, prior to the child being sent home. This has reportedly prevented some exclusions from taking place.

⁷ Further information on Champion's Boards:

<https://www.lifechangestrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/Champions%20Boards%20Media%20Release.pdf>

⁸ Further information about Corporate Parents: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/looked-after-children/corporate-parenting/>

In addition, Network members described their involvement in delivering training, with most reporting that they had some responsibility for organising or delivering training and development for staff outwith their own team. Some described relevant training, for example, on trauma informed practice, being delivered within their local authority by various groups including Educational Psychologists and the NHS. While the availability of this training was welcome, there was concern around the lack of strategic or systematic approach to developing trauma informed practice.

Capacity building activity in various forms was considered vital by Network members for sustainability purposes, particularly in the context of uncertainty for some around continuity of funding for their role. This included building the knowledge and skills base of existing staff, such as through designing and delivering training, and developing and 'care-proofing' new and existing policies and processes. The importance of making links with partner agencies in relation to this was described at the initial roundtable meeting as an important feature of the role.

4.2 Data

The focus of the Network meeting in January 2020 was on articulating the various activities in which VSHTs were involved. Members participated in a workshop which helped them to reflect on their role, and the most frequently occurring category of activity identified by Network members was around the collation, management, interpretation, and quality assurance of data (Deeley & O'Neill, 2020c). A discussion of the issues around data had featured in the initial Roundtable meeting of the Network, with delegates noting challenges around the collection, recording, reporting, and sharing of consistent and robust data at both a local and national level. They raised concerns that reliable data would be needed as part of tracking and monitoring of individual pupils' progress, but also as a means of demonstrating the possible impact of the Virtual School. At later meetings, further concerns were expressed around the alignment of social work and education data. The question was also raised around the recording of data for all care experienced children and young people, not only for those currently 'looked after', but it was recognised that at present there is no formal shared definition of 'care experienced'.

Network members felt that reliable, robust, consistent data collection and reporting at a national level could have a 'transformative impact' on children's journey through education. Recent work in Scotland however has emphasised inconsistencies in data collection and reporting in relation to looked after and care experienced children; Clark et al. (2017), for example, noted that a valid national pupil identifier (Scottish Candidate Number, SCN) was missing from national records for around a third of looked after children in the 2011/12 pupil census. Connelly (2017) highlighted the challenges this presents to data linkage work and the accurate monitoring of change, but indicated that some improvement in SCN recording were apparent. The most recent statistical publication shows that there is variation between local authorities, with most, but not all providing SCNs for 90-100% of looked after pupils (Scottish Government, 2020).

Most Network members reported having some responsibility for the collecting, collating, and/or reporting of data (McIver & O’Neill, 2021). This tended to include information about attendance and exclusions, and on attainment – mainly in Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)⁹ national exams at the Senior Phase, but also in some instances, on the Broad General Education phase in primary and early secondary (P1-S3) through the Scottish National Standardised Assessments. Some Network members also collected information using wellbeing measures, and recorded information relating to Additional Support Needs, and destinations of school leavers.

A number of local authorities were using their own data to guide their work, and some Network members had a remit to make improvements to the collection and use of data in their local authority. Some had the support of data analysts within their local authority, while for others this was not available, which made systematic and robust analysis challenging. Network members recognised that the range of approaches and interventions in place in the different local authorities would require a variety of measures to monitor outcomes and evidence impact.

Use of the SEEMiS¹⁰ management information system was a focus of discussion amongst Network members, particularly in relation to access, sharing of information and GDPR, and to the type of information held on the system. While most Network members reported that they were able to access SEEMiS, few were able to add to the pastoral notes of pupils who are part of the Virtual School, meaning that other approaches were needed for sharing relevant information. Network members reported that access was via individual school based log-in, and that this was time consuming as these staff have a remit which includes pupils across multiple establishments. Group members also highlighted that establishments which are not part of the local authority, such as partnership nurseries, residential and independent schools, do not use SEEMiS, which presents an additional challenge in accessing information about children attending these settings.

