

**Response by Surrey Virtual School to:**

**‘The Educational Achievement of Children in Care’ – December 2015**

This is a joint paper prepared by the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, the National Consortium for Examination Results and the National Association of Virtual School Heads

This paper makes a number of recommendations to the DfE, Ofsted, Local Authorities and schools, which if implemented will improve significantly the outcomes for children in care. Once considered by all partners the necessary resources will be identified and a detailed project plan prepared. It is anticipated that new systems will be in place by September 2016.

We as an authority must be prepared for these changes and as a starting point this response illustrates our position with regard to the recommendations in the paper.

**Recommendation 1**

**ADCS, DfE and Ofsted should work together to develop a more comprehensive set of metrics and analyses to enable a better assessment of local authority and school performance, including the consideration of longer-term outcomes post-16, post-18 and post-25.**

Surrey Virtual School has worked hard to ensure that we both collect and analyse data on the performance and progress of children in care. We would benefit greatly from a national dataset which gave information and analysis on the performance of children in care in more ways than just a measure at the end of Key Stage 4. We are pleased that there is a recognition that for many children, especially those taken into care in Key Stage 4, 16 is too soon to assess their achievement as many will get GCSE grades later when they are more able to catch up and settle into education again.

We have focused on improving our service to those who are post 16 so we can start to collect more information about what support is needed to help children in care achieve more. There are also clear links here to the role of Local Authorities in supporting care leavers and the Virtual School is working with our Care Leavers’ Service to appoint an education support link to specifically focus on reducing the number of care leavers who are not in education employment or training [NEET]. This will enable our Post 16 coordinator to focus on the performance of children in care and ensure they are achieving accelerated targets. Colleges are beginning to realise that they are required to have Personal Education Plans [PEPs] reviewed 3 times a year for all children in care and that Ofsted will ask to see them. There are, however, many colleges who are resisting this and not setting high enough expectations. We welcome the support of Ofsted in changing these attitudes.

## Recommendation 2

**Year-on-year cohort outcome analysis has no statistical validity at Local Authority or school level and should not be used to assess or compare local authority or school performance over time. The DfE and Ofsted should end the use of year-on-year cohort outcome analysis.**

The Virtual School is pleased that the year on year comparison of the performance of children in care is recognised as invalid due to the small and heterogeneous nature of the cohort. To this end we have involved our performance team in presenting to the Virtual School Management Board the number of ways in which we analyse the performance of children in care and what this tells us. This was missed by a number of board members due to other commitments and we will repeat this at future meetings so that all understand the unique nature of each cohort and how it affects their overall performance.

Performance is significantly affected by members of the cohort who have an ECHP plan and are excluded from access to the national curriculum due to their additional needs. This paper recommends they are no longer included in the closing the gap indicator.

The Virtual School looks forward to having a more complete view of the factors affecting the performance and achievement of children in care which are not clouded by statistical anomalies.

## Recommendation 3

**The DfE should review and update the methodology for aggregating and reporting on performance on 'closing the attainment gap' so that all comparisons are made on a like-for-like basis so as to avoid perverse comparisons, placements and incentives.**

The Virtual School is aware that children in care often have a number of additional factors affecting their performance such as additional educational needs or English as an additional language and it would be helpful for their performance to be compared with children who are in similar positions and not in care rather than individuals who do not have these additional factors affecting their lives. We do this on an individual basis where possible but it is at present difficult for us to access this information as we have to rely on an individual school to release information about their children who are not in care. National comparative data where the only difference is whether the child is in care would really strengthen our understanding of the support we need to offer. ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network should develop measures to assess the progress of individual children in care, with reference to their starting point on entry to care, with a view to targets for progress being accelerated with reference to the population not in care, with explicit learning support provided to support the meeting of accelerated targets.

#### Recommendation 4

**ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network should develop measures to assess the progress of individual children in care, with reference to their starting point on entry to care, with a view to targets for progress being accelerated with reference to the population not in care, with explicit learning support provided to support the meeting of accelerated targets.**

This is a very important point that the Virtual School has recognised for some time. The PEP records the starting point for the child and we push for ambitious targets to enable the child to catch up any missed learning as quickly as possible. Many schools fail to recognise the potential achievement of children in care and need pushing to ensure children are entered for qualifications which represent potential and ability not current circumstances.

#### Recommendation 5

**Secondary schools, alternative provision and other settings should always set appropriate targets for progress, and provide appropriate support, with a view to entering children in care for the qualifications that they are capable of attaining.**

**Virtual School Heads should monitor and support schools and other providers through the mechanism of the Personal Education Plan (PEP).**

**Virtual School Heads should support and challenge schools to set ambitious targets for every child immediately on entry to care, and to provide appropriate learning support, with clear escalation processes to the Local Authority for maintained schools, regional schools commissioners for academies, and Ofsted where problems persist.**

**Local Authorities, Ofsted and regional schools commissioners should identify where pupils are not being entered for appropriate qualifications and where schools and other settings are failing to set appropriate targets for progress.**

Surrey Virtual School has always worked on the basis of potential when setting educational targets and worked hard to train social workers and designated teachers so they understand that targets must reflect capacity to achieve regardless of the current situation. Schools that are reluctant to do this are reported to area education officers for investigation. This works for Surrey children even if in another authority but currently Virtual School Heads do not have access to information about looked after children from other authorities in Surrey schools.

