Virtual School Head Teachers in Scotland: Practice Case Studies

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Introduction

This report provides an insight into the role of Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHTs) and Care Experienced Teams (CETs) in Scotland through a diverse range of case studies. These provide examples of how VSHTs are using creativity, compassion, and communication to establish new, innovative and alternative ways of supporting care experienced children and young people during their education journey so that children and young people can feel more settled, confident, and motivated, ensuring a better experience at school.

The first two case studies focus on how VSHTs provided personalised support for care experienced learners during their time in primary and secondary school. The third case study explores how a VSHT supported a group of care experienced learners. The final case study reflects on how a VSHT developed their service from scratch and made a positive impact across wider children's services.

Any identifying features of the children and young people referred to in these case studies have been changed to protect their identities.

Context

In 2018, as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, funding was made available to all local authorities through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund to provide additional support to care experienced children and young people. As of April 2022, 18 of Scotland's 32 local authorities have chosen to use this funding to establish a specific job role or team who have a focus on improving the educational outcomes and experiences of care experienced children and young people. These posts or teams are commonly known as Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHT) or Care Experienced Teams (CET). The VSHT or CET has a responsibility for all care experienced[1] children and young people within a local authority, regardless of which school children and young people attend.

In 2019, the Virtual School Head Teachers' (VSHT) and Care Experienced Teams' (CET) Network ('the Network') was established by CELCIS to support and connect those working in the role, share good practice, and drive progress towards better educational experiences for all care experienced children and young people.

The education of care experienced children and young people

All children and young people have a right to a high-quality education. All children need support during their educational journey and care experienced children and young people may require additional support during their time in school to meet their distinct, and often unseen, needs. While the educational outcomes of care experienced learners in Scotland have improved over the last ten years, official statistics show that there is still a

gap between 'looked after' children and their peers. Having experience of care is not a predictor of poorer educational outcomes; the data demonstrates why it is important to provide effective, timely and responsive support to meet the individual needs of children and young people.

The Virtual School

A Virtual School offers an additional layer of support for the education of care experienced learners through one person or team. The term 'Virtual School' is used interchangeably to refer to:

- The way that some local authorities organise the support they provide for care experienced children and young people.
- The group of care experienced children and young people who for whom a local authority is responsible.
- The person (VSHT) or team (CET) who offers support to care experienced children, young people, their families and carers, and schools.

Research on the structure and impact of Virtual Schools is still emerging but there is consistency in the description of the key features of the model:

- Led by an individual or team with specific responsibility for raising awareness of the needs of care experienced children and young people.
- Aims to bring about positive and sustainable systemic changes to policy and practice.
- Works across all levels of the education and care 'systems', from practice through to operational and strategic activities.
- Emphasises the building of collaborative relationships between different agencies.
- Focuses on addressing wider factors, such as wellbeing, that can impact on children and young people's educational and life experiences.
- Upholds the rights and ensures the wellbeing of care experienced children and young people.

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[1]'Looked after' children is the legal definition used to refer to children who are currently in the care of a local authority, while 'care experienced' children are those who have at any time been in the care of the local authority

1. Zara's Story: Sailing into Success

Context

There is a consensus in society, supported by education research literature, about the inherent benefits of learning in the community, including through sport, voluntary and work experience for children and young people. A body of evidence points towards multiple benefits of paid, voluntary work and spare time activities, in particular, for children and young people with care experience.[2] This includes the social capital gained through work, the value of social connections and opportunities to transform their identity, 'sense of self'[3] and build resilience.[4] A North American study found a strong association between early work experience and later employment stability for those with care experience well into later adulthood.[5]

South Ayrshire Council is on the west coast of southern Scotland. There are over 400 care experienced school aged children and young people cared for by the local authority, and the VSHT, Kimberley Keenan came into post in 2019. This case study describes how Kimberley and her team, in collaboration with a range of professionals, worked together to provide intensive support for Zara during a particularly difficult time.

What were the circumstances?

