

North Lanarkshire Council

Report

Education & Families Committee

approval noting

Ref MJH/TS/SH

Date 17/09/19

Virtual School

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Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the progress and development of the new Virtual School model within North Lanarkshire Council. The report highlights the work undertaken in the last six months to develop a greater understanding of how best to enhance the educational attainment of Looked After and Care Experienced Children and Young People (LACE CYP) and the early actions and interventions undertaken.

The Virtual School is supported through specifically targeted Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) funding providing a unique opportunity to establish a model of support and challenge for Education and Social Work and to ensure we are getting it right for all of our LACE CYP through improving educational experience and attainment leading to enhanced life opportunities and outcomes. It aims to add value to existing provision through improvements in education planning and in the co-ordination, efficacy and targeting of existing resources for LACE CYP. In addition the Virtual School team will develop new programmes of support and facilitate tailored individual and family/carer support where this is identified as required through assessment and planning processes. This will be reflected in a detailed implementation plan.

Recommendations

Committee are asked to:

- (1) Note the content of this report.
- (2) Approve the next steps set out at section 2.10 and agree to receive a further report on the detailed implementation plan and evaluation framework in November 2019.

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority Support all children and young people to realise their full potential

Ambition statement (6) Raise attainment and skills for learning, life, and work to enhance opportunities and choices

1. Background

- 1.1 The Scottish Attainment Challenge set out by Scottish Government in 2015 is underpinned by the National Improvement Framework, Getting it Right for Every Child and the Curriculum for Excellence. Funding from the associated Attainment Scotland Fund was made available by the Scottish Government to support the reduction of the poverty related attainment gap in a number of challenger authorities including in North Lanarkshire.
- 1.2 In 2018 as part of the Attainment Scotland Fund additional monies were ring-fenced to create the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund (CECYPF). This funding is specifically targeted at improving the educational outcomes of Looked After and Care Experienced Children and Young People (LACE CYP). Based on the Children Looked after in Scotland (CLAS) return for 2016/17 and the number of LACE CYP aged 5-16 the funding allocated to North Lanarkshire Council for 2019/20 is £619,200.
- 1.3 A focus on improving outcomes for LACE CYP is already a key priority for the Council and its partners. This is reflected within the new Corporate Parenting Strategy and Improvement Plan 2019-2022, the Plan for North Lanarkshire, the recent appointment of an elected member champion for LACE CYP, the Council's commitment to the Scottish Care Leaver's Covenant and the establishment of the Family Firm initiative.
- 1.4 Synergy is also created by the ongoing process of alignment through the new Education and Families Directorate. This is therefore an exciting and timely opportunity for education and social work colleagues to take a fully integrated approach to improve outcomes for North Lanarkshire's LACE CYP.
- 1.5 As reported and approved through previous reports to Committee, an early decision was made to create a Virtual School model through the available CECYPF monies. Two broad priorities were also identified for the Virtual School to:
 - Improve the attainment of children and young people who are care experienced;
 - Support the carers and families of children and young people who are care experienced, including those in kinship and looked after at home to enable them to achieve.

The identification of these priorities recognised the high proportion of LACE CYP in North Lanarkshire who are supported at home or in kinship arrangements.

2. Report

- 2.1 In February 2019 a scoping exercise was initiated to identify current gaps in service provision impacting on LACE CYP and to explore best practice. In addition, demonstration projects were implemented to offer support to a number of these young people who were experiencing barriers to achieving their potential. Data cleansing of both MySWIS and SEEMis was and continues to be a priority to ensure both systems accurately reflect North Lanarkshire Council's LACE CYP population.
- 2.2 **Scoping Exercise**
 - 2.2.1 The scoping exercise included examination of current research and discussion with CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. Links were also made with other authorities on a similar journey to explore different models of

support. Research has also been undertaken to understand the support offered in England, where the Virtual School model is a statutory measure of support for LACE CYP. A common thread underpinning best practice is the importance of the ethos of keeping children and young people at the centre of their plans and improving their life chances through education, ambitions which are core to the new Virtual School team.

