Virtual School Model of Integrated Education for Care-Experienced Children: Initial Evidence Gathering from Local Authority Pilots.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
LACE	Looked After Children Education Co-ordinator
PEP	Personal Education Plan
PDG	Pupil Development Grant
VSH	Virtual School Head
Looked After Children (Foster et al. 2021)	Children and young people currently looked after under the Children Act 1989 and Social Services and Well-being Act 2014.
Care-experienced children (Foster et al. 2021)	The term 'care-experienced' generally refers to anyone who has been or is currently in care or from a looked-after background at any stage in their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after.

1.   Introduction

Background

1.1   In discharging their duties under the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004, responsible authorities have in place a specialist practitioner, the Looked After Children in Education Coordinator (LACE), to coordinate the child's education plan and address the education needs of looked after children and care leavers in the local authority area.

1.2   LACE Coordinators' exact roles are defined by individual local authorities and therefore there is considerable variation in practice between local authorities across Wales.

1.3   Between January and March 2020, Sir Alasdair Macdonald was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a scoping exercise focused on developing an integrated approach across Wales to improve educational outcomes for care-experienced children.

1.4   Sir Alisdair's report (Macdonald, 2020) highlighted the good practice happening in Wales, but concluded there was too much variation in the way local authorities supported care-experienced children.

1.5   The report produced five recommendations to improve the educational outcomes for care-experienced children, one of which was to develop a Welsh Virtual School model. This recommendation indicated that the Welsh Government should consider requiring all Local Authorities in Wales to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH) and establish a Virtual School model.

1.6   The Virtual School model approach is to work with care-experienced children (which can include young people in post-16 provision), as if they were in a single school and to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve educational stability (Welsh Government, 2021). The school is 'virtual' in that it does not exist as a physical institution or building; instead, children attend the school or education setting at which they are enrolled and remain the responsibility of this educational setting, but all aspects of their welfare and progress are monitored and supported by the VSH.

1.7   The VSH is the lead officer responsible for improving attendance and raising educational outcomes for the care-experienced children ('their pupils'), but also

importantly preparing them for transition to adult life (Macdonald, 2020). The VSH has oversight over both education and social care outcomes for care-experienced children and is responsible for developing and monitoring strategy to achieve and improve these outcomes. A Virtual School is therefore an organisational tool which has been created for the effective co-ordination of support in education for care-experienced children at a strategic and operational level.

1.8   Virtual Schools are statutory in England, and in use in Scotland. The Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint a VSH, for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its care-experienced children. That person must be an officer employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in England (Macdonald, 2020).

1.9   The role of a Virtual School is to:

- Influence policy and develop and improve services for care-experienced children.

- Promote individual achievement, health, and wellbeing.

- Provide advice, support and training to professionals, schools, and carers.

- Improve access to specialist services, including health assessments, mental health assessments and treatment.

- Provide access to professional advice and guidance on education, training, and employment.

- Promote additional opportunities for out of school learning and leisure.

1.10   IFF Research was subsequently commissioned by the Welsh Government (Foster et al. 2021) to conduct research to determine how a new model for supporting care-experienced children can build on existing best practice and systems in Wales, how a new Welsh model can be implemented, and the impact of introducing a new model.

1.11   The research included local authority social care and education stakeholders and practitioners in all 22 local authorities, eight school leaders, five care-experienced young people, as well as the National Delivery Group for the support of care-experienced children education, Directors of Education and Social Services, the Regional Education Consortia and the Education Priorities Group. They also

conducted a documentary review of relevant Welsh and international policy and practice, as well as six in-depth local authority case studies.

1.12   They identified a wealth of practice occurring in local authorities that was perceived as good and should continue in Wales, such as capturing the voice of care-experienced children, collecting data on wider social and emotional factors that extend beyond attainment data, and support provided to schools to help them to be more aware and prepared for the needs of any care-experienced children in their school.

1.13   A number of key challenges were identified in existing local authority systems, including the variation in support offered to care-experienced children depending on where they are living at a given time. This local variation in support provides uncertainty and inconsistency to care-experienced children, a group that already experience a great deal of uncertainty, as well as to professionals who must operate across differing systems as they regularly need to engage with colleagues in other local authorities.

1.14   Other key challenges included limited direct engagement with care-experienced children, few examples of celebrating the achievements of care-experienced children at local authority level, limited outcome measures that focused beyond academic attainment, challenges with data systems (such as obtaining data for looked after children placed out of area), and considerable variation in LACE team structures and consistency of funding.

1.15   The research explored stakeholders' views on Sir Alisdair's recommendation for; 'all local authorities in Wales to appoint a VSH and establish Virtual Schools'. Views on the recommendation to introduce a Virtual School model were mixed. Some local authorities felt that the remit of the VSH was similar to the Looked After Children Education Coordinator (LACE) role and concerns were raised with how the LACE and VSH roles would interact or whether the VSH would replace the LACE role, and the funding implications of introducing a new role. Conversely, others felt that introducing a Virtual School model would result in greater consistency with England and Scotland, enabling easier cross-border collaboration, and that the Virtual School model may enable better access to specialist resources for care-experienced children, in particular Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

1.16   Based on these findings, the report recommended the required principles and component parts that are required to deliver an integrated approach to improve the educational outcomes of care-experienced children. Based on these principles and components, several recommendations were outlined for the Welsh Government to create the conditions for change.

1.17   These recommendations included commissioning a pilot to test different approaches to 'restorative leadership'. Restorative Leadership refers to leadership that is characterised by both high support and high challenge. It is recommended that the pilot should be based on a set of agreed principles underpinning an integrated approach and should centre on testing a VSH equivalent. Each local authority would be given a chance to define their own approach to defining this strategic vision and for the VSH equivalent role in a way that works for their local needs.

1.18   It was also recommended that the Welsh Government should take a more holistic approach to explore a broader range of outcome measures for care-experienced children. Next, the recommendations outlined that the Welsh Government should reflect on the most effective mechanisms to ensure local authorities have the necessary funding to resource strategic initiatives and interventions, such as through the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) for care-experienced children. Furthermore, it was recommended that the Welsh Government should encourage more efficient access to relevant data of Looked After Children through encouraging more open data sharing between local authorities. Lastly, the Welsh Government should promote evidence-based support through Wales-wide communication between local authorities of good practice and evidence-based intervention.

1.19   Based on this research, the Minister for Education and Deputy Minister for Social Services agreed to take forward the implementation of an integrated approach to improve educational outcomes for care-experienced children with interested local authorities in Wales, similar to the Virtual School approach in England and Scotland. A three-year pilot of the Virtual School model was agreed, from March 2021 to March 2024. It was agreed that each local authority would be eligible to bid for a total of £100,000 grant funding.

1.20   The funding has been allocated over two years – all local authorities were invited to apply via an expression of interest process, for grant funding of £40,000 in year one, and £60,000 in year two. A panel comprising of Welsh Government Education

and Social Services officials and Sir Alasdair Macdonald assessed and agreed the outcome for the bids received. 13 local authorities (out of a possible 22) successfully applied for funding. At the time this research was carried out, 8 local authorities had received the total funding of £100k each and 5 had received year-one funding only[1].

1.21   The funding was provided to successful local authorities via the Local Authority Education Grant and subject to specific terms and conditions, which reflect the recommendations of the 2021 report. These included the incorporation of a VSH role in the development of the Virtual School, and to consider the sustainability of the VSH role beyond the lifetime of the pilot funding. Local authorities were also asked to ensure that processes and practices were young people-centred and captured the voice of the child, to ensure that all stakeholders had access to relevant data to support care-experienced children effectively, while ensuring buy-in of the new Virtual School approach with these stakeholders. Lastly, local authorities were asked to monitor the impact and effectiveness of the VSH role and Virtual School approach to support future evaluation.