#### Recommendation 6

**Virtual School Heads should have access to all support plans and targets for children in their care, wherever they are educated. Where children in care are not being educated in the 'home' Local Authority, the 'home' Virtual School Head with corporate parenting responsibilities will need to liaise with the 'local' Virtual School Head who works with local schools.**

**ADCS should agree with the DfE a form of words that will enable such arrangements to operate.**

The electronic PEP introduced by Surrey Virtual School is making this process much more efficient, whether the child is educated in Surrey or not.

#### Recommendation 7

**Ofsted should consider making the failure to enter children in care for appropriate qualifications, to set accelerated and challenging targets, or to provide appropriate learning support, a limiting judgment in school inspections.**

This would significantly help the Virtual School in its task to raise expectations of children in care and we would thoroughly support this change. Safe-guarding processes received significantly greater attention in schools when they were made limiting judgements.

#### Recommendation 8

**As representatives of corporate parents, ADCS should initiate a national conversation with the DfE, regional schools commissioners, Ofsted and other national partners to agree a nationally-agreed ambition for children in care.**

The specific admissions post for children in care appointed in Surrey has made a significant difference to the effective educational placement of children in care in Surrey as there is a clear understanding of the need for a child in care to attend at least a good school and that placement needs to be swift. There are more delays in Authorities where there is no specific link. There are also more suggestions that children in care should not be pushed into academic environments particularly where grammar schools remain. The Virtual School in Surrey will always push for the school which will encourage the highest achievement for a child in care.

#### Recommendation 9

**Children in care should, so far as possible, have unbroken educational placements in good or outstanding schools that meet their educational needs. To this end:**

- **Local Authorities and Virtual School Heads should work with foster carers and social workers to develop an understanding of the admissions and exclusions processes and their responsibilities in these areas.**

- **Virtual School Heads should agree any change in education placement except in an emergency, in which case the Virtual School Head should be notified without delay.**
- **Local Authorities, through Virtual School Heads and, for academies, regional schools commissioners, should be able to direct any school to admit a child in care without delay.**
- **Regional schools commissioners should work with Virtual School Heads and take any necessary action to ensure that children in care are admitted promptly to academies.**
- **Virtual School Heads, Local Authorities, schools, regional schools commissioners and academies should collaborate to reduce to a minimum both permanent and fixed-term exclusions.**

The shortage of quality carers has significantly affected the frequency with which some children change residential placement and hence often their educational placement too. The Virtual School has worked hard with social workers to improve communication when a change of placement is likely so educational planning can begin. There are still too many occasions when children are placed in areas where educational provision is poor or inappropriate for the child. This creates delays and further moves which should be avoided. Children not on roll due to changes in residential placement are the biggest cause of poor attendance at school for children in care.

There are still some delays in notification of a change in residential placement to the Virtual School but we are working on this with social care.

Sometimes changes in residential placement have transport implications which can result in avoidable changes in school. The Virtual School is working with transport at the moment to reach a better understanding of why children in care will need special arrangements to maintain their school provision where possible and appropriate.

There are significant delays in placement for those requiring SEN provision. This is extended when there is no ECHP in place. The virtual school is working with Surrey SEN to improve processes for children in care.

The Virtual School is informed immediately about any fixed term exclusions through Welfare Call, who supply an electronic system which also monitors attendance and has worked with us to develop our electronic PEP. We will then do our best to ensure that this is kept to an absolute minimum and avoided with alternative sanctions if at all possible. We are also training our designated teachers to inform us of any likely exclusion scenarios before they happen so that alternatives can be recommended. Fixed term exclusions are a very small part of the total causes of absence for our children in care in Surrey. There have been no permanent exclusions of children in care in Surrey for several years.

There have been occasions when schools have had to be reminded that we will direct them to take a child in care if necessary. This is usually enough to persuade the Headteacher to admit the child, but there have been some very difficult conversations with some Heads who view children in care as a

liability. Area Education Officers are aware of these schools where their support has been necessary. We do have concerns about the actual experience of the child in the school when this has happened.