- 2.2.2 As part of the scoping work the team also engaged with a number of frontline staff in North Lanarkshire Council and the Third Sector who support LACE CYP as well as with young people from Today Not Tomorrow (TNT) Children's Champion Group. Views were sought from both education and social work practitioners, including those working in intensive services and staff from the five Children's Houses. Through this early dialogue and engagement opportunities for demonstration projects were identified. Discussion with workers, parents, carers and young people are still ongoing with the focus on which supports are working well and where the challenges lie.

2.3 **Demonstration Projects**

- 2.3.1 Following meetings with the Head Teacher of Pentland Primary School, it was identified that this school offered an ideal base for a demonstration project. Pentland School is North Lanarkshire Council's designated specialist provision for primary pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs and is situated in the Townhead area of Coatbridge. The school has a maximum role of 30 pupils within which there is a high proportion of LACE CYP (27%) plus a number of other young people who required additional support and were not achieving well in their learning. It was identified that if these young people became more engaged in school, this could alleviate the risk of exclusion for these children and have a positive effect on the overall wellbeing of both individual children and the pupil group.

- 2.3.2 Programmes were established to allow pupils to experience a varied curriculum in the afternoon to enhance their health and wellbeing. Two physical activity groups and two creative arts groups were established. In addition, a member of social work staff worked in the school two days a week, with the goal of offering individual support to the children, support to the families and to improve communication between social work and the school.

- 2.3.3 Feedback from the Head Teacher, Social Work staff and young people has been very positive. The immediate impact in engagement was noted for certain pupils who were able to remain in the visual arts class for the whole lesson, a significant improvement for some. There was evidence of pride and enjoyment in the work by the pupils which had a positive impact at home as they told their parents/carers about what they did at school again not typical previously for some. The communication between social work localities and the school was also improved by the links made through the social worker based within the school.

- 2.3.4 This demonstration project concluded at the end of the summer term 2019 however due to the evident benefits of the programmes the Head Teacher has committed to utilise the providers in the next term to continue the groups.

2.4 **Vocational Groups**

- 2.4.1 In addition to the groups arranged for Pentland Primary School, vocational groups were established for other young people throughout North Lanarkshire. A catering and mechanics group were first established within Lanarkshire Catering School and the Seven Day Centre in Netherton,

2.4.2 The objective of these groups was to enhance attainment through engaging in activities which young people have not previously been able to access. This allowed them to develop a personal sense of success and achievement. All young people offered places in these groups had struggled with the traditional school environment. Attending these groups was an enjoyable experience with a positive impact on their self-esteem.

2.5 Individual Support

2.5.1 Individual support has also been offered to several young people as a demonstration of flexible curriculum interventions. The Virtual School has worked alongside Additional Support Managers, to identify placements on an individual basis for one young person who finds it difficult to sustain a group placement and who successfully sustained the placement one full day per week over a five week period. Another package of support was put in place for a young person in Primary School who was at risk of exclusion. Activities were identified by the young person and implemented for four afternoons a week. This approach supported the young person to successfully complete their education to the end of term.

2.6 Employability

2.6.1 It is well recognised that many LACE CYP experience disruption to education and other barriers and that ensuring opportunities are created to gain recognisable qualifications and access to employability support is vital. The Virtual School has also established strong links with the Council's Pathways Programme and the Family Firm to ensure LACE CYP have a positive destination post 16. In addition a link with Skills Development Scotland has been established with staff responsible for all LACE CYP. It is intended that this support will allow young people who are currently disengaged with education to maintain a link to discuss a positive plan for the future.

2.7 Summer Programme

2.7.1 An activity programme was offered to LACE CYP who are currently on Compulsory Measures of Supervision at Home or in a kinship placement. This drew on the experience of benefits gained from similar supports offered to children and young people in foster care or residential placement over the summer. Working in conjunction with colleagues from North Lanarkshire Leisure (NLL) we agreed a place on the NLL summer programme for children up to age 12 for two weeks. This could be accessed and booked either by the school, social worker or family. A junior membership to the leisure centres was made available to young people of age 12 and over. To make this more attractive it was agreed that a friend, who may not be LACE CYP, could also access this resource free of charge. In line with other Virtual School initiatives take up and impact will be evaluated to inform future planning.

2.8 Data cleansing

2.8.1 A comprehensive data cleansing exercise was required to match information from MySWIS with information from SEEMis and to ensure both were accurate. It is recognised that due to the continuing changes in status for LACE CYP this process will be ongoing.