Aims and Objectives

1.22   The aim of this research project was to explore the implementation of the Virtual School model pilot as an initial evidence-gathering exercise, in order to develop a high-level overview of the different structures, implementation processes, perceived impacts, and other factors relevant to the Virtual School model thus far and to inform any further evaluative work around next steps for the Virtual School model. The information gathered in this research can identify evidence gaps and inform the approach and research questions of any further evaluative work.

1.23   To explore the implementation of the Virtual School model pilot, the following research questions were asked:

1. How have local authorities used the Virtual School model pilot funding?

2. What were the main factors for determining how the pilot funding was used?

3. What successes and barriers were experienced during the implementation of the Virtual School model by local authorities?

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[1] At the time of publishing this report, 2023-2024 funding had been allocated; out of the 5 local authorities that received year-one funding, 4 applied for year-two funding and all applicants were successful.

4. What are the perceived impacts by local authorities from their use of the pilot funding?

5. Do local authorities consider Virtual Schools to be an appropriate model to deliver an integrated approach for care-experienced children in education?

2. Key Findings and Recommendations

Key Findings

2.1 There are three broad categories of usage for the Virtual School model pilot funding by the participating local authorities. Firstly, five local authorities have utilised the funding to implement a new or significantly changed Virtual School system; secondly, four local authorities have utilised the funding to improve the capacity and effectiveness of their existing systems for supporting care-experienced children; and thirdly, three local authorities are in the early stages of developing their Virtual School system.

2.2 Five of the twelve local authorities have appointed a VSH and four are currently planning to appoint a VSH. One local authority did not provide information regarding a VSH. The VSHs manage teams ranging from two to twelve members, with roles ranging from qualified teachers to administrators, who work directly with care-experienced children in education and with key stakeholders or maintain monitoring systems. Structures vary according to individual circumstances.

2.3 Responses from eleven of twelve local authorities outlined care-experienced children policy and practice which aligns, or plans to align, with additional learning needs (ALN) systems of support, typically through merging or developing online data monitoring systems for the two areas. Local authorities that have invested in improved data systems for care-experienced children described improvements in the efficiency of accessing monitoring information, sharing data, and personal education plan (PEP) completion for Looked After Children.

2.4 All participating local authorities have utilised or plan to utilise pupil voice to deliver their care-experienced children approach. Example methods of acquiring pupil voice include qualitative information collection through case studies, engagement activities, and PEPs. A further five local authorities stated that they utilised 'trauma-informed' policy and practice to implement their Virtual School model. This pupil-centred approach is reported to have helped tailor processes and interventions to the specific needs of care-experienced children in education, which helps to address the issue identified by Foster et al. (2021) of local authorities needing to look beyond attainment data in addressing the needs of care-experienced children.

2.5 As part of the development of the Virtual School model, local authorities have focused on developing strong links with key stakeholders, particularly through

awareness engagement events and delivering training to schools, with local authorities noting an improvement in the efficiency of processes and interventions for care-experienced children.

2.6   Interviewees from two local authorities described an increase in the attendance levels of looked after children as a result of the Virtual School model, which was also reported to have positively contributed to a reduction in school exclusions. Another local authority noted an increase in the percentage of care-experienced children from 2022 to 2023 who have stayed in mainstream education. For each outcome, improvements were attributed to intensive, targeted support from practitioners and collaborative working with schools and other stakeholders, enabled by the Virtual School model.

2.7   A major barrier to the implementation of the Virtual School model identified by local authorities is funding and uncertainty over the continuation of future funding. In most cases, the pilot funding does not cover the costs of running the Virtual Schools, with staffing, projects, and data system costs being supported by core funding from the local authority budget. The uncertainty over whether the Virtual School model pilot funding will continue has limited the scope of the Virtual School models developed for some local authorities, while others have staff on temporary contracts as a result. The costs of developing the Virtual School model vary between local authorities due to numbers of care-experienced children and geography, which results in greater challenges for some local authorities in developing their model.

2.8   Due to a range of different systems and processes, data sharing and the sharing of good practice for supporting care-experienced children in education between different local authorities was limited. This repeats the issues of data sharing identified by Foster et al. (2021), indicating that development is still required in this area.

2.9   Of the four local authorities interviewed, all four were in favour of continuing the Virtual School model as a permanent, statutory model, with ring-fenced funding. Three stated they were in favour of developing a limited set of requirements that all local authorities should follow to support care-experienced children in education as part of this, with scope for local authorities to customise their approach to address the specific needs of care-experienced children in their region.

Recommendations

2.10   A group for supporting care-experienced children in education should be established as a forum for all twenty-two local authorities to share information on processes and good practice, which should meet regularly throughout each year.

2.11   If the Virtual School model is to be continued, the following recommendations are proposed:

- A minimum set of requirements of processes and practices set for each local authority should be considered, with scope for each local authority to adapt their approach to their local circumstances.

- A single set of monitoring documentation should be developed for local authorities to monitor progress of the implementation of the Virtual School model more clearly and accurately subject to any further evaluation of the pilot.

- Explore the development of a common data system to enable data-sharing between local authorities and promote more effective communication and support for looked after children crossing county borders.

- A fluid approach to funding based on care-experienced children population and geographical challenges could be considered to target areas of the highest need.

2.12   Any further evaluation of the Virtual School model pilot should include the following:

- Collecting in-depth and consistent quantitative and qualitative information from all participating local authorities, ideally across each year, to gain a full, comprehensive picture on spending (attributable to the pilot funding and other sources), staffing, implementation, impacts, and barriers experienced in the pilot.

- Further exploring the implications of cross-border data sharing and interaction between local authorities and the impact on looked after children in education.

- Investigating the processes for supporting care-experienced children in education in the remaining nine local authorities that did not participate in the pilot in order to give a complete understanding of the support available to care-experienced children throughout Wales and inform the future development of policy and guidance.

3.   Methodology

3.1   In addressing the research questions, two methods of investigation were utilised. Firstly, an analysis of Virtual School model monitoring information from local authorities, and secondly, four case studies in the form of qualitative interviews with stakeholders from four Virtual Schools.

Monitoring Information Analysis

3.2   The analysis of monitoring information from local authorities was conducted as the first stage of the research. The monitoring information for the 2022-23 year was submitted by local authorities in May 2023 as a requirement to provide the Welsh Government Equity in Education Division with an annual update of how the Virtual School model pilot funding has been utilised. All twelve local authorities who received funding in 2022-23 as part of the Virtual School model pilot provided monitoring information. One local authority who received funding in 2021-2022 but not in 2022-23 did not submit monitoring information. Monitoring information from 2021-22 was not available during the research apart from one local authority who provided a breakdown of spending for the 2021-22 year. Therefore, the analysis for this research was mainly focused on information from the 2022-23 year.

3.3   Given that the monitoring information primarily consisted of qualitative feedback, the monitoring information was analysed using a form of thematic template analysis (King et al. 2019). A template of themes was constructed based on the research questions and linked to each local authority. The information was coded according to these themes for later comparison, with the structure being subject to ongoing revision as the analysis took place to accommodate additional material of interest.