Network members discussed a number of possible changes and additions to the data held on SEEMiS, ahead of a planned upgrade of the system, to ensure its usefulness for tracking and monitoring. The recording of attendance if a child is learning at home was one issue raised, in relation to the important role of the VSHT in knowing where and how children are learning. This issue may have risen to even greater prominence in the context of increased home learning as part of the coronavirus pandemic response. The opportunity for recording of information on pupils’ involvement in non-academic activity, such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award or school-based clubs, was also suggested. Furthermore, the group discussed the ways in which data held in SEEMiS might be useful to the Virtual School, in terms of understanding pupils’ experience of education and their academic progress, evidencing the impact of the VSHT and CET role on improving

⁹ <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/70972.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.seemis.gov.scot/>

outcomes and experiences for children, and on helping to identify successful approaches which might be progressed. The identification of a 'minimum data set' for Virtual Schools was also discussed, and recorded as a future focus of discussion for the group. There was agreement that further work would be required to fully understand the data required to measure impact before any future discussions could be instigated with the relevant organisations on how to capture, analyse and report on this.

4.3 Finance and Funding

Nine of the 12 respondents to the October 2020 survey indicated that they had some responsibility for budget allocation, while seven reported having responsibility for commissioning services or projects. In relation to the reporting of expenditure to the Scottish Government, 10 of the respondents had sole or joint responsibility for completing their local authority's funding return (McIver & O'Neill, 2021).

The completion of funding returns was sometimes described as complex, due in part to the range of ways in which the funding is used, even within a single local authority, and the involvement of both education and social work services. The mismatch between the financial year and academic year also contributed to the challenge of reporting, and also sometimes to recruitment and staff contracts. The involvement of Scottish Government representatives in the Network was highlighted as important in navigating this. Some Network members also felt that there was a lack of alignment between funding allocations made for school-aged children, and corporate parenting responsibilities which include young people to the age of 26.

In other discussions around funding, Network members described a range of ways in which the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund was used, including to support various posts and roles (e.g. educational psychologists, data analysts, mentors), and for creative and development opportunities for young people. Network members emphasised the importance of collaborative working, particularly around the use of 'shared funding', but some also queried the ways in which funding is split between social work and education.

Ten of the twelve respondents to the telephone survey reported that their post was directly funded through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund (McIver & O'Neill, 2021), and Network members noted that the continuation of this funding was not guaranteed. This resulted in a level of uncertainty for post holders, and for those they were working to build relationships with. The impact of the pandemic on local authority spending priorities also became a concern.

5. Phase two: March – August 2020

At the end of March 2020, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, nurseries and schools in Scotland were closed to most pupils. Some children, whose parents or primary carers were classified as key workers, or who were considered vulnerable, were able to access places in schools, although not always in their usual school. There was no shared

definition across Scotland of 'vulnerable children', and local authorities developed their own guidance and criteria around which children should be offered places within schools.

The role and remit of VSHTs, which for many was still in an early stage of development, and for their teams, altered in several local authorities as part of the COVID-19 response.

5.1 Supporting children and families

'During lockdown, the support from the Virtual School was extended to families identified as being vulnerable.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

Network members described a range of activity to support children and families in which they, or members of their teams, had become involved as part of the pandemic response.

This included:

- Direct one-to-one support for individual pupils involved in home learning.
- Supporting digital access, as well as access to physical learning resources.
- Access to school/hub places for vulnerable children, including those who might not have previously been identified as vulnerable, but for whom the pandemic had meant that additional help was needed.
- Supporting and signposting around access to food and other provisions. Network members reported increased recognition that families who were not previously considered vulnerable might be in need of this support during the pandemic. This included families whose children received funded school meals as part of the universal offer for children in P1-P3 (P4 in Glasgow); while schools were closed to most pupils, the universal offer was not available, and meal funding (usually via cash or vouchers) was only available for families meeting the usual free school meals criteria¹¹. This may have had a significant impact on families who had to provide additional meals during the week which they had not previously needed to budget for. Similar issues were raised in relation to older pupils' access to period products, as some may have been reliant on free provisions available at school. Group members highlighted that families may experience stigma around accessing food and provisions in this way.
- Signposting and supporting access to summer activities, which were available in some schools and local authorities, but on a reduced scale from previous years. Network members highlighted the importance of links with third sector and voluntary agencies around this.