2.8.2 The accuracy and format of this data now allows for robust analysis and planning to be undertaken through which the Virtual School team can identify priority themes as well as those individual LACE CYP who are most in need of intensive support and thus where additional supports can best be targeted. For example we are able to see there are 34 Looked After young people starting S4 in August 2019, about whom there are significant concerns.

- 2.8.3 The process of matching information from both systems has allowed for each young person who are LACE CYP on MySWIS to have their Scottish Candidate number also included on the system enhancing the tracking of attainment outcomes.

2.9 Building Collaborative Relationships and Analysis of Feedback

- 2.9.1 Visits and a presentation have been undertaken by the Virtual School team to all high schools and social work localities, children's houses, intensive services and the children's carer's team and to all primary and secondary school head teachers. The presentation provided information on the role and aspirations of the Virtual School in North Lanarkshire Council and sought support to take this forward. The team were able to gather feedback from all of these participants/stakeholders on their experiences of good practice and barriers in supporting LACE CYP in schools.

- 2.9.2 From initial analysis of the feedback the key themes are communication between agencies, relationships between staff and multi-agency training. When all three are present the experience for the child or young person is much more likely to be positive. However, when any of these areas are not in place, it is more difficult for the team around the young person to quickly address barriers which occur and impact their learning.

2.10 Next Steps for Virtual School

- 2.10.1 The Virtual School has created two posts for Virtual School Officers, two Virtual School Support Workers and a Senior Clerical Assistant post. Recruitment to the Virtual School Officer and Support Worker posts has now been progressed. The recruitment to these posts benefited hugely from the direct involvement on a small number of LACE young people and it is envisaged that all staff will be in place by September 2019.

- 2.10.2 The Virtual School Lead and Virtual School Officers will carry responsibility for liaising with the school cluster groups within their identified localities. Direct support will be offered to children and young people from the Virtual School Support Workers and through other identified interventions.

- 2.10.3 A reference group comprised of relevant stakeholders including LACE young people will be established over the next month to inform the ongoing development and delivery of the Virtual School model. It anticipated that this group will provide support and challenge and ensure wider partnership perspectives are represented in planning.

- 2.10.4 By October 2019, we will also have completed a wider exercise to gather the views of parent's/carers and young people. This will all contribute to shaping the service and type of support offered by the Virtual School. It is intended that Who Care's Scotland and local Kinship Support Groups will support and facilitate this wider consultation exercise.

- 2.10.5 Further to the additional activity outlined above a detailed implementation plan and evaluation framework will be completed by November 2019.

3. Equality and Diversity

3.1 Fairer Scotland Duty

The Virtual School will support young people who are care experienced who have traditionally experienced disproportionately negative outcomes in educational attainment and linked life opportunities.

3.2 Equality Impact Assessment

Whilst being looked after and care experienced is not in itself a protected characteristic the duties set out in legislation for corporate parents place similar obligations on the Council with respect to this group. Where relevant EIAs will be considered for specific programmes within the Virtual School Model which may impact differentially on those with protected characteristics within the LACE population.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial Impact

This programme can be fully supported through the Care Experienced Young People tranche of SAC funding (£619,200) allocated to North Lanarkshire to the period ended June 2020.

4.2 HR/Policy/Legislative Impact

To date five posts have been established through appropriate delegated processes as to build a core Virtual School Team. The Virtual School lead has been in post since May 2019, from the scoping exercise posts were identified with recent recruitment for two Virtual School Officers and two Virtual School Support Workers. A Senior Clerical Assistant post has also been created. All posts with exception of the Virtual School Lead are temporary in line with funding.

4.3 Environmental Impact None

4.4 Risk Impact None

5. Measures of success

5.1 For LACE young people to have:

- an increased level of attendance;
 - reduced number of exclusions;
 - improved attainment.
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6. Supporting documents

6.1 National Improvement Framework.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/2019-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/>

6.2 Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund: national operational guidance 2018 to 2019.

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

6.3 North Lanarkshire's Corporate Parenting Strategy and Improvement Plan 2019-2022.
To follow.

6.4 The Plan for North Lanarkshire.
<http://connect/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=44070&p=0>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison Gordon', written in a cursive style.

Alison Gordon
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