3.4   There were several limitations in the monitoring information. There was no standard format for the monitoring forms, with a wide range of formats received, leading to differences in the type of information supplied and the amount of detail provided. Consequently, a detailed comparative analysis of spending, staffing, implementation, and impact between the local authorities could not be achieved, limiting the analysis to a high-level overview. Furthermore, monitoring information was not provided for 2021-22 and so it was not possible to explore spending and implementation across the first year and second year of the pilot.

Stakeholder Interviews

3.5 Four semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders from four local authorities in Wales who had received funding as part of the Virtual School model pilot. The participants were VSHs, and in one interview the PDG funding lead also participated alongside the VSH to provide additional information. These participants have either led or had direct involvement with the implementation of the Virtual School model pilot in their respective local authorities.

3.6 The sample was recruited through the network of local authority contacts maintained by the Welsh Government Children and Young People's Rights in Education Branch as part of the ongoing Virtual School model pilot project.

3.7 The local authority sample was chosen to reflect different geographical areas of Wales, as well as approaches to and stages of implementation. The sample also reflects urban areas with a high density of care-experienced children population, such as Cardiff and Swansea, and more rural areas with lower density of care-experienced children population, such as Anglesey and Powys.

3.8 Prior to data collection, an interview guide was constructed in collaboration with Welsh Government policy officials based on the research questions. The final interview guide can be found in **Annex A**.

3.9 Interviews were conducted in June 2023 via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were recorded using the automatic transcription software in Microsoft Teams and examined and corrected post-interview.

3.10 The interview data was analysed using a thematic template analysis (King et al. 2019). A template of themes was constructed based on the research questions, and the data was coded according to these themes, with the structure being subject to ongoing revision as the analysis took place to accommodate additional material of interest. This method allowed for the same structure to be used in the analysis between the four case studies, enabling easier comparison when presenting the data. The interview data was triangulated through comparison to the information provided in the respective monitoring forms for each participating local authority.

3.11 The data was used to outline the background approaches and models to support care-experienced children in education prior to the Virtual School model pilot in each of the four local authorities, the implementation of the Virtual School model funding in the local authority, the success and barriers of this implementation, the

perceived impacts of the Virtual School model, and visions and opinions on the future of the Virtual School model.

3.12 The number of detailed case studies was limited by the available time, and the findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

4. Detailed findings

Overview of Virtual School model Implementation

4.1 This section draws on the monitoring information from the twelve local authorities who received Virtual School model funding for the year 2022-23 to provide a high-level overview of the different structures, implementation processes, perceived impacts, and other relevant factors as part of the Virtual School model thus far.

Spending and Implementation

4.2 Ten out of the twelve local authorities (not including the one local authority who did not receive funding in 2022-23) provided breakdowns of the spending of the Virtual School model funding for the 2022-23 year, while only one local authority provided a breakdown for the 2021-22 year. From these, three broad categories of spending priorities can be identified. That is, the funding has been used to:

- Produce a new or significantly revised approach to supporting care-experienced children.

- Improve existing systems for supporting care-experienced children.

- Scoping and development activities ahead of the introduction of a Virtual School model.

4.3 For each of these three categories, a detailed example can be found in the Case Studies section below. It should be noted that these categories are not necessarily distinctive, with some overlap in approach and/or circumstance between local authorities.

4.4 **Produce a new approach for their Virtual School model:** Five local authorities utilised the pilot funding to develop new, or notably different, systems of support for care-experienced children. The processes differ according to the needs of the individual local authorities, but funding has generally been utilised to appoint staff to form a Virtual School, such as a VSH and practitioners. For instance, in 2022-23, one Virtual School used the money to fund an Education Mentor, a Performance

Officer, and two education support workers. These roles are designed to identify educational needs, provide high quality interventions, develop data management and quality control, develop bespoke support packages, capture pupil voice, work with education staff and parents and carers to provide support, and more. Similar approaches are to be found in the other local authorities in this category, with a focus on utilising the pilot funding to appoint or subsidise new staffing roles to fulfil the requirements for support for care-experienced children in education. For detailed examples of a newly formed Virtual School system (see **Case Study 1: Powys**, and **Case Study 2: Anglesey**).

4.5   **Improve existing systems:** Four local authorities utilised the Virtual School model pilot funding to improve existing systems, rather than developing a distinctive system to the process existing before the pilot. In two instances, a key facet of the spending has been focused on refining existing data monitoring systems for care-experienced children. This has allowed for a greater focus on 'high quality data', the completion of online Personal Education Plans (PEPs; a written record and plan of education and training for each care-experienced child), and educational data such as education attendance, attainment, exclusions, and school moves. One of these local authorities did not provide a breakdown of costs, but the other set out how they achieved this through funding extra capacity for the VSH and administrative support and developing a new monitoring system. This demonstrates a focus on staffing capacity as a method of improving existing systems. The remaining two local authorities in this category have taken a different approach, instead utilising all the pilot funding to invest in a new data system designed to enhance their existing system of supporting care-experienced children in education. Both local authorities have invested in the same system called CACI Impulse provided by information technology company CACI Ltd., which was previously used to coordinate ALN support. The new system incorporates the tracking and data monitoring of care-experienced children into this system, integrating the care-experienced children and ALN approaches. The costs were related to software development, testing, and training for staff, with annual maintenance costs being the only anticipated ongoing expense. With this approach, the Virtual School model pilot funding has been utilised as a distinctive funding source to implement infrastructure that would support a long-term approach to supporting care-experienced children (see **Case Study 3: Swansea**).

4.6   **Scoping and development activities:** The remaining three local authorities can be considered to have Virtual School models which are at an earlier stage of development. For instance, one local authority in the first year of its pilot funding spent the funding in 2022-23 on two areas, the planning and recruitment of a VSH, and the development of collaboration and coordination with key stakeholders. The remaining local authorities are in a similar stage of the process, scoping ideas for the Virtual School model, with one meeting with stakeholders from established Virtual Schools in Scotland and England to gather information and develop relationships ahead of establishing their own virtual school. One local authority indicated that there is an existing system that is currently providing support for care-experienced children that may be developed in the future, though this was not explained in detail in the monitoring information. A detailed example of a Virtual School model at an earlier development stage can be found in **Case Study 4: Cardiff**, below.

Structures

4.7   Five out of the twelve local authorities have appointed a VSH. The remaining local authorities either have staff in roles which fulfil the same function, such as 'Service Manager' (Anglesey), 'Inclusion Manager' (Powys), and 'Virtual School Lead'. Four of the local authorities that do not have a dedicated VSH indicated a plan to appoint a VSH, and one did not state whether a VSH had or will be appointed. Roles for VSHs have been developed, or plan to be developed, from existing posts within the local authorities (such as LACE coordinators or equivalent), while other local authorities have created, or plan to create, a new role which is advertised. While individual responsibilities may differ, the role of the VSH appears to be broadly similar across the local authorities, namely the development of the Virtual School system (such as scoping activities and developing systems), building links with key stakeholders pertinent to care-experienced children both in and outside of the local authority, and leading the Virtual School team of staff in day-to-day interventions with care-experienced children in education.

4.8   The structure of staffing according to the monitoring information in the Virtual Schools varies. From the available information, Virtual School teams can range from two to twelve team members in addition to the VSH. These roles have a variety of titles and responsibilities, ranging from staff who work directly with care-experienced pupils and stakeholders, to managerial and administrative roles. Some

Virtual School models make use of an existing care-experienced children team from prior to the pilot. The extent to which existing funding or Virtual School model pilot funding was being used to fund teams and systems for supporting care-experienced children was not clear from the information available.