¹¹ Further information about free school meals: <https://www.mygov.scot/school-meals/>

A range of specific groups were included in the work of the VSHTs. In one area, for example, increased collaboration with residential staff in Children's Houses was reported. This enabled a direct link between children's houses and schools. Network members also described their support for kinship caring families, in which the carers are often older relatives such as grandparents, who may have higher risk or vulnerability in terms of COVID-19. The variety of supports included regular telephone contact, provision of activities and supplies, and places in children's hubs where assessed as necessary on an individual basis. In general, Network members felt that good relationships with families had been developed and maintained; however, there were some concerns about the quality of information that could be gained from telephone conversations, in which nuances of body language and expression aren't available, and discussions of sensitive issues may feel more difficult, rather than in-person reviews.

'My team [...] continued to work through lockdown, initially Skype calls, phone calls and WhatsApp messages to parents, carers and young people. This resulted in a far better, trusting relationship [...] Between my team they sourced over £2,000 worth of white goods, food vouchers, electricity supports and many more financial and economical supports, which schools and parents have all commented extremely positively and appreciatively about. Since returning from lockdown, the team feel that families are more relaxed with them, more open and honest about their own challenges and in general more trusting that our team are on their side.'

Workshop participant, October 2020

5.2 Supporting Educational Progress

Network members also had a role in supporting the educational progress of pupils in a number of ways. The 2020 SQA examinations were cancelled in response to the pandemic, and teachers were therefore expected to provide evidence-based grade estimates for their pupils in line with SQA guidance. VSHTs and CETs were also well placed to recognise the circumstances of individual children and young people in their local authority, and to understand the impact on care experienced pupils of being away from school.

SQA grade estimation

Network members raised the issue of grade estimation for care experienced pupils, recognising the challenges that teachers were facing in making decisions about grade estimation within the new and limited guidance. In the context of looked after and care experienced pupils in particular, there was concern that pupils may not have completed coursework and assessments earlier in the academic year. This could mean less available evidence on which teachers could make their determination, or to support teachers' judgements of the level the pupil was working at.

A facilitated workshop was held during October which formed the basis of a short life working group, led by the VSHT National Advisor. This group worked together to create document which contextualised the SQA guidance for teachers of care experienced pupils, and this was circulated within the Network. In addition, the Education Scotland representative within the Network was able to highlight these issues and allow the group's valuable insights to be shared with national bodies.

Impact of being away from school

Network members also had a range of insights into the impact of being away from school, both for pupils and for teachers. Concerns have been raised that time away from school will exacerbate the 'gaps' between different groups of children, for example in relation to the poverty-related attainment gap, and that relating to care experienced young people, which the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund is intended to address.

OFSTED (2020) reported that the social and academic skills of many pupils in England and Wales had regressed in their time away from school during 2020. In Scotland, VSHTs and CETs were able to share their observations on the experiences of care experienced pupils through an online questionnaire in early 2021. While there was some indication from respondents that they knew of care experienced children and young people whose social and academic skills had suffered during the restrictions of the first lockdown, there were a similar number of reports of improved social and academic skills. Some children had previously found the school environment overwhelming for social or emotional reasons, and several Network members reported knowing of children who had found that home learning was a positive experience for them. It was agreed that the learning from these examples around individualised planning and bespoke curriculum should not be lost and that it would be helpful for the Network to think about how these lessons could be shared more widely.

