



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2ND FEBRUARY 2023

Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report 2022

Report of Councillor Guy Renner Thompson

Interim Joint Directors of Children's Services, Graham Reiter and Andrey Kingham

Purpose of report

This report is to publish to members the Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report for 2021-22 regarding the education achievement of Northumberland's looked after children and care leavers.

Recommendations

1. Members note the education achievements of our looked after children and care leavers and ongoing challenges caused by the disruption to education during the pandemic.
2. Members to provide scrutiny and challenge to the service responses and developments detailed in the report as appropriate.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the corporate objectives, and specifically the "Living, Learning" and "Thriving" priorities of the Corporate Plan 2021-24.

Key issues

1. The Virtual School's priority from September 2021 was to get pupils safely back to school and back on track with their learning. School attendance improved during the year and this contributed to improved education outcomes since the last national tests and exams were taken in 2019, notably at Key Stage 1 in the combined reading/writing/maths measure, and at GCSE.
2. The Virtual School made good progress with plans for improvement, despite higher than anticipated levels of staff absence and vacant posts:
 - there is better stability in school placements
 - more pupils are back on track and working within their age-related curriculum
 - more care leavers are staying in further and higher education
 - there is momentum behind our aspiration for all Northumberland schools to be attachment aware and trauma informed

3. Grant funding received to raise achievement was used creatively and had a positive impact overall. The Virtual School received funding to provide additional tuition, to provide support to the adopted parents and carers of previously looked after children, and to promote the education of children with a social worker. These workstreams will continue into 2023.
4. Relationships with schools, both in and out of county, remain strong. Designated Teachers engaged with training in high numbers, including our termly virtual conferences that met a range of training needs. Schools engaged well with the Personal Education Plan process to support children to do the best they can at school.
5. Our response to the new extended duty of Virtual School Headteachers to promote the education of children with a social worker was very positive. Our innovative Virtual School model gave us a strong starting point to share what we know works well and engage professionals with this crucial agenda. Northumberland's model achieved national recognition when we were invited by the DfE to deliver a webinar on the attendance of children with a social worker.
6. We know that pupils are able to achieve their best when they are in stable school placements. For the 14th consecutive year there has been no permanent exclusion of a looked after child from school. However, school stability is a concern. The number of children experiencing suspensions (previously fixed term exclusions) was very high, due to a combination of increasingly complex needs, challenges with self-regulation, and the pressures faced by schools including staffing and attendance. The impact is that we need to work with schools to improve achievement in most key measures so that they are in line with national averages for looked after children.

Background

1. Virtual School Headteacher's Annual Report 2022.

Implications

Policy	<p>The Virtual School fulfils the council's statutory duties in relation to the education of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • looked after children • previously looked after children and care leavers • and children who have or have had a social worker
Finance and value for money	<p>The current proposals seek to be delivered within existing service budgets and additional DfE grant funding to support Covid recovery and raise academic achievement.</p> <p>Grant funding is allocated on a year by year basis and is intended to cover the academic year. Delays in the recruitment process have had a negative impact on achieving the best value for money from this funding.</p>
Legal	Discharge of statutory duties regarding the education of looked after children, the Children Act 2004.
Procurement	None
Human Resources	The wellbeing of all staff is a priority as they cope with the additional pressures of staff absence and vacant posts, and high demand for support from schools.
Property	None
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	None
Risk Assessment	None
Crime & Disorder	None
Customer Consideration	Personal risk assessments are in place for all staff; all education providers have risk assessments in place which are monitored by NCC
Carbon reduction	None
Health and Wellbeing	The emotional and mental health and wellbeing of looked after children is a priority. Improved use of the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) is starting to have a positive impact

Wards	No implications have been identified at this stage
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Background papers:

- Promoting the education of looked after and previously looked after children, DfE statutory guidance February 2018
- Promoting the education of children with a social worker, DfE guidance June 2022

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Lynsey Denyer obo Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Graham Reiter
Chief Executive	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Guy Renner-Thompson

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