Zara was in her second year of secondary school and had recently gone to live in a Children's House[6] following a build-up of pressure at home and a period of being 'looked after' at home.[7] In her young life, Zara had experienced several bereavements, and was going through significant change as she navigated the reality of moving away from her family and community and leaving the responsibilities she had at home. The VSHT team felt that Zara had lost trust in the adults around her. She found it difficult to attend school and did not see value in engaging in school and learning while she was making

sense of her situation, her identity, and dealing with the psychological impact of moving away from her family.

What did the team do?

The team at the Virtual School started by getting to know Zara so that they could build a relationship with her. They wanted to find out what sparked her interest and what she enjoyed doing. They were looking for a way in and an opportunity to offer her something that she could buy into and enjoy. A welfare officer from the team visited her regularly to slowly build up familiarity and get to know her. At times, Zara didn't feel like talking, but the team kept in touch so that she knew they were there when she felt ready to speak

with them. The team felt that Zara had lost confidence in adults and was angry about her situation.

Eventually Zara started to open up and expressed an interest in sport, and this galvanised the team into action. Working closely alongside staff at the Children's House and the local authority Active School's team, an approach was made to a local sailing club. They supported Zara to attend sailing lessons and worked around her schedule, for example, by adjusting the working hours of the welfare officer to enable Zara to attend in the evening at a time that suited her. Zara thrived in this setting. The Virtual School, in collaboration with Active Schools, used pandemic recovery funding to pay for her membership at the Club and she subsequently attended their Summer School. This experience became the linchpin around which a bespoke plan was built with Zara to support her and which promoted both her confidence and her attendance back into school.

What difference did this make?

Zara thoroughly enjoyed and learnt a great deal from the sailing lessons that were arranged. She grew in confidence as a result of her time at the sailing club and the experience helped Zara to develop positive relationships with her peers and the adults who worked alongside her. Zara became a valued and integral part of an organisation that she otherwise may never have come across.

Zara has since achieved a sailing qualification and has undertaken volunteering at the sailing club, leading to her achievement of a [Saltire Award](). A certificate to recognise her commitment and achievement was presented to her and she took the awards to show her school. Zara has also achieved her Bronze Duke of Edinburgh award and is working towards the Silver award. Zara's school attendance has improved and there is work underway to identify and record learning from her activities to support her achievement of National Qualifications in the future. The Virtual School is considering how to use opportunities like this for Zara and other learners as a pathway into modern apprenticeships.

Implications for practice

A key takeaway for the South Ayrshire Virtual School was the need to explore options for learning and growth in settings out of the school context. VSHTs work with care experienced learners of many different ages and abilities, who have a diverse range of needs and interests, and there can be a narrow window in which some young people are interested and motivated. A key strength of the Virtual School model lies in being able to support care experienced learners throughout their educational journey and offer different pathways. The ability to match learners' needs quickly with an out-of-school learning opportunity matched to their interests can be key in contributing towards positive educational progress.[8] A large-scale study with care experienced graduates[9] also

points towards ready-made access to multiple opportunities as a factor associated with future success.

> The experience became the linchpin around which a bespoke plan was built with Zara to support her, which promoted both her confidence and her attendance back to school.

[2] Webb, L., Cox, N., Cumbers, H., Martikke, S., Gedzielewski, E., & Duale, M. (2017). Personal resilience and identity capital among young people leaving care: Enhancing identity formation and life chances through involvement in volunteering and social action. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *20*(7), 889-903.

[3] Arnau-Sabatés, L., & Gilligan, R. (2015). What helps young care leavers to enter the world of work? Possible lessons learned from an exploratory study in Ireland and Catalonia. *Children and youth services review*, *53*, 185-191.

[4] Gilligan, R. (1999). Enhancing the resilience of children and young people in public care by mentoring their talents and interests. *Child and family social work*, *4*, 187-196.

[5] Stewart, C. J., Kum, H. C., Barth, R. P., & Duncan, D. F. (2014). Former foster youth: Employment outcomes up to age 30. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *36*, 220-229.