Network members also highlighted the challenges for teachers, who may experience discomfort or anxiety around making contact with children at home, as this is outwith their usual experience. Teachers would not usually expect to contact children at home, in the way that other professionals such as social workers might. They might also find it challenging to ask directly about welfare, especially in the absence of a pre-existing relationship with the family. Network members indicated that while teachers were not opposed to this change in their role, they were anxious to ensure that they were providing appropriate support. Teachers were also keen to have guidance on procedures to follow if they identified concerns, which would have been clearly defined as part of school-based policies but was sometimes less clear in relation to online engagement. Network members shared some examples of the ways in which their own local authority had attempted to support teachers with this.

5.3 Supporting the work of the Local Authority

Network members described the ways in which their roles had become broader as part of the pandemic response. Some Virtual School and Care Experienced Team members were

involved in direct work in leading or working in children and young people's hubs (for vulnerable children and the children of key workers). Others' roles became more strategic, around the continuation of services, development of new services, and co-ordination with other professionals. The October 2020 meeting of the Network took the form of a workshop, in which Network members were asked to reflect on these experiences, and further reflections were invited through the online questionnaire in January 2021.

'Tried to find creative ways of delivering the service affected by lockdown - has been a challenge with lots of adaptations made. Created other services as a result of lockdown based on emerging needs. This is ongoing and ever changing.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

'My role specifically was more strategic, working with Service Leads of Social Work, Team Leaders in Health to weekly discuss the various concerns being raised from Head Teachers, Health Visitors and School Nurses. [This] proved to be an effective weekly meeting, with lots of early intervention taking place. I felt that it also alleviated a lot of the potential tensions between services, allowing open dialogue to take place.'

Workshop participant, October 2020
(see Deeley & O'Neill, 2020a)

'I was asked to lead the Youth Hub for vulnerable young people at risk of placement/home breakdown, mental health deterioration, offending. We created a collective of council depts. and third sector agencies, who were willing to offer face to face support to [young people] through lockdown.'

Workshop participant, October 2020

Deeley and O'Neill (2020a) describe in detail the Network members' reflections on the changes to their role as part of the pandemic response in their local authority.

6. Phase 3: August-December 2020

The 2020-21 school year began in mid-August 2020 with the full re-opening of nurseries and schools for the first time since the end of March 2020. Network members broadly welcomed the decision to re-open schools, but recognised that children and families may need considerable time and support to adjust to the return to school. They also highlighted the needs of teachers and other school staff, and the support they would need for this.

6.1 Supporting return to school

Respondents to the 2021 online questionnaire generally reported that the schools and nurseries they work with had given specific attention to the needs of care experienced

children and young people, in preparing for the transition back to school in August 2020 following almost five months away from school for many.

Network members were asked about any children and young people who had previously attended school for at least part of the week, and who had not returned to school at the start of the new term. Respondents indicated that some pupils had not been able to return to school due to testing positive for COVID-19, or needing to self-isolate due being a close contact of someone who tested positive. Three respondents indicated knowing of at least one pupil in their local authority who remained away from school due to medical advice suggesting that attendance was a high risk for them at that time. Four reported knowing of pupils unable to return to school at the start of the new school year due to anxiety or other mental health reasons. As well as highlighting the level of knowledge the Network members have about the individual pupils in the Virtual School, the range of experiences also indicates the importance of the VSHT/CET role in supporting these pupils, and also in providing support to teachers and other school staff, who may also have faced challenges in starting the new school year in the context of the pandemic, in relation to the needs of care experienced pupils.