#### Recommendation 10

**ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network should actively promote:**

- **Understanding of attachment difficulties and trauma on learning**
- **Comprehensive and effective use of the SDQ**
- **The development of explicit strategies, recorded in PEPs, to address issues highlighted by SDQ scores.**

**Ofsted and the DfE should include compliance with regard to completion of the SDQ by schools and foster carers in regulatory and inspection activities. Ofsted should sample SDQ quality as part of inspection.**

Research unequivocally shows that the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children has a significant impact on their learning which is why the Virtual School has maintained that it must be aware of the rates of completion of SDQs and their outcomes for all children in care. We would welcome the involvement of Ofsted and the DfE in ensuring compliance with regard to SDQ completion and quality. The Virtual School in Surrey has offered training on attachment from experts in the field to relevant partners and will continue to do so as part of group training and at conferences.

#### Recommendation 11

**ADCS, with the Virtual School Heads Network, and in consultation with the DfE, should develop a standardised dataset for PEPs and the extension of the proposed tracking tool to incorporate PEPs.**

Surrey Virtual School feels that while this would require some consultation across the country a standard PEP would be helpful and would certainly ease the burden on large establishments where children in care from different Authorities are using different documentation. We feel that a standardised e PEP would be the way forward although not every Authority has invested in this approach.

#### Recommendation 12

**Ofsted should consider incorporating in the school inspection framework an assessment of:**

- **The time it takes for a school to accept a child in care onto the school roll from the day the request for a placement is received from the Local Authority**
- **Fixed term exclusions for children in care, as well as total days spent out of school for any reason**
- **The completion and quality of Personal Education Plans.**

Surrey Virtual School would support the inclusion of each of these points into inspection frameworks as where they have been queried it has prompted schools to take action.

### Recommendation 13

**The DfE should, in consultation with ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network:**

- **Amend the national dataset to include measures of education progress and the stability of social care and education placements**
- **Update the stability indicator to remove the disincentive with regard to positive placement moves.**

The link between stability of placement and educational progress is clear and should be measured. Any disincentive should be removed as positive placement moves will be reflected in better progress in any case.

### Recommendation 14

**ADCS should work with partners, including children in care councils, to develop an agreed 'education offer' for children in care so that they are aware of what they have a right to expect from schools, carers, health professionals and their corporate parents, and so that professionals and carers working with children in care know what is being expected of them.**

This would help to recognise the needs associated with the experience of being in care as opposed to those due to additional special needs.

### Recommendation 15

**The DfE should:**

- **Work with ADCS to explore system re-design to achieve a more integrated approach to assessing, planning, delivering and monitoring the education, health and care needs of children in care**
- **Consider requiring Local Authorities to provide training and support on education issues to foster carers and residential social workers**
- **Issue the NICE guidance on attachment to all schools, with particular, but not exclusive, reference to supporting children in care.**

It has long been recognised that the understanding of education issues and processes by foster carers and social workers is weak and this is why Surrey Virtual School has spent much time and money on training to build better partnerships and integration between social care and education

workers. This will continue including our involvement with the social care academy. We will be developing our work with foster carers in this matter. Our biggest challenge is the low uptake of training in some areas.

#### Recommendation 16

**The DfE should work with ADCS and the Virtual School Heads Network to deliver an improved set of data returns with appropriate quality assurance.**

Surrey Virtual School already spends much time and money on finding out the results of looked after children from schools and checking information. We would welcome more involvement with the collection and accuracy of data returns.

#### Recommendation 17

**The DfE, ADCS, Ofsted and the Virtual School Heads Network should work to stimulate a national discussion on areas of activity, other than those considered in detail by this paper, that would support improved educational outcomes for children in care.**

Surrey Virtual School supports the development of discussion opportunities to share what we know about improving educational outcomes for children in care.

#### Recommendation 18

**ADCS, supported by the Virtual School Heads Network and the DfE, should commission from NCER a national evidence-based data management and analysis tool to improve the tracking and reporting of the educational achievement of children in care from birth through to age 25, and to enable all parts of the education system to be held to account for the effectiveness of their support for children in care.**

**ADCS should convene a steering group with ADCS, DfE, the Virtual School Heads Network and NCER representation.**

**ADCS and the DfE should identify the resources needed to implement the national data management and analysis tool.**

It is in many ways unbelievable that this tool does not already exist and it is often expected that virtual schools can produce the same kind of data as other schools when national and local data as it stands at the moment is released. We can and do work hard to assemble and analyse data for our looked after children in Surrey in as much detail as we can regardless of what is known nationally. This tool would enable us to see much more clearly how our children are doing compared to those in care in other parts of the country and compared to those not in care but in similar circumstances with regard to additional needs and social environments.

We strongly welcome a tool that would allow a better understanding across the country of the needs of children in care and what our priorities must be. We can no longer accept that home placement issues drive the educational future of these children. Coming into care must be the start of something better for these children and education is the core of that life chance improvement. Those priorities that are currently standing in the way must be dealt with before more generations



of children in care navigate life with limited prospects and disappointing outcomes. All children in care have a right to the best support and help they can get and if that means getting them better parenting then that is what we must do

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