An Integrated Approach

4.9   A key priority of local authorities in developing an integrated approach to Virtual Schools is to develop links and integrate them with systems of support for children and young people's ALN. Eleven of twelve local authorities outlined care-experienced children policy and practice which aligns, or plans to align, with ALN systems of support. Most local authorities are doing this through integrating online data to provide information on both care-experienced children and their ALN in a single information system.

4.10   All local authorities, including those still in the scoping stage of implementing a Virtual School, expressed the importance of 'pupil voice' in the Virtual School model, aligning with the recommendations from Foster et al. (2021). The local authorities provided examples of how pupil voice is collected to inform Virtual School model practice and interventions including improved data systems that can include 'qualitative' information from care-experienced children, 'case studies' of individual care-experienced children that consider well-being alongside educational outcome measures, and 'engagement' activities with care-experienced pupils. While these examples provide an overview of some approaches to pupil voice, the process of collecting and utilising pupil voice was not elaborated on in detail in many of the monitoring forms. Therefore, more data is required to understand the details of this aspect of integration in the Virtual School model.

4.11   Another example of an integrated approach can be found in the strong focus on collaboration between local authorities and stakeholders, such as schools, education practitioners, social workers, and others, particularly through providing training and guidance for education practitioners on new systems (such as new data monitoring systems, and online PEPs) and raising awareness of the needs of care-experienced children. To illustrate, five local authorities stated that they utilise 'trauma-informed' policy and practice. This involves training practitioners and schools to be aware of and seek to reduce the negative impact of trauma that care-experienced children may have experienced.

Impacts

4.12   While it is still relatively early in the Virtual School model implementation process for most local authorities, six of the twelve provided evidence of the perceived impacts of their Virtual School models as part of the monitoring forms. This took the form of written comments, with a wide variety of detail ranging from simple statements to pupil case studies and supporting quotations from key stakeholders in one instance. The remainder did not provide impacts; this may reflect that no impact information is available, or it is too early in the process to gauge any impacts such as where the virtual school is not yet or recently implemented.

4.13   Improved data monitoring systems were a consistent impact/outcome noted by all six of these local authorities. These systems enable better 'monitoring' and 'tracking' of care-experienced pupils in terms of placements and locations, as well as collecting attainment data more effectively. This could allow for more effective targeting of PDG funding for pupils. Furthermore, these improved data systems mean that PEPs can be completed electronically with easy access to the relevant data, helping one Virtual School achieve a '100%' on-time PEP completion rate; completion of PEPs has previously proved challenging for local authorities. In some cases, these PEPs are also used to collect 'qualitative' data from care-experienced pupils and are developed in collaboration with pupils, who can retain a personal copy, enabling a feeling of 'ownership' over the process and utilising pupil voice. These factors could allow for more targeted and responsive interventions as VSHs have increased access to track the progress of care-experienced pupils over time.

4.14   Multiple local authorities noted that they delivered 'training' for schools and other relevant stakeholders to educate and raise awareness of the needs of care-experienced children. These include tailored training on the relevant processes and systems, ensuring that schools have 'designated' staff to engage with care-experienced children, and in one instance a toolkit that schools could put in place for care-experienced children. Through initiatives such as these, impact is demonstrated through increasing awareness amongst key stakeholders of the processes and systems relevant to care-experienced children, as well as the needs of these pupils.

4.15   One local authority reported that the percentage of care-experienced learners retained in mainstream education has increased from 2022 to 2023 as a result of

intensive, targeted support from Virtual School practitioners and collaborative working with schools and other stakeholders.

4.16   One local authority (Powys), noted a marked increase in school attendance for care-experienced pupils since the introduction of the Virtual School in the region, attributed to the 'dedicated' staff team which has been enabled by Virtual School model pilot funding. For a detailed examination of the Virtual School model in Powys, see **Case Study 1** below.

Case Study 1: Powys

4.17   Powys was successful in their funding bid in both 2021-22 and 2022-23. This case study draws on data from the monitoring form supplied by Powys local authority, and qualitative data from an interview with two key stakeholders from the local authority's Virtual School. We note that all longer quotes were provided in this interview, unless stated otherwise.

Background

4.18   Prior to the Virtual School model funding becoming available, there was one officer responsible for supporting the education of care-experienced children. However, it was reported that this role included 'lots of other responsibilities' such as safeguarding and complaints, which resulted in this individual working in an 'overseeing role' for care-experienced children to provide support when required such as 'emergency educational placement'. It was noted that there was no 'consolidated approach of how to support [care-experienced] children as a whole', and there 'certainly wasn't any tracking or monitoring, or impact assessment'. Beyond this role, there were not 'any dedicated staff' to care-experienced children, with case workers supporting care-experienced children on an 'as a need arose basis'; thus, they were not able to develop a 'thorough understanding' of 'where every child is' and their relevant needs.

Implementation of the Virtual School Model

4.19   In Powys, the current Inclusion Manager (VSH equivalent) was seconded into the inclusion team on a part-time basis to conduct scoping research, utilising the Virtual School model funding to cover these costs. Following desk research, they met with 'three English local authorities' with the aim of developing a sustainable structure to support 'social workers and social care team, and the actual children and the

families'. As part of the scoping and development process, the current Inclusion Manager supervised the care-experienced children officer to;

> 'understand the day-to-day requirements of the care-experienced children and understanding the complexities that supporting them individually and as a whole brought.'

Following these exercises, an action plan was developed and the Virtual School model was implemented in September 2022.

4.20   The structure of the Virtual School model is as follows. There is the Inclusion Manager, who has headed the Virtual School permanently since January 2023. Initially there were '2.5 specialist teachers' and an administrator role; starting in September 2022, one specialist teacher focused on secondary learners, one on primary learners, and a 'part time specialist teacher' focused on post-16 care-experienced learners. However, following two school terms of operation, the decision has been made to adapt the structure to better suit both the 'fast changing aspects of care-experienced children' and the geographical challenges of the '2008 square miles' of Powys. Therefore, the three specialist teachers will now each cover their respective north, central, and south regions of the local authority. It was noted that this has advantages in 'upskilling' staff to support care-experienced children in their area in a more holistic way and enables 'a child going through their children looked after journey' to have the same specialist teacher in primary, secondary, and post-16 education, and 'will be known really well by the specialist teacher'.

Successes and Impacts of the Virtual School Model

4.21   One of the key reported positives emerging from the implementation of the Virtual School model has been relationship-building. The specialist teachers work closely with social workers and schools for care-experienced children, and have a range of roles with schools and families including;

> 'parental conferences, coordinating PEPs, reintegration meetings following exclusions, supporting with careers advice, and supporting in attendance meetings'.

The specialist teachers can also provide referrals to a range of programmes which may benefit care-experienced children, including 'Bright Stars Programme, Forest Schools'.

4.22   Interventions with care-experienced children are 'targeted' with a focus on understanding and incorporating 'pupil voice' into the system through relationship-building with care-experienced pupils and stakeholders. For example, when introducing the Virtual School model, a number of 'reengagement programmes' were trialled for care-experienced pupils. However, on seeking pupil feedback 'they quite clearly told us they didn't want that' for some interventions as they 'didn't want to be singled out' in a specific way in school. Therefore, these interventions were discontinued, demonstrating that the Virtual School model is being partly modelled around feedback and a clear regard for pupil voice.

4.23   Other successes include a '100% PEP completion rate', which are completed via an electronic system for efficiency. A 'really detailed tracker' has been developed that provides information on the educational progress of care-experienced children. There is a 'profile for every child' which is for ALN and can build individual development plans, but 'also holds online PEPs' so that 'everything is in one place' for efficient access for practitioners.