6.2 Maintaining key relationships for VSHTs

Network members had emphasised the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with a range of individuals and groups for the effectiveness of their role. In the online questionnaire, we asked VSHTs about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on their face-to-face engagement and on their work. All respondents for whom face-to-face work was part of their remit (n=5) indicated that prior to the pandemic, they were able to make in-person visits as much as they felt they needed to, to successfully carry out their role. However, only one respondent felt that they had been able to do this in all establishments and locations since the start of the new school year; another felt that this was possible in primary schools only. The main reasons for this were various guidelines and restrictions in place which limited the number of different establishments VSHTs were allowed to visit each week, and the reluctance of schools and nurseries to have them visit, due to the risk of virus transmission. Asked to describe the impact of the restrictions on their work, one VSHT explained:

'Makes it far more challenging to build relationships. Good outcomes are based on good relationships and despite the best of efforts, this cannot always be done on screen/by text etc. As a team we are constantly trying to find creative ways to engage our children and young people whilst sticking to rules and trying to keep everyone safe.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

Another emphasised that it was not only face-to-face engagement with children and young people which had been lost.

'It has made it more difficult to maintain regular contact with staff and makes me wonder, at times, if schools and partners are remembering that my role exists'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

Some respondents, notably those who described their role as more strategic than operational, or more with adults than with children and young people, felt that the change to remote working had not impacted significantly on their work. Others described the challenges of appropriately supporting, at a distance, adults who are working with distressed children and young people; and of working remotely with children and young people who in the past had valued the opportunity to meet in less formal and non-school settings.

'I think being a face to the job is very important and builds trust and respect from colleagues. Building relationships enhances the quality of work that I can deliver.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

Clearly, the use of these restrictions is an important part of the response to coronavirus; however, their impact on the VSHT's important work in building relationships and visibility is also clear.

7. The Network

Network members reflected on their membership of the Network, in general, and during the early stages of the pandemic in particular. After a short gap between meetings when the first lockdown began, the Network continued to meet online, and agreed to continue with regular short virtual meetings throughout summer 2020, as an additional support for members. Notes of the meetings throughout that period suggest that membership of the Network provided a range of benefits, including:

- A forum for discussion, support, reassurance, and to ask questions and access realistic feedback on the situation in individual local authorities
- Understanding of the context; a group of people with similar remits and challenges
- Opportunities for sharing ideas, good practice, and resources; prevents 'reinventing the wheel'
- Direct links to national bodies such as the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, which allowed questions to be asked and information to be shared as part of a 'feedback loop'.
 - Network members described that national level information was often sent to the local authority at Director level, and could take time to 'filter through'. Network members welcomed direct receipt of relevant communications.

- Network membership was also described as beneficial to national bodies in making clear what information teachers and care experienced young people needed, for example in relation to grade estimation

'I think just knowing that everyone was in the same boat was helpful. Some days felt really isolated and lost, then when we had our calls it all made sense and suddenly realised everyone was in the same boat. The network impacted by allowing me to implement anything new that the group would discuss, approaches that were shared that were positive and also reassurance about our role and what we are doing collectively is making a difference.'

Workshop participant, October 2020

Even where members were not able to attend online meetings during this period, the awareness that the Network was continuing to meet was itself reassuring.

'I didn't manage to attend the meetings but it was reassuring to read the updates and know that other people were in the same position as I was! It was good to know that there was support there if I needed it'

Workshop participant, October 2020

In terms of general benefits beyond support during the pandemic, similar features to the above were identified. Reflecting on Network membership was also a specific focus of the January 2021 questionnaire. Network members were asked to describe what they felt were the benefits of Network membership. All six respondents answered this question, and described that the Network provides:

- A safe space for discussion, asking questions, seeking advice and reassurance, sharing learning and information
- An opportunity to work together with others in similar roles, to raise issues and find answers, and to influence thinking
- Valuable connections with Scottish Government (particularly in relation to reporting requirements and funding returns, information about funding processes)
- An identified person in other local authorities to connect with in relation to children being educated 'out of authority', and a sense that they will have good support in that local authority
- Opportunities for discussion of wider relevant issues, such as the introduction of the UNCRC into Scots law; the 'digital divide'; Care Experiences students bursary¹²; The Promise¹³; and corporate parenting more generally.