[6] Children's House is a term used in Scotland to describe what may have previously been called a residential care home and is synonymous with the term children's home

[7] Looked after at home describes a situation where a child continues to live at their normal residence but receives regular support from social workers

[8] Gilligan, R. (2007). Spare time activities for young people in care: What can they contribute to educational progress?. *Adoption & Fostering*, *31*(1), 92-99.

[9] Harrison, N. (2017). Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education.

2. Jamie's Story: Enhanced Transition Support

Context

A move of school for any child can be challenging. For the vast majority of school pupils, the move from primary to secondary is a significant life event and their only school move. Care experienced learners are likely to experience more moves than their peers[10] and any change can be disproportionately unsettling. Whilst there are no definitive figures, Scottish Government statistics indicate a distinct group of care experienced learners, who are known as living in 'out of authority' placements. They live and attend school away from the communities they were born in.[11] These children and young people may need closer attention and support so that they do not miss out on potential sources of support as a result of being geographically distant from their 'home' local authority.

Aberdeen City is a large urban centre and port in the northeast of Scotland. Aberdeen City Council is responsible for approximately 600 care experienced learners with over 200 of these children and young people living outside of Aberdeen City. It was the first local authority in Scotland to establish the post of a VSHT, in 2015. This case study describes how Larissa Gordon, the VSHT, developed support for a care experienced learner who, at the time, lived in another local authority area in Scotland.

What were the circumstances?

A significant amount of the research literature on the education of care experienced learners is concerned with raising academic attainment.[12][13] School-based research on social and emotional aspects of learning and wellbeing is less available, although there has been a recent renewed focus on attachment and trauma awareness in education.[14] We know that learners are more able to settle to learn when they have emotional stability. The ability to achieve, attain and access the curriculum is inextricably linked to social and emotional wellbeing. An understanding of how early experiences affect learners and the importance of relationships, underpins much of the Scottish policy landscape.[15]

Aberdeenshire Council is a predominantly rural council area in the northeast of Scotland. The central council services of Aberdeenshire Council are in Aberdeen City making it the only council in Scotland whose headquarters are located outside its jurisdiction. It has almost 800 care experienced learners and 17 secondary schools spread over a large, almost two thousand square miles, geographical area. This case study outlines how Emma Allen, the VSHT in Aberdeenshire, supported and grew 'care experienced groups' within schools in the local authority area.

What did the VSHT do?

There was no blueprint for Larissa but she knew that she wanted to replicate for Jamie what she did routinely for learners who lived within the local authority area. Her starting point was to fact-find to begin to better understand Jamie's story. She met Jamie's social worker, read Jamie's Child's Plan, and began to build up a picture of who he was as a learner. She was acutely aware that the transition from primary to secondary can be difficult for any child and that Jamie would need targeted support given the challenges he had experienced.

Larissa convened a planning meeting and began the process of building relationships with the network of people around him. A comprehensive assessment led to a bespoke plan to offer support to Jamie, his carer and the school. Over the coming weeks and months Larissa forged connections with those who taught and cared for him. She followed Jamie's progress by keeping in regular contact and listening closely to their feedback and concerns. Whilst there were inevitable difficulties, she was able to anticipate flashpoints and travel to visit Jamie at school when she felt that being there in person was needed to calm tensions, provide reassurance or simply to refocus on Jamie's plan. Through the Aberdeen City Educational Psychologist, Larissa was able to broker bespoke training for the school and promote an attachment-focused 'key adult'[16] relationship with an identified member of staff.

> Virtual School Head Teachers inhabit the space between policy ambition and practice.

What difference did this make?

Whilst he acknowledged some difficulties, Jamie described his school experience as good, and his attendance was consistently excellent. He was supported in the transition to secondary school and went on to achieve a range of qualifications. Larissa was clear from the outset that the key to Jamie being able to achieve at school lay in positive, nurturing relationships formed with school staff. The conditions were created for Jamie to experience 'doses' of therapeutic care in consistent, sensitive daily interactions within school.[17] The consistent and continuous focus on Jamie's plan and the support this provided created the environment for Jamie to be able to go to school, maintain friendships and learn.