4.24   Since the implementation of the Virtual School model, an increase in school attendance has been reported for care-experienced children, now only being approximately '0.04 [per cent] behind the overall attendance for Powys', which was described as a 'marked improvement' that has 'maintained through the academic year'. The reasons for this improvement were credited to the dedication of the Virtual School specialist teachers, who are constantly 'on the ball' and 'do whatever they need to do' for positive outcomes for care-experienced children.

> 'where every single child is and where every single child is going to school… and then working with those schools and with strategies and interventions… to get those children into school for longer'.

It is perceived that Virtual School staff, efficiently structured and resourced, have successfully and tangibly impacted on attendance for care-experienced pupils.

4.25   One specific example of an intervention to improve attendance is set out in one of the case studies provided by Powys. A care-experienced pupil displayed 'poor attendance, [lack of] engagement, and high number of negative behaviour points', with a school attendance of '79.8%'. Subsequently, the Virtual School team-

'commissioned some work with Bright Star, a not-for-profit organisation that uses boxing and education to empower young people to make positive changes'

As well as commissioning work, the Virtual School team also-

'ran the Futures Programme, an alternative education provision for young people, one day a week. They use sport, mentoring and education to inspire, engage and connect.'

Following these interventions, the pupil is 'doing well in lessons', is 'much less negative about school', their 'grades have improved' and their attendance has risen to '92%'. This provides an example of the importance of dedicated Virtual School staff who are able to identify the needs of the individual and have the resources to take action, enabling a positive impact outcome.

4.26   Powys are aiming for all schools to have a 'policy in place for children looked after', a 'designated teacher', and a 'link governor' to lead on care-experienced children. Reported figures from January 2023 indicated that the number of designated teachers went up from '90 to 94', the number of care-experienced children policies '50 to 68', and link governors from '2 to 11', which demonstrates the impact that a virtual schools model is having on the education infrastructure for care-experienced children. For reference, data from the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census indicates that there are 90 schools (primary, middle, secondary, and special schools) in Powys.

4.27   Furthermore, it was reported that 'many exclusions' have been avoided, with 'no permanent exclusions' since the introduction of the Virtual School model as a result of 'working directly with the schools.' This is deemed as a 'very important' outcome.

'it's really important that schools understand that these children have got very different circumstances'.

'they're not missing school and they're not getting a negative message about school.'

4.28   Powys are currently working with 'six local authorities' to talk about 'how we measure impact' following the changes in the way learners are assessed under the new Curriculum for Wales. Challenges to tracking progress, that arise from differing

assessment systems in England and Wales, are also being considered. Potential ways of measuring impact that have been posited are;

> 'case studies… feedback scores… a matrix that measure everything from exclusions to wellbeing… PEP targets.'

The aim is to build a 'consistent' approach that they would 'love to be Wales-wide because it would be so much easier for all of us'.

4.29   Further impacts of the Virtual School model developed were reported as feedback from stakeholders in the monitoring form.

> 'the support we receive from the virtual schools assists us in supporting through the PEP process with a wealth of knowledge that we would find hard to replicate. If the virtual school was not able to support young people in education, I feel there would be a lot of missed opportunities for children.'

> Social worker, Powys local authority

Another social worker explained that the specialist teachers from the Virtual Schools have worked closely with them to support them with a number of tasks and that 'had it not been for this service…things would have got missed.'

> 'the virtual schools has been a valuable asset as it has allowed everything to be made available centrally to those involved. The system is far more robust, inclusive, and succinct.'

> Headteacher, Powys local authority

> 'enquiries from carers/parents have been promptly replied to and meetings conducted have been helpful, informative, and concise. Pupils and the school have been fully supported by the service at key transition points, ensuring that pupils are fully encouraged to stay in education and fulfil their academic potential.'

> Designated safeguarding lead, Powys local authority

These reported instances illustrate the positive impact that the Virtual School model in Powys has had on productive relationships with stakeholders.

Barriers to Implementation

4.30   The temporary nature of the Virtual School model pilot funding, and the uncertainty over its future is felt to be a barrier for Powys. This is a particular issue for staffing, with the specialist teachers of the Virtual Schools having to be on 'fixed term contracts' due to this uncertainty. Regret was expressed at not being able to offer permanent contracts –

> 'you want to be able to give your staff some permanency because you know they're working really hard to deliver these fantastic programmes for learners'.

It was noted that they were 'highly lucky in the people that applied for these jobs' who are 'conscientious and hard working', however, should they move on then they would probably have to 'upskill' a replacement 'quite drastically', and funding may not be available for this. Consequently, securing permanent ongoing funding from the Welsh Government was reported to be a priority for Powys to maintain their staffing, and subsequently the impacts which this has produced.

4.31   As mentioned above, Powys is unique in its geographical size of '2008 square miles' in Wales, bordering 'fourteen local authorities'. Consequently, Powys 'have to make payments to those learners that are looked after by other authorities' which is a 'changing amount all the time… one month you may have 25 and the next month you've got 35' which may result in 'another twelve or fourteen thousand pounds you've got to find', which is difficult to sustain with 'year on year funding' when 'you're trying to budget for the virtual school' and 'you've already committed to staff'. Again, this demonstrates the difficulties of temporary funding, which are compounded by the geographical challenges of the local authority.

4.32   Support for adopted children and previously care-experienced children was described as a 'minefield' because the 'data isn't necessarily shared' by parents, and the Virtual Schools 'only know if a child is adopted if the parent decides to tell us about it'. While the Virtual Schools offer 'advice and support around strategies and interventions' and 'work with schools to make sure that they're providing… inclusive support' for all care-experienced children, it is 'not a main part' of the support they are currently able to offer.

The Future of the Virtual School Model

4.33   Participants from Powys were in favour of the Virtual School model continuing with the funding 'investment from the Welsh Government' becoming a 'permanent' fixture. This would allow them to implement a longer-term Virtual School structure, with, as outlined above, permanently employed staff to produce positive outcomes for care-experienced children.

4.34   Interviewees from Powys believed that there should be certain 'standardised… must haves' in terms of practice and approach as part of a permanent Virtual School model across Wales, but felt it was important that they should have 'strategic oversight' as 'different local authorities need slightly different structures' to adapt to the 'very different circumstances' that each face, again citing the geographical challenges faced by Powys due to its size and the high number of local authorities that it borders.

4.35   Interviewees in Powys were in favour of a national collaboration to share good practice information and address the 'lack of standardisation across Wales' in the approach to support care-experienced children in education.

Case Study 2: Anglesey

4.36   Anglesey was also in receipt of funding in both 2021-22 and 2022-23. This case study draws on data from the monitoring form supplied by Anglesey local authority, and qualitative data from an interview with one key stakeholder from the virtual school. We note that all longer quotes were provided in this interview.

Background

4.37   Prior to the introduction of the pilot funding, Anglesey had a LACE role which was placed within 'Children and Families Service'. This was the 'only person responsible for the education of children looked after' with a caseload of between 'one hundred' and 'one hundred and fifty' children.

Implementation of the Virtual School Model

4.38   Since the introduction of the Virtual School model funding Anglesey has been 'doing quite a lot of scoping work', examining Virtual School models in England, specifically Norfolk, Lewisham, and Cheshire. While it was recognised that they would not receive the funding required to directly emulate these examples, they felt

it gave them a 'good idea of what does work' and helped formulate plans to introduce what Anglesey term an 'integrated service', for care-experienced children.