¹² <https://www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/support-for-care-experienced-students>

¹³ <https://www.carereview.scot/conclusions/independent-care-review-reports/>

'You don't have to explain context all the time. [...] Group look for creative solutions that will serve care experienced children and families rather than looking for ways to fit children and families into pre-existing systems.'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

'[Working together] gives confidence to me as a VSHT that the children and young people I have in a local authority with a VSHT will be well supported and schools will receive the same messages as the schools in my own LA'

Questionnaire respondent, January 2021

'I love the fact you can ask a question that you know someone will be able to help you with and totally understands why you are asking it.'

Workshop participant, October 2020

'It was the one group that I was part of that facilitated honest and open discussion around the real issues for these children'

Workshop participant, October 2020

As part of the questionnaire, Network members (n=6) were then asked to indicate whether they agreed with a series of statements about the Network itself. The number of respondents agreeing with each statement is shown in Figure one.

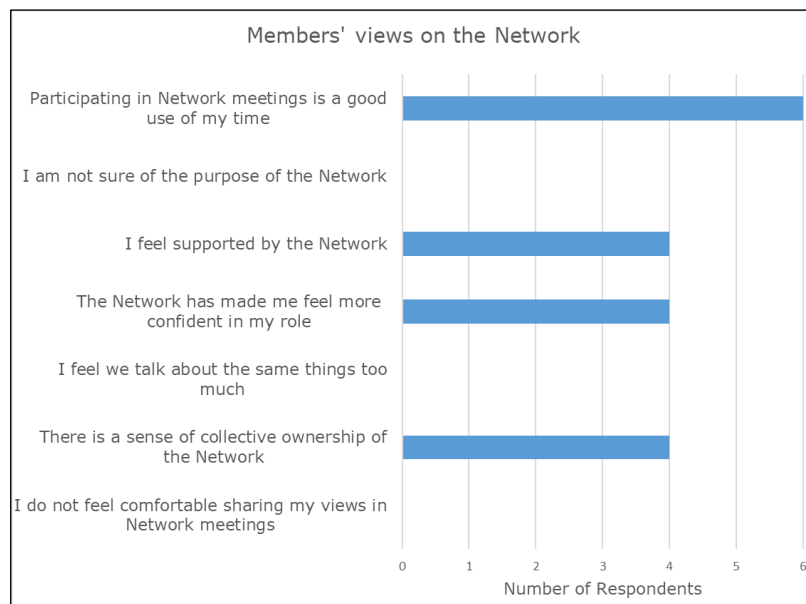


Figure one: Network members' agreement with statements about the Network (Online questionnaire, January 2021. N=6)

Next we asked members whether there is 'anything you feel you need or would like from the Network that you don't currently get? Or, is there anything that could be done to improve the Network to make it more useful for you?' Four respondents answered this question. The main point raised was the use of online meetings, which was recognised as useful in the circumstances as a means of maintaining connections and continuing to build the Network; however, the reintroduction of at least some face-to-face meetings (when possible) was suggested. Other suggestions included the creation of a 'step-by-step guide to use with schools', further support around Scottish Government funding reporting requirements, and the expansion of the Network to all 32 local authorities.

8. Conclusions

Members of the VSHT and CET Network valued the support of the network as their roles emerged, and in the changes and challenges they faced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussions and descriptions by Network members since the first roundtable meeting in March 2019 have demonstrated the range of tasks and activities in which Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experienced Teams have been involved in Scotland, and the following key features have emerged:

- Focus on education, and on looked after and care experienced children and young people
- Connections and relationships
- Flexibility and adaptability

Members have reflected that, through Corporate Parenting legislation, there are many organisations which have a responsibility for care experienced young people; but that, particularly in the case of pupils educated 'out of authority', there are advantages to having a single role or team whose focus is on educational progress. Network members' experiences since the start of the pandemic have shown clearly how important this focus is for all care experienced young people, wherever their learning takes place. Their understanding of the needs of this particular group can help to make these visible in situations where they might not be immediately considered.