Jamie's foster carer described her experience of Jamie's education as a roller-coaster. She said that at times she felt judged for the difficulties Jamie had at school and that she often wanted to take away his distress by keeping him off school when things were particularly challenging. At key points during this journey, she wanted Jamie to attend a school that offered specialist provision. Having access to the reassurance and expertise of a VSHT lowered her levels of anxiety and shifted her thinking about his education.

Jamie's foster carer began to see how, with the right support in place, Jamie could navigate the transition from primary and thrive in secondary school.

Both Jamie's primary school, and more so his secondary school, benefitted from there being bespoke, co-ordinated support, training and advice in place. His secondary school built capacity and developed particular expertise in embedding social and emotional aspects of learning into the fabric of school life. It became routine for school staff to become more curious, recognise and know what children were communicating; they were more flexible, and quicker to respond. A core part of this was due to training that Jamie's school secured to support the development of his pastoral assistant who became his 'key adult'.[18] She developed expertise in attachment-focused approaches which has benefitted both Jamie and the wider group of learners that she supports.

Implications for practice

VSHTs and CETs have a responsibility to prioritise the education of care experienced children and young people wherever they live. There is a plethora of guidance[19] on 'out of authority' placements and a regulatory framework, however these can be complex and bureaucratic. There is emerging research and practice evidence on effective ways of working for children living in 'out of authority' arrangements.[20] A substantive report from England indicates there is increased co-operation between local authorities as a result of having a VSHT in post but this is described as not consistent or standardised.[21] The report goes on to highlight the features of "positive" 'out of authority' placements to include high-level planning, robust multiagency working, information sharing and co-ordination.

This Aberdeen City case study demonstrates how VSHTs inhabit the space between policy ambition and practice. They are at the forefront of operationalising guidance and ensuring that care experienced learners experience quality education wherever they live. Many learners who live in an area away from their responsible local authority benefit from an 'overlaying' of support to ensure forward planning, the development of effective working relationships and bespoke support. This additional support, an 'enhanced transition', points to an additional layer of support that some care experienced children need that goes beyond the expectations of what might be considered good practice.[22] This support is perhaps more important and necessarily overstated for children and young people living at a distance from their local authority.

[10] Ofsted (2014) From a distance: Looked after children living away from their home area London. Ofsted.
[11] Scottish Government (2018) Children's Social Work Statistics 2016-17. Edinburgh. Scottish Government.
[12] O'Higgins, A. A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship of being in care on the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*. The Rees Centre.
[13] Männistö, I. I., & Pirttimaa, R. A. (2018). A review of interventions to support the educational attainments of children and adolescents in foster care. *Adoption & Fostering*, *42*(3), 266-281.
[14] Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme
http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/

[15] Scottish Attachment in Action (2022). *MAPPING ATTACHMENT-INFORMED, TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PRACTIC IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION*.

[16] Bombèr, L. M. (2007). *Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in schools*. London: Worth.

[17] Treisman, K. (2016). *Working with relational and developmental trauma in children and adolescents*. Taylor & Francis.

[18] Bombèr, L. M. (2015). *The Key Adult in School*. London: Worth

[19] Gough, A. (2018) Secure Care in Scotland: Cross-border placements Glasgow. University of Strathclyde.

Scottish Government (1995) Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Adoption and Children (Scotland) Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

Scottish Government (2011) Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

Scottish Government (2009) Looked after Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

Scottish Government (2013) Secure Accommodation (Scotland) Regulations 2013 Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

Scottish Government (2014) Part 9 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

SCRA (2016) Practice Direction 27. Cross-border issues. Glasgow. SCRA.

[19] UK Government (2010) Out of authority placement of looked-after children: Supplement to The Children Act 1989 volume 2: care planning, placement and case review guidance. London. UK Government.

[20] Care Inspectorate (2022) Report on distance placements Dundee. Care Inspectorate.