4.39   The 'integrated service' is headed by the Service Manager, who is responsible for the 'education, engagement, and progression' of care-experienced children, ensuring 'all vulnerable learners achieve their full potential', providing 'formal /informal learning support/provision', 'youth clubs and activities', and to develop Anglesey into a 'trauma informed island'. The Service Manager leads a team which included a Practice Lead Social Worker, the LACE, a full time qualified teacher from September 2023, 'ten well-being officers based in our secondary schools', and youth workers aligned from the Youth Service who work-

> 'at least a day a week supporting either children looked after, children on the Child Protection Register, or children and young people on the edge of care'.

There is also a 'part time business support data officer', who is responsible for maintaining the data monitoring system for care-experienced children. Therefore, Anglesey has started to build a team, but also realign 'services within education and children and family services so we have a base and a structure for staffing' to support care-experienced children more effectively in education.

4.40   In terms of funding the integrated service, 'in 2022/23, 95% of the grant expenditure' was used to recruit and develop the new 'service manager' role. The remainder of the service is funded through realigning core funding from the Anglesey local authority annual budget.

Successes and Impacts of the Virtual School Model

4.41   The introduction of the management information data system has enabled the integrated service to track and 'show progress with what we've done' with care-experienced children and combines care-experienced children and ALN data in the same system. This integration combined with alignment of Youth Service resources with the integrated service team aims to enable a 'multi-agency approach' that provides timely interventions for care-experienced children in education.

4.42   'Learner voice' was described as an 'essential' part of the integrated service development. For example, the service worked with '500 young people' including care-experienced children and 'edge of care' children, for a 'full week of outdoor learning' through which the children were asked 'what matters to you?' and 'what do you need?'. Furthermore, Children and Family Services officers do a 'what matters'

process with care-experienced children and a 'general questionnaire' and reported using the evidence to tailor educational interventions and processes. Furthermore, each year the 'Star Awards' are held to celebrate the achievements of care-experienced children.

4.43   There is a focus on keeping care-experienced children in the county, rather than pursuing cross-border placements 'because of the Welsh language' usage, and 'that element of feeling part of your community'. To achieve this, the service has three-

> 'small group homes which take between two or three children and young people. It won a national award because 'we're bringing children back to Anglesey'.

Subsequently, only 'about eight or nine' care-experienced children have been placed outside of Anglesey.

4.44   The interviewee from Anglesey noted that the integrated service has positively 'impacted on the attendance' of care-experienced children in schools. This was due to the data manager being able to 'actually show progress', and data systems enabling more direct monitoring and timely interventions, helping to 'keep more children and young people who've got complex needs in education' and helping to avoid exclusions.

4.45   The interviewee from Anglesey also described success in working with children 'on the edge of care', meaning that 'some children haven't had to come into care'. This has been achieved through a focus on mitigation strategies, aiming to work with stakeholders to keep care-experienced children in a 'safe' home, family, and school environment.

Barriers to Implementation

4.46   The 'lack of funding' was identified as a key barrier for the development of the integrated service, noting that the money 'has helped, but obviously it's just a small pot of money'. This is illustrated in most of the roles and systems of the integrated service being funded by realigned core funding from Anglesey local authority, with the Virtual School model funding contributing towards the Service Manager role.

4.47   Another barrier described, is that two data management systems are in place. One is the 'education management information system' through which data is added

from all the schools, and another is the 'WCISS' system used by Children and Families Services. The two different platforms 'don't speak to each other and they never will' and consequently 'dealing with live data' from two separate sources has proven 'quite challenging' in 'the integration of ALN and inclusion' due to the risk of duplicating data.

4.48   It was reported that attitudes and expectations of stakeholders have proved a further challenge. Educating stakeholders in the processes of the new integrated service has proved difficult. For instance, 'changing people's mindset has been quite challenging in terms of what the Virtual School model or an integrated manager' means, and how it will 'make a difference' to care-experienced children. Conversely, 'managing expectations' from social workers as to what the integrated service can achieve in the limited time it has been active has also been a challenge.

4.49   The interviewee from Anglesey noted that they've 'had no communication whatsoever' from neighbouring local authorities regarding the development of the Virtual School model, which typically have 'completely different' models. This limits the ability to share effective practice between different local authorities.

The Future of the Virtual Schools Model

4.50   The interviewee from Anglesey described the vision of their local authority to be a 'trauma-informed island by 2025' to 'meet the needs of our children… much, much quicker' and are working with Public Health Wales to help pursue this, who are due to publish a case study on Anglesey's processes.

4.51   There is a goal to increase staffing to achieve the integrated, trauma-informed approach, with a desire to have a second qualified teacher and a 'Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), or a classroom assistant, or a learning coach' and a 'therapeutic worker' to both help care-experienced children to make progress in schools, and also to look 'at their achievement in a more holistic way, looking at their wellbeing'.

4.52   In terms of the future of the Virtual School model, Anglesey are committed to continuing with their integrated system. They argue that a national 'community practice or a strategic group [of] twenty-two local authorities' is a 'necessity' to take the Virtual School model forward to 'showcase effective practice' for supporting care-experienced children.

4.53   While the Welsh Government's decision to introduce a Virtual School model pilot was welcomed as a 'brave' move, it was stated that they would 'like to know that we would have potential funding for the next two to three years, if not more'. It was noted that in the experience of the interviewee that they couldn't think of any significant changes in support for care-experienced children in education for the 'last 20 years' and would welcome conversations about how the model should progress. The interviewee reported that 'in order to change things… we would have to change legislation' to make the Virtual Schools model statutory as the 'benefits would outweigh the costs' in the long term, particularly in payments for care-experienced children placed 'out of county'.

Case Study 3: Swansea

4.54   Swansea was successful in achieving funding for the Virtual School model pilot for both 2021-22 and 2022-23. This section draws on data from the monitoring form supplied by Swansea local authority, and qualitative data from an interview with one key stakeholder involved in their Virtual School model. We note that all longer quotes were provided in this interview.

Background

4.55   Swansea local authority was described as previously having an approach to supporting care-experienced children with a 'virtual schools feel' 'five to six years ago'. This included a set-up involving a LACE, Deputy LACE and PEP Coordinator, and Administration Assistant managing a team of five 'project workers' who would 'go out and work with [care-experienced children] in the schools and work with 'any care-experienced children', including children who were adopted. The local authority utilised the PDG to fund the project workers.

4.56   However, it was noted that due to a 'change in the terms and conditions' leading to 'funding changes' much of the team was disbanded, with only a LACE and PEP Coordinator remaining in the period directly prior to the Virtual School model Pilot.

Implementation of the Virtual School Model

Swansea local authority opted to utilise the Virtual School model funding to implement a software system that integrates information about care-experienced children and ALN provision into one system (delivered by the software company CACI who currently provide software for ALN provision in Swansea). Integrating

ALN provision is 'appropriate since over half of children looked after pupils have ALN'.

4.57   It was reported that the development of the system will allow:

'Data such as attendance and behaviour to be analysed and shared in real time, and crucially those children who are placed out of area can be monitored more effectively, as any school can be provided with a portal. All staff working in the Virtual School model will have access to this system. This will include staff working in about 70 out of county schools where Swansea children looked after are on roll, via a secure portal.'

4.58   The need for a new integrated system was justified in that previously, Swansea local authority were using 'two separate systems', one for social services, and another for education, with the data about looked after children being tracked via spreadsheets. This approach was limited and potentially problematic as it relies on 'word of mouth' and relationships with stakeholders to be effective (this system was to remain in place until the new data system was to be introduced in September 2023). While the looked after children population has reduced from 'between 550 and 600'…five to six years ago' to 'about 450' presently, there are around '120 working and living outside of county' and estimated at 'up to 81' looked after children who have moved or are moving into the area. Concerns were raised by the interviewee with the previous system:

'There didn't seem an adequate way to track them… we could only work with one system in our local authority'.

