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# Evaluation of the Virtual Schools Model pilot funding in Wales

## Executive summary

### 1. Background

The Welsh Government launched the Virtual Schools Model pilot in 2021, as part of its commitment to improving the educational outcomes for children looked after and care-experienced children. Development of the pilot programme was informed through previous studies, undertaken by [Sir Alasdair Macdonald](#) and [IFF Research and OB3 Research](#).

In March 2024, the Welsh Government commissioned Miller Research in partnership with OB3 Research and Children in Wales, to conduct an independent evaluation of the Virtual School Model (VSM) pilot funding. The aim of the research was to assess and compare the ways in which the VSM funding was used by local authorities participating in the pilot to support children looked after <sup>[footnote 1]</sup>, and to determine the early impacts of the funding. The evaluation also explored the approaches to supporting children looked after taken by local authorities that did not participate in

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[1] Children looked after (CLA) has replaced the term “looked after children” (LAC) in recent years in Wales and refers to children under 18 who are ‘looked after’ by local authorities. Care experienced children are those who are either looked after by the state under Wales national legislation or were previously looked after by the state. This includes adopted children. In Welsh law, they are defined as looked after children or care leavers. For a variety of issues, the focus of all the VSM pilots has primarily been on CLA and therefore this term is used throughout this report except in cases where specific reference is made to care experienced children or care leavers.

the VSM pilot and compared these methods with the approaches taken in pilot local authorities.

The main purpose of the evaluation was to:

- Establish what approaches each local authority in receipt of the VSM funding put in place, and how their approach aligned with the VSM principles and components.
- Compare the nature and effectiveness of approaches taken by local authorities not in receipt of the pilot funding, with those put in place by pilot local authorities.
- Explore both short-term and anticipated long term impacts of the approaches taken by pilot local authorities on key stakeholders <sup>[footnote 2]</sup> – including on children looked after in education.
- Understand the views of children looked after.

The findings from the evaluation are intended to inform Welsh Government decisions on whether the VSM is a feasible model of integrated support for children looked after in Wales and whether it should be rolled out across Wales. The findings may also be used to inform wider Welsh Government policy relating to improving the outcomes of children looked after in education.

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[2] Care-experienced children (including adopted children), adoptive parents and foster carers, school leaders and teachers, local authority lead officials, wider local authority officials, Regional Consortia officials, and social workers.

## 2. Methodology

To fulfil the requirements of the brief and to answer these research questions, the evaluation used a Theory of Change approach based on [HM Treasury Magenta Book](#) examining:

- inputs (i.e.: policy aims and objectives of the VSM, resources, skills etc.)
- activities (e.g.: development of new/improved young person-centred practices, data-sharing between stakeholders, management and monitoring arrangements etc).
- effects (i.e.: short- and medium-term outcomes such as improved school attendance and increased self-esteem amongst children looked after as well as contribution to longer-term impacts, e.g.: improved post-education destinations).

The evaluation method involved 2 stages of qualitative, primary research. Qualitative methods were used given the range and complexity of approaches used to support children looked after in education, which were each being delivered in a variety of different contexts.

The first stage of fieldwork comprised interviews with the most appropriate lead on children looked after education in all 22 local authorities, for example the LACE coordinator or the Virtual School Head (where these existed). <sup>[footnote 3]</sup> These interviews aimed to capture an in-depth understanding of:

- the way in which the pilot funding had been used and the context in which it had been delivered (in the case of pilot local authorities)
- the current approach to supporting children looked after in education (in the case of non-pilot local authorities).
- capacity within the local authority to engage in the second stage of the fieldwork.

The second stage of the research involved interviews with a range of different stakeholders in a sample of both pilot and non-pilot local authorities. Stakeholders included care experienced children and young people. The sample of local authorities for this in-depth fieldwork included a cross Wales spread, a mix of urban/rural populations, different levels of deprivation, and areas with both high and low numbers of children looked after. The pilot authorities included in the in-depth

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[<sup>3</sup>]This included pilot areas that appointed a VSH/equivalent strategic role as part of the VSM pilot (4), pilot areas that already had a VSH prior to the pilot (1) and non-pilot areas that had a VSH (1).

sample (8 out of 11) covered each of the different ways in which the pilot funding was used.

## **Findings on the use of the funding**

The evaluation identifies four different models that were adopted across the 13 pilot local authorities, specifically:

- four local authorities that created a virtual school head (VSH) or equivalent strategic role
- four local authorities that created operational posts to deliver a variety of functions, including the delivery of training to school practitioners, the creation and maintenance of a new data system and the provision of support directly to children looked after
- three local authorities that invested in an electronic Personal Education Plan (ePEP) system (in two of these local authorities, Year 2 funding went into an ePEP coordinator role)
- two local authorities that intended to appoint a VSH but did not do this in practice – in one case the funding was used to backfill existing posts that would, collectively, deliver the role of the VSH, with a view to appointing a VSH in future. In the other case, the local authority effectively withdrew from the pilot.