[21] Ofsted (2014) From a distance: Looked after children living away from their home area London. Ofsted

[22] Skilbred, D. T., Iversen, A. C., & Moldestad, B. (2017). Successful academic achievement among foster children: What did the foster parents do?. *Child Care in Practice*, *23*(4), 356-371.

3. Care experienced groups: 'Sounding out'

Context

A significant amount of the research literature on the education of care experienced learners is concerned with raising academic attainment.[23][24] School-based research on social and emotional aspects of learning and wellbeing is less available, although there has been a recent renewed focus on attachment and trauma awareness in education.[25] We know that learners are more able to settle to learn when they have emotional stability. The ability to achieve, attain and access the curriculum is inextricably linked to social and emotional wellbeing. An understanding of how early experiences affect learners and the importance of relationships, underpins much of the Scottish policy landscape.[26]

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What were the circumstances?

Emma was acutely aware that many of her care experienced learners were dealing with issues of separation, trauma and loss 'live' and in the moment. The experience of state supported care is not something that had happened to them in the past, it is something that they live with and continue to process on a day-to-day basis. Multiple factors including how they came to need the support of the care system, where they lived, and their relationships all intersected, making their pastoral needs at school more complex.

What did the VSHT do?

This is a journey that developed in three phases over two years.

Phase One

"I'm thinking of running a group for care experienced learners. Would you like to join?"

The Principal Teacher of Mackie Academy posed this question to each of her care experienced learners, and it came to be the start of this work. The school had historically run groups for Young Carers and learners who identify as LGBTQ+. Emma met the newly formed 'care experienced group' soon after coming into post. She described her remit as

a VSHT and invited the group to submit a bid for funding that she had available as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Their very strong application with compelling justifications for a residential trip with the Outward Bound Trust was successful and the group went on their trip just before the first lockdown at the start of the pandemic. The group's feedback from the trip proved to be a catalyst for further support. The young people demonstrated a strong group identity, resilience, leadership and a commitment to supporting each other. While the pandemic inevitably delayed ambitions to work with more schools, the Mackie Academy group continued to meet online throughout the lockdown.

Phase Two

At the end of the 2021 academic year, Emma, determined to grow this work, facilitated meetings between Mackie Academy and another school -The Gordon Schools - so that they could share the thinking and process of the work. The Gordon Schools posed a similar question to a number of learners which included care experienced children and young people who subsequently wanted to form their own group. The school's Principal Teacher of Guidance and a Pupil Support Worker worked with the young people to plan a year's worth of activities to support what they wanted to do. The group met weekly from September 2021 and participated in a range of voluntary and social activities both in school and in the local community. During the spring term they collaborated with the Youth Music Initiative to collect footage and sounds to produce a video installation. They went on to screen this as a film 'Sounding Out' as a projection on Huntly Castle in the grounds of their school which was well attended by staff and families.

Phase Three

Emma is currently supporting and encouraging more schools to pose this important question and consider the value of creating identity and 'common experience' based groups. She is liaising with another academy and a primary school and supporting them to grow groups based on the needs of their communities. She is using social media to communicate with young people and has built an online platform where schools and learners share their experiences. The digital platform 'Your Place, Your Space' is a forum

for all local care experienced young people which links them to organisations and showcases work across the whole local authority area.

> "I'm thinking of running a group for care experienced learners. Would you like to join?"

What difference did this make?

'Care experienced' groups have met consistently and regularly, as part of the school timetable, in two schools in Aberdeenshire. These have both provided safe spaces for children and young people who share common experiences to meet together whilst learning and participating in a range of cultural, social and voluntary activities both in and out of school. Learners can talk about their experiences in a therapeutic context, as little or as much as they want. Teachers have formed close relationships with learners, they know them well and are able to offer further bespoke, individualised support. Teaching staff have developed a sophisticated understanding of this group of learners in their schools, and their needs, and have access to information which is helping to further reduce barriers to learning.