Consequently, the transient nature of the population resulted in data not being updated, causing a 'huge issue when they moved over… from one system to another.'

4.59   For these reasons, the decision was made to utilise the Virtual School model funding to implement an IT system which will aim to overcome such difficulties. For instance, it is hoped the new system will allow multiple agencies that interact with looked after children to input data through portals which link to a single encompassing system enabling the effective transfer of information. This will 'help us track those children effectively', with alerts to the system when a child is moved. It will also be an 'easy way' to develop PEPs for looked after children, as well as

enabling the local authority to track school attendance and behaviour more effectively.

4.60   For Swansea local authority, the potential one-off nature of the Virtual School model funding was a key factor in the decision to invest the funding into software development and implementation. It was described that investing the Virtual School model funding into the software would provide 'a system which is lasting and sustainable [that] would be giving us the best outcomes constantly'. The new system is viewed very much as a 'long term solution' for the question of supporting care-experienced children in education in Swansea.

4.61   In Year 1 of the Virtual School model funding (2021-22), Swansea local authority used the pilot funding to scope and develop the new software system for care-experienced children. Monitoring data indicates that funding was spent on various stages of software development and testing, and system administrator and user training. However, interviewees noted that work on the project could not begin until January 2022 due to the funding not being received, and focus being placed on an Estyn inspection. Most of the development did not take place until Year 2, with the total development time being around 18 months.

4.62   In Year 2 of the pilot (2022-23), Swansea local authority used the pilot funding on implementation and maintenance of the software. The local authority has been quoted for 'necessary training of schools out of the local authority area' to enable efficient use of the new system. The largest output was for offsetting staff costs due to project management commitment.

4.63   In conclusion, the introduction of the CACI impulse software system in Swansea local authority was designed to streamline the efficiency of the system, with the aim to enable staff to track the progress and needs of care-experienced children, monitor relevant data, and produce PEPs. The local authority aim to 'relaunch' the Virtual School [model] from September, with the next stage in the development 'looking at the processes within the virtual schools IT system and starting to train our staff and teachers'. The day-to-day structure of supporting care-experienced children in education will remain largely the same, with the introduction of the software being introduced as part of a rebrand for the Virtual School model going forward.

Impacts of the Virtual School Model

4.64   Given that the new Virtual School system is yet to be implemented in practice in Swansea local authority, the successes currently revolve around the development process. For instance, the 'few glitches' in the system have been resolved, and an issue surrounding 'two-factor authentication' for staff has been solved. Another key success has been the introduction of a 'PEP quality assurance process'. The new system can produce an electronic PEP which takes 'staff and teachers a lot less time to complete' and is 'a lot less ambiguous'. These are then assessed for quality and 'pupil voice' more easily. The use of pupil voice in the PEP process has been a further reported success. Following 'overwhelming' feedback from pupils that they wanted 'their own PEP to take away', the 'MyPEP' was introduced, a one-page PEP document which learners can adapt and add to.

4.65   As discussed, the new virtual system is yet to be implemented in practice and therefore the impacts of the new system cannot yet be measured. However, the interviewee from Swansea local authority anticipated that the new integrated system will be able to measure a number of pupil engagement factors, including attendance, exclusion rates, managed move data, PEP returns, attainment data, and monitor the return of 'what matters' questions[2], further enabling pupil voice within the process.

Barriers to Implementation

4.66   The most significant barriers identified by the participant from Swansea local authority were the ongoing costs for the future of the system. For example, to implement the system as planned in September 2023, money would be required to 'ensure appropriate and timely training' for staff on the new system, and further funds for 'roadshow workshops' to improve stakeholder engagement. These expenses would however be limited to the implementation period in 2023-24, though further training costs may arise in the future. In terms of on-going costs, the system requires maintenance costs each year, though it was noted that this could be 'subsumed centrally' by the local authority.

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[2] The statements of 'what matters' are a set of guidelines that identify the essential knowledge, skills and attributes that every child in Wales should develop by the end of each key stage. They are part of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, which provides a broad overview of the curriculum that pupils in Wales are entitled to. The statements of what matters cover six areas of learning and experience and support schools to plan and develop their curriculum. See The Curriculum for Wales Statements of What Matters Code.

The Future of the Virtual School Model

4.67   Officials from Swansea local authority are planning engagement events with stakeholders, including schools, child and family services, parent/carer forum, pupils, and governors, to 'support the embedding of the Virtual School ethos.'

4.68   The interviewee from Swansea local authority was in favour of the Virtual School model becoming a statutory requirement for local authorities in Wales with regular funding being provided. While it was noted that each local authority would have their own approach, 'having some sort of minimum requirement' for the use of the funding 'would be beneficial'. Thus, a set of basic requirements for the Virtual School model with the flexibility to adapt to local circumstances is their favoured approach. The interviewee also stated that they would like to see specific funding to target adopted and looked after learners as part of a Virtual School model, rather than just a focus on PDG funding based on numbers of currently looked after children only. Following this point, a desire was stated that Welsh PDG funding match the levels of Pupil Premium funding in England, citing examples of complaints from parents and carers from England, who were unable to claim funding for adopted children. It was argued that specific funding would enable targeted interventions for all care-experienced children.

4.69   It was commented that it would be desirable for all local authorities in Wales to use 'one standard IT system' for ALN and care-experienced children 'where every local authority could talk to each other' and share data on care-experienced children for ease of operation.

Case Study 4: Cardiff

4.70 Cardiff is an example of a local authority in the first year of developing a Virtual School approach, receiving year 1 funding in 2022-23. This case study draws on data from the monitoring form supplied by Cardiff local authority, and qualitative data from an interview with one key stakeholder involved in their Virtual School model. We note that all longer quotes are provided from this interview.

Background

4.71 Prior to the Virtual School model pilot, Cardiff local authority 'already had a LACE team in place' which provided support for 1000 care-experienced children of statutory school age. This was headed by an Operational Manager for Key Groups (one of which was care-experienced children) and a LACE Coordinator. The staff members in these two roles retired, and the VSH role was created to cover these responsibilities when the local authority bid for the Virtual School model pilot funding. The VSH has been in post since 17th April 2023. The remainder of the team remains the same, consisting of a Project Manager, a Learning Mentor, a Business Support role, and an Inclusion Specialist Teacher who is responsible for individual development plans for care-experienced children.

Implementation of the Virtual School Model

4.72 Following their appointment, the VSH has conducted scoping exercises to learn of best practice for Virtual Schools in other areas of the UK. For example, they met the VSH from Lewisham in England, and with representatives from Scottish organisation Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection to gather ideas of the elements of different Virtual School model practices that could best work for Cardiff local authority. Reflecting on these discussions, the different experiences from England and Scotland:

> 'encouraged us to reflect on where we were in developing the [Virtual School] in Cardiff and realise that growing organically was a preferred model.'

Therefore, Cardiff has continued to utilise their existing structure for care-experienced children as the basis of the Virtual School, gradually developing the system to form an integrated approach over time.

4.73 The Year 1 funding has been used to support the creation of the Virtual School model in Cardiff local authority. However, it was noted that this was insufficient, with

Cardiff local authority having 'committed funding from their budget 2022-23' to offset the costs:

> 'The funding allocated to the pilot does not cover the full salary or other costs such as IT and resources'.