A key challenge for the evaluation was the lack of detailed pilot monitoring data that included a breakdown of how the funding had been used, an issue that was identified in the [initial evidence gathering work](#).

This issue is compounded by the fact that, in many cases, the pilot funding was used to augment existing roles and functions funded through other sources, or it was supplemented by other funding, typically Pupil Development Grant for Children Looked After (PDG-CLA), investment from core local authority budget, such as education or children's services, or a combination of both.

## **Barriers and facilitators for local authority approaches to support children looked after**

Common themes were observed to contribute (as facilitators) to positive outcomes across both pilot and non-pilot areas: largely resting upon effective communication and collaboration between services; trusted and experienced personnel; and timely information sharing. In pilot areas, approaches can be deemed effective as they targeted areas of weakness in provision and sought to strengthen these attributes.

It was observed that many of the barriers raised by non-pilots were areas that the pilot funding was specifically targeted to address, such as improving communications between teams and building mutual understanding across the education and social services landscapes. However, persistent systemic barriers remained across pilot and non-pilot authorities, such as pressures in social care and inconsistencies with social worker staffing, as well as lack of foster care placements.

### **Operational impacts of the VSM Pilot**

The main impacts produced through the allocation of funding to the VSH role included enhanced integration between teams and services supporting children looked after in local authorities; greater authority associated with the lead role; strengthened strategic collaboration with the pilots who had taken a similar approach; and more preventative provision, mitigating the various challenges encountered by children looked after.

Stakeholders in local authorities that appointed new operational posts reported a more joined-up approach to supporting children looked after learners in their areas. In three of these cases, greater provision of direct work with children looked after was enabled (through roles such as mentors, access officers, and inclusion officers). This also allowed for better monitoring and tracking of attendance, and mitigation measures to prevent exclusions.

For pilots that invested in data systems and ePEPs, short-term impact is evident in the shift towards a learner-centred approach to capturing progress and development. The enhanced level of data collected has meant that lead stakeholders (for example the VSH or service manager) can prioritise and plan their provision more effectively, targeting specific areas of identified need.

Collectively, impacts reported by key stakeholders across pilot local authorities included:

- improved data collection and monitoring systems
- improved awareness and upskilling of staff
- improved collaboration and partnership working
- provision of a single point of access for information about children looked after
- improved quality and timeliness of producing PEPs.

## **Impacts for children looked after in education**

The pilot approaches have, themselves, enabled a greater understanding of the views of children looked after in education through the improvement of pupil-centred PEPs, and increased capacity to support and communicate with learners.

The pilot impacts observed by children looked after were the presence of consistent and trusted support (from VSM teams, but particularly impactful where increased capacity allowed for direct work); enhanced advocacy for children looked after (their needs, rights, and entitlements); and improved ability to mitigate behavioural issues. The latter is attributed to the holistic, emotional and wellbeing support that is enabled through a dedicated VSM, which addresses the wider issues that may be impacting the educational progress of children looked after.

Linked to this are the anticipated long-term impacts of improved attendance, reductions in exclusions, and increased numbers of children looked after staying, or being reintegrated, into mainstream education.

## **3. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the pilot approaches were well aligned with the VSM principles and components, as set out in the Welsh Government's principles, terms, and conditions of the pilot. In the impact analysis, it was concluded that components were achieved at the programme level because of the funding; however, the amount of funding available was often insufficient to make progress across all intended areas.

However, the evaluation also found that non-pilot approaches were working in alignment with VSM principles. For example, person-centred support for care-experienced children and collaborative working within local authorities.

Both pilot and non-pilot local authorities identified similar barriers to progress, which included insufficient funding, uncertainty surrounding funding cycles, ineffective communication and data sharing.

### **Future outlook for the VSM in Wales**

A consensus between local authorities on whether there should be a nationwide role out of the VSM was not established. However, there were common and shared views surrounding the importance of key components of the VSM approach.

Although successful practice in all local authorities could be related to the principles of the VSM, and this was perhaps even clearer for pilot local authorities, it was not possible to determine whether the VSM should be rolled out or not. The effects of the VSM pilot could not be 'isolated' to the pilot funding, in order to conclude the extent to which the funding had generated distinct outcomes. This is because the flexibility of the grant funding meant that the application of the VSM varied in each pilot local authority and there were overlaps with VSM funding and other funding sources, as well as an absence of detailed monitoring data from all pilots.