'Someone with a sharp focus on them who could "care-proof" initiatives and keep being a champion (issues included addressing digital poverty when everything went online, pushing for schools to keep pupils "visible"), making sure that schools did not underestimate when doing estimates, attending review meetings, providing support for staff around the need for a trauma-informed return'

Workshop participant, October 2020

Furthermore, VSHTs and CETs have begun to demonstrate ways in which education can respond to the International Council of Education Advisers' (2020) call to 'pandemic-proof' the education system, by focusing on the experiences, strengths and needs of care experienced individuals, supporting families and carers to engage with education and

'home learning', and developing closer relationships with other agencies involved in supporting children and families.

The range of connections made by VSHTs and CETs, both within local authority structures, departments, and services, and with other agencies, organisations, and individuals have also been demonstrated, and are important beyond the pandemic-response context. This element of the role aligns closely with the findings of the Independent Care Review (2020, p.71), which concluded:

'Improving the educational attainment of care experienced people should not be the sole responsibility of school staff, but Scotland must support the broader workforce and carers to value and engage with the educational progress of the children in their care.'

The impact of remote working on the development of these relationships varied, and for some whose roles and remits were expanded in light of the pandemic, the development of new relationships was required. This sometimes had a significant impact on workload, which had already been a challenge in some areas. The solution to this was described as the development of a larger, multi-disciplinary Virtual School or Care Experienced team, but the feasibility of this was also linked to concerns around the distribution of funding. A main concern in relation to the overall VSHT and CET roles was, in various ways, uncertainty around funding, and concerns that the security of VSHT/CET posts may impact on the extent to which these roles can influence on longer-term systems change.

The flexibility and adaptability of these individuals in continuing to support care experienced children and young people as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic is clear. Towards the end of 2020, however, there was recognition that the focus of both the Network and its individual members, which had necessarily adapted during the period from March, should return to the substantive work of Virtual Schools. The impact of the VSHT role is at risk of being diluted, and there is a need to ensure that expanded role for some does not result in a longer term loss of focus on those whom the VSHT role is intended to benefit. This must also be understood in the context of the potential for increases in the number of children and families who become part of the 'care experienced' remit; social workers have reported an increase in referrals since the start of the 2020-21 school year (BASW, 2021).

The unique role of the VSHT remains critical in this context. 'What works for Children's Social Care'¹⁴ found that educational interventions which have been reported to be effective for children generally are not always the most appropriate for children who have had a social worker (which includes looked after and care experienced children). While some interventions had a greater impact on these children, others has a lesser or negative effect (Sanders et al., 2020). These authors acknowledge the small sample

¹⁴ <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/>

sizes on which their analyses were based, but their findings suggest that the needs of children who have had a social worker are not always best met by the same sorts of support and interventions which would be best suited to the general population. This reinforces the importance of individuals within education who have a focus on the needs of care experienced pupils in particular, and are able to consider which supports and intervention are appropriate for individuals. In the context of concerns that the specific needs of care experienced young people may be minimised as a result of the increasing support needs of everyone, as society begins its 'COVID recovery', this is vital. The focus on understanding care experienced individuals' needs may be supported by increased prominence of the Designated Manager role in individual establishments, and the strengthening of links between these roles and the Virtual Schools.

At the time of writing, educational establishments in Scotland are once again closed to most pupils, and Network members' expectations around returning to their substantive focus in early 2021 are likely to have been impacted by this. The challenge remains for VSHTs and CETs to maintain the advantages that have been gained under recent circumstances, and the momentum they have built in the role, but also to re-establish the key focus of the role in the context of the ongoing pandemic. The Network must ensure that VSHTs and CETs continue to have the support they need to maintain their focus on looked after and care experienced children and young people, to develop and strengthen key relationships, and to utilise their flexibility and adaptability in meeting the needs of care experienced pupils particularly, in the ongoing pandemic context.

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