The 'operational budget' for supporting care-experienced children in education comes 'directly from [PDG]'. It was reported that the Virtual School model pilot funding is not meeting the needs of the local authority in enabling them to develop their model. There is evidence that this issue is limiting further development.

> 'I've got ideas that I'd like to see in a structure, an organisation, and what we can offer, but… you can't do any movement on that until that funding is secured.'

This suggests that if the funding were to be sustained annually, then some of the limitations to the expansion of the model in Cardiff might be lifted.

Successes and Impacts of the Virtual School Model

4.74   Some of the biggest successes so far have been the opportunities for the VSH in Cardiff local authority to visit schools and build relationships with the care-experienced children themselves to understand 'what they want…to advocate for them'. This personal approach highlights the intention to utilise pupil voice in their Virtual School model. Pupil voice was further utilised through engagement opportunities for groups of care-experienced children to meet with the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee where they had the opportunity to:

> 'develop their relationship, build on their confidence and trust the adults, enabling them to share their worries and concerns as well as celebrating successes and achievements.'

The outcomes of these meetings have been used to shape the agenda for future development of their Virtual School model.

4.75   There are also examples of 'improved collaboration' leading to 'better understanding between services.' For instance, the VSH has extensively networked within Children's Services and Safeguarding Teams, helping to 'improve relationships and communication' between relevant groups which support care-experienced children. A 'dedicated Teams channel for school staff, Education, and Children's services to message' and a 'direct email' set up for ease of communication between the Virtual

School staff and key stakeholders. Key areas for training have also been identified for staff in relation to care-experienced children, including 'the admissions process' (which will aid in ensuring that the 'admissions procedure is done expediently' to avoid 'any delay in getting [care-experienced children] into learning'), and 'the ALN Reform and LA-maintained Individual Development Plans'

4.76   Given the early stage of development of the Virtual School model in Cardiff local authority, 'impact is at an early stage'. However, regarding measurement of impact in the future, it was noted that 'numerical data related to progress and attainment' would continue to be utilised, such as educational attainment and attendance. However, it was recognised that 'the vocabulary used for talking about progress is changing' because of the Curriculum for Wales, being much more 'person centred… looking at the individual'. It was stated that they were in favour of utilising 'case studies' as a way of measuring impact. For example, the Virtual School is working to develop strong collaboration with other services within Education through the work and links with the Cardiff Commitment[3]. John Lewis have been working in partnership with the Cardiff Commitment to introduce their national 'Building Happier Futures' scheme into their Cardiff store. The programme looks to identify and recruit talented young people who have experienced care to become Partners in their business. Five young people were identified and supported to access this opportunity by Cardiff Local Authority and successfully completed their three-day work experience within the store. The young people then had the opportunity to participate in a supported interview process. Cardiff local authority conducted a case study to explore the impact of this work experience for the young people, such as the skills they learnt and their career aspirations following this. The use of case studies in this way further enables the use of pupil voice to influence outcomes as part of the Virtual School system.

Barriers to Implementation

4.77   As discussed above, finance was identified as a 'definite barrier' by the interviewee from Cardiff local authority, which was reported to limit their operational ability to actively support care-experienced children in education, stating that 'it doesn't give us the capacity that we need'. Thus, it was indicated that the pilot funding is

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[3] The Cardiff Commitment is a city-wide alliance of employers from growth sectors of the economy, Higher Education, Further Education, the third sector and schools. Their mission is to work in partnership to raise ambitions, develop opportunities and deliver skills to support pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to fulfil their potential and contribute to the economic growth of the city.

insufficient for the authority to staff their Virtual School to the required levels to support care-experienced children:

> 'By going out to schools you get to know exactly what the children and young people need and what the schools need. I really like to be able to...have my staff going out to schools…but we can't at the moment because we just haven't got that capacity in the team'.

4.78 The participant posited that the level of Virtual School model funding should match the needs of the specific authority, 'it's about actually recognising what's needed because of the profile of the authority', especially given the high population of care-experienced children in Cardiff.

Future of the Virtual School Model

4.79 The interviewee from Cardiff local authority believed that the Virtual School model will be 'a really strong model' that will continue to benefit care-experienced children in the local authority and wished the model to become permanent given 'the time and work' that 'has gone into setting this up'. They stated that certain 'elements' of the Virtual School model should be made 'absolutely clear', indicating a wish for a degree of standardised practice, though still with 'movement' to adapt to the local circumstances. A desire was expressed for 'more engagement' from the Welsh Government, so that the Welsh Government can better understand 'what is actually needed' by the Virtual School model as part of any future arrangement.

4.80 The participant expressed concern over the levels of funding, stating that 'the funding that's come from Welsh Government is nowhere near enough' to support the model, and that Cardiff local authority have had to financially support the model themselves. More substantial and consistent funding would be required to further 'impact on the outcomes' for care-experienced children.

4.81 The interviewee also indicated that there was a strong desire for a 'national association' of Virtual School members in Wales, similar to the Scottish CELCIS group. It was argued that this would 'bring people together' to address the 'lack of consistency of good practice across all the local authorities', as identified by Foster et al. (2021).

Reference Section

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Annex A: Interview Guide

Virtual School model for care-experienced children: Interview Guide

Background

- What is your role within the local authority and the Virtual School pilot?
    - How long have you been working on the pilot?
- How did you support children looked after in education before the pilot?
    - How was this structured?
    - How was this staffed?
    - How was this funded?
    - How did you measure impacts?
    - What impacts were observed?

Virtual Schools Funding

- How have you utilised the Virtual School pilot funding?
    - How was the money spent across year 1 and 2 respectively? (e.g., scoping activities, new systems)
    - How was your existing children looked after approach developed or improved using the pilot funding?
    - Has the pilot funding been used to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH)?
        - Has an existing role been adapted to facilitate the VSH role?
- What has been achieved, developed, and/or implemented as a result of the pilot funding (e.g., policy development, system changes, data sharing)?
    - What have the VSHs achieved, developed, and/or implemented in their role?
        - How does the VSH role interact with/impact 'on the ground' staff?
    - How has the funding been used to include all care-experienced young people, including previously children looked after?
- What were the main factors for determining how the pilot funding was used?

Successes and Barriers of the Pilot

- What was successful during the pilot? Why?
- What could have been improved during the pilot? Why?
- What barriers to delivering the approach have been encountered during the pilot?
- Are there any gaps in support for the Virtual School approach?

    o   If so, how could this be solved? (e.g., guidance, training etc.)

Perceived Impacts

- What were the perceived impacts by local authorities from their use of the pilot funding?
  - o What methods have been utilised to measure the impact of the funding?
  - o What has been the perceived impact of the pilot funding on children looked after in education?
    - Educational attainment?
    - School attendance?
    - Pupil engagement in education?
    - Pupil wellbeing?
    - Enabling pupil voice? If so, how?
    - Data sharing between local authorities? If so, examples?
    - Sharing of evidence-based practice between local authorities? If so, examples?
    - Access to specialist resources?
    - (Implementation steps?)

The Future of the Virtual School Model

- Do you consider Virtual Schools to be an appropriate approach to support children looked after in education?
  - o If yes, what elements of the approach would you like to keep and/or develop to deliver an integrated approach?
    - What support would be required to achieve this?
  - o If not, what alternative approaches would you prefer? Why?
  - o Would you like the Virtual School approach to become a statutory requirement? Why/why not?
    - If so, how prescriptive would you like the approach to be? Why?

Other Comments

- Is there anything you would like to add regarding anything we have discussed?
- Is there anything that we have missed that you would like to add?