Almost unanimous support was observed for roll-out of a VSM in some form amongst stakeholders in pilot local authorities. Lead stakeholders (i.e. LACE coordinators and VSHs) provided various explanations to support their views, and the provision of a dedicated resource for championing children looked after in education with local authorities was a central factor. In conjunction with this, stakeholders emphasised the importance of clarity for professionals around who to contact in relation to educational issues for children looked after – providing a recognisable and accountable point of contact.

Despite the emphasis on maintaining autonomy for local authorities in determining the structure of their support and in appealing against provisions, widespread support was observed for some key components of support for children looked after in education. This included the standardisation of PEPs between local authorities, to ensure a consistent standard of quality, transparency, and inclusion for learners.

Consequently, the recommendations section focuses on the changes that could be made to improve educational outcomes for all care experienced children, regardless of whether the VSM is rolled out.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations are designed to overcome weaknesses identified in the pilot and strengthen the Welsh Government's approach to supporting the educational outcomes of children looked after. It is recommended that, as far as possible, the suggested actions are applied to the wider population of all care experienced children to reduce the educational inequalities experienced by children currently looked after, and those who have had similarly disruptive experiences in their schooling but are no longer in the care system.

The recommendations aim to incorporate the main characteristics and features of approaches considered by stakeholders to be successful. These also consider the mechanisms that may be required to facilitate actions and changes. The six primary recommendations are shared as follows:

1. **Design a shared framework for monitoring and data collection, to promote consistency across approaches and drive standards:** There is scope to strengthen impact measurement going forward. Local authorities recognised the value of consistent data collection to improve traceability and provision for learners. A two-tiered approach including a common national framework whilst encouraging flexibility for authorities to set their own local aims and targets according to population need should be explored.
2. **Review PDG-CLA funding considering the impact of the VSM pilot:** Funding arrangements should be reformed to ensure that outcomes can be attributed to each strand (the PDG-CLA and VSM funding respectively), or, merged to ensure funding is attached to a comprehensive set of terms. This would be essential to trace outcomes attributed to funding for children looked after with greater accuracy, and failure to do so would likely to compromise future evaluations in determining the practices with most impact.
3. **Use the National Delivery Group for the education of care experienced children (NDG) to support a national dialogue for sharing best practice and establishing common standards:** Operating as a national forum, the NDG would be well-positioned to facilitate an open dialogue with local authorities about these recommendations. Specifically, discussions on minimum standards and entitlements for children looked after should be held to establish unified goals and common understandings between local authorities. It is recommended that an independent organisation leads this process to overcome perceptions of influence or bias, and to ensure that findings are assessed from a more 'neutral' position.
4. **Include specific funding for adopted learners and children previously looked after:** Any reviewed future funding stream and corresponding guidance should provide an allocation of funding for adopted and previously looked after learners. Whilst the VSM and PDG CLA are intended to benefit all care experienced children, children looked after education leads and strategic stakeholders noted the 'gap' in available support that is perceived to be a result of funding calculations being based on the current numbers of children looked after.
5. **Formalise a set of rights and entitlements for children looked after in education (regardless of whether a national VSM is implemented):** Under the current system, the inconsistency of approaches delivered by local authorities presents a risk of further inequity in education for children looked after, who may encounter varying levels of support depending on where in the



country they are situated. Stakeholder insight has been applied to suggest a set of minimum standards which should be extended to all children looked after in education in Wales. The benefits of extending these rights and entitlements to the wider cohort of care experienced children, not just those currently looked after, should also be explored.

6. **Introduce a statutory Head role to champion the rights and entitlements of children looked after, in each local authority:** The rights and entitlements should be enforced and championed by a statutory local authority lead for children looked after, and other care experienced children, in education. Evidence shared as part of this evaluation, as well as secondary evidence from across the UK [footnote <sup>4</sup>], [footnote <sup>5</sup>] has highlighted the value of a senior role in securing better provision for children looked after in education.

Stakeholders emphasised that the VSH (or equivalent leadership title) must have demonstrable (recent) experience as a headteacher or in a senior leadership role, as well as of working with vulnerable children. The perceived and reported advantages of a leading role include heightened experience and authority, investment in relationship building, and improved accountability in relation to the tracing, stability, and progression of children looked after in education. It is integral that the lead role is supported by an integrated, multi-agency team who can bridge educational outcomes with wider outcomes for children looked after.

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[<sup>4</sup>] This includes: Improving the Effectiveness of Virtual Schools (2023) Neil Harrison, Judy Sebba, Marc Wigley, Rachael Pryor and Fay Blyth

[<sup>5</sup>] Virtual Schools for Care Experienced Learners in Scotland: Reflections on an Emerging Concept in a New Context (2024) Leanne McIver, Michael Bettencourt

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

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