There have been multiple benefits for individual learners within both of the groups. One learner's school attendance improved significantly as a result of being part of a group with their peers; and when another learner, suffered a personal loss, both the group and school community were able to offer practical, emotional support and stability. Learners have been supported to access additional tuition, helped with transport to work experience opportunities, and have attended career-related training and courses. Many of the young people have had opportunities to participate in skills-based activities and voluntary work. Teachers have created self-sustaining school communities and are able to quickly offer bespoke support as and when needs arise.

> The Aberdeenshire case study points towards a model that creates safe spaces for learners and a mechanism for schools to get to know care experienced learners in a deep and nuanced way.

Implications for practice

'Caring schools' is a model of practice drawing from care theory in the USA[27] and is proposed as an approach that may be suited for those with care experience.[28] Practitioners draw attention to the importance of relationships and make the point that teachers typically only gain a narrow snapshot of a child's story. The child's family narrative and their lived experience is rarely heard and understood holistically by the school.[29] This case study points towards a model that creates sustainable safe spaces for learners and a mechanism for schools to get to know care experienced learners in a deep and nuanced way. This is not proposed as a solution for all schools to adopt, a combination of factors must be in place for the model to work. First, learners are asked whether they want to be a part of a group. Secondly, the support of the senior

management team in providing time within the curriculum and space for groups to evolve and grow. Finally, a key role is played by specialist staff who are available, emotionally attuned and work in a trauma informed way.[30]

[23] O'Higgins, A. A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship of being in care on the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*. The Rees Centre.

[24] Männistö, I. I., & Pirttimaa, R. A. (2018). A review of interventions to support the educational attainments of children and adolescents in foster care. *Adoption & Fostering*, *42*(3), 266-281.

[25] Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/

[26] Scottish Attachment in Action (2022). *MAPPING ATTACHMENT-INFORMED, TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PRACTIC IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION*.

[27] Noddings, N. (2015). *The challenge to care in schools, 2nd Editon*. Teachers College Press.

[28] Jackson, S., Cameron, C., & Connelly, G. (2015). *Educating children and young people in care: Learning placements and caring schools*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

[29] Wetz, J. (2009). *Urban village schools: Putting relationships at the heart of secondary school organisation and design*.

[30] Scottish Government, 2021. *Trauma-informed practice: toolkit*. Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

4. The Virtual School: Multiple Levels of Support

Context

All children require a degree of support on their journey through education. Children and young people with care experience are more likely to live with a degree of complexity in their lives and can benefit from bespoke support that is able to change and adapt according to their unique circumstances and needs. Research is pointing towards the Virtual School as a comprehensive approach that offers multiple levels of support to children, families and schools,[31] with the potential to bring about change and improvement to the education system.[32]

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

What were the circumstances?

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

What did the VSHT do?

Mary Jane took a three-pronged approach to her broad remit. These were inevitably interlinked, ran parallel and fed into each other. A priority was to understand who their children were and collect accurate up-to-date data. This was a journey that took six months and required getting to grips with the complexity of creating a bespoke database for the Virtual School. The challenge was to bring together both education and social care information and for this to interact dynamically with schools and others so that it both informed and was updated by them.

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

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

What difference did this make?

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

> Perhaps what is most significant is the potential of the model to have a strategic impact across the complex ecosystem that surrounds care experienced learners.

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

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

Implications for practice

The VSHT in North Lanarkshire came into post feeling both daunted and freed by a remit to impact on a group of over fourteen hundred learners and their families. A reported strength of the role for many VSHT in Scotland has been the freedom to develop a service organically, responding to the local context and adapting as they go to follow the education trajectories of individual learners.[33] This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as the Virtual School model demonstrated a flexibility to adapt to prioritise the education of care experienced learners as well as being on the front line of practical, emotional and financial support for families.[34] Perhaps what is most significant is the potential of the model to have a strategic impact across the complex ecosystem that surrounds care experienced learners by raising awareness of their needs and promoting new creative initiatives, as well as 'tackling systemic problems'.[35]

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About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland.
We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

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