RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

20TH JULY 2021

A PROPOSAL TO PILOT A VIRTUAL SCHOOL MODEL TO IMPROVE THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES IN DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES (COUNCILLOR MRS J ROSSER)

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an opportunity to consider a joint pilot strategy between Education and Inclusion Services and Children's Services to improve the educational outcomes of children who are looked after (CLA) by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCTCBC) through the creation of a Virtual School Model (VSM).

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

   I.   Note the content of this report.

   ii.   Determine whether to proceed with the proposal to provide funding to pilot a Virtual School Model to improve the educational outcomes for children who are looked after (CLA) by RCTCBC.

   iii.   If a decision is made to agree to the above proposal, to receive a further report presenting an evaluation of the Virtual School Model pilot to inform future actions.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 To progress the proposal to pilot an integrated model of support to promote the educational achievement of CLA who attend both in county and out of county educational settings.

3.2 To promote opportunities to develop more inclusive practices in our schools and to support the implementation of wider educational reforms to meet the needs of learners who are CLA.

4.   BACKGROUND/WIDER CONTEXT

4.1   This report provides an overview of the arrangements currently in place in the Local Authority for supporting the educational outcomes of CLA learners and the rationale for moving towards a Virtual School Model that has the potential to provide a more effective, integrated model of support for CLA.

4.2   The report provides a brief overview of the number of RCT CLA accessing statutory education and the challenges faced by this particularly vulnerable cohort of learners.

4.3   The report also provides an overview of the additional funding being requested to progress with the proposal to pilot the Virtual School Model.

5.   CURRENT CONTEXT

5.1   National data detailed on the Welsh Government Statistics Wales website records that 7,170 children in Wales were looked after on 31st March 2020 - an increase of 4.9% on the previous year.

5.2   In 2020 there were 715 looked after children and young people within RCT. This was the second highest total number of children and young people who were looked after and the second highest number of school aged children (5–15) within Wales.

5.3   On the 31st March 2020, there were a total of 715 children and young people within the Local Authority's care. 450 of these children were of statutory school age. This equates to 1.5% of the overall school population.

5.4   In the academic year 2019-2020, 17% of the cohort of CLA pupils in RCT had a statement of special education needs and 57% had identified Special Educational Needs SEN at school action, school action plus and with statements. This is significantly higher than the population of non CLA pupils where around 3% are expected to have a statement and around 20% would have additional needs at school action, school action plus or have a statement of SEN. Approximately 13% of the CLA population attend special school, specialist classes and/or are taught within EOTAS provision.

5.5   Due to the removal of LAC/CLA from the PLASC data capture, the above data is no longer available. However, there is consistent and indisputable evidence from PLASC data returns over many years that the number of CLA learners who experience complex additional learning needs and significant social, emotional, behavioural difficulties and mental health issues is disproportionately high in comparison to their peers.

CLA Education Team

5.6   Historically Education and Children's Services have jointly funded the CLA Education Team to support educational opportunities for RCT CLA learners placed at educational settings both in and out of county. The team also provides support for CLA learners residing in RCT who belong to other local authorities.

5.7   The CLA Education Team is managed by the Deputy Head of Educational Psychology and consists of 1.6 full time equivalent (1.6 fte) specialist CLA Educational Psychologists, a 0.6 fte CLA advisory teacher, a CLA support officer and a CLA Education Co-ordinator.

5.8   The team provides support to CLA learners in a number of ways including consultation, advice and guidance to educational settings, the delivery of direct intervention including therapeutic approaches, assessment and observation of individual learners, and support to ensure that CLA learners are able to access appropriate educational placements. The team promotes multi-agency collaboration, working with professionals in health and social services, the third sector and foster carers.

5.9   Poor educational outcomes for CLA learners in comparison to their non-care experienced peers are well documented in research. There are many risk factors that can adversely impact upon the educational progress of CLA learners that are often a significant and long-term barrier to achievement. Whilst acknowledging the high-quality support provided by the CLA Education Team, the outcomes for CLA learners in RCT have consistently reflected nation-wide data, indicating less positive outcomes for CLA learners than for the general population of learners.

5.10   Due to concerns regarding the educational outcomes of CLA learners in RCT, the Corporate Parenting Board requested that Education and Children's Services undertake a review of their current support systems for CLA learners within the context of up to date research on good practice for supporting the educational attainment of CLA and make recommendations for a strategy to improve the educational outcomes of our CLA learners.

5.11   In January 2021, Education Services presented a report to the Corporate Parenting Board outlining a rationale for a proposed cross-directorate improvement strategy and to raise awareness of the Board of the intention to make a formal joint proposal for change.

6.   **STRATEGY FOR IMPROVEMENT**

6.1   With a clear ambition to improve the educational achievement of our CLA pupils, Education and Children's Services recognise that there is a need for change. However, any strategy for improvement must be based on effective research-based practice where there is clear evidence of impact.

6.2   In May 2020 Sir Alistair Macdonald published a research paper commissioned by Welsh Government - *An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales.* (See Appendix 1). The paper explores good practice within LAs to support learners who are looked after to

enjoy the same life chances as their peers, with a focus upon raising their educational attainment. The report highlights the importance of adopting child centred approaches through collaborative approaches with all stakeholders and, in particular, Sir Macdonald presents a strong evidence base for how the Virtual School Model in England and Scotland could be used as a basis for local authorities in Wales to promote the educational achievement of CLA.

6.3   A Virtual School (VS) does not have a physical environment for pupils to attend. It is described by Macdonald as an 'organisational tool' which has been created for the effective co-ordination of support for CLA at both a strategic and operational level, including CLA learners who access out of county placements. In England, under the Children's and Families Act 2014, local authorities have a statutory duty to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH) whose key role is to promote the educational achievement of CLA which differs from the model in Wales where the key person to undertake this role is the Looked After Children Education (LACE) Co-ordinator.

6.4   The LACE Co-ordinator role is a statutory role within each local authority in Wales. However, there is significant variation across Wales regarding the qualifications and professional background of LACE Co-ordinators and in relation to the service area in which they are 'based' – e.g. Children's Services or Education. There is no national job description although they do work to the same guidelines relating to the minimum expectations for the role and the tasks that they are expected to undertake.

6.5   Effective leadership and management of the Virtual School by a Virtual School Head is noted by Macdonald to be a major strength of the Virtual School Model. Despite the similarities between the roles and responsibilities of the Virtual School Head and the LACE Co-ordinator, Macdonald notes that the key difference is the decision to have a 'Head' post in England, who is placed within the Education Department. Further, Macdonald notes that the Virtual School Head overwhelmingly has a background in education.

6.6   The status of the Virtual School Head and their strong background in education enables them to work at a strategic level to influence practice, make evidence-based decisions regarding the effective use of resources. Their knowledge and experience enhances the level of scrutiny and accountability within the local authority for evaluating systems and processes that are key contributors to educational achievement. Their Headteacher status enables them to intervene and provide professional challenge on an equal level when Headteachers make decisions that are not felt to be in the best interests of individual CLA learners. They are also well placed to provide effective leadership to a diverse virtual school team of professionals.

6.7   As with mainstream schools which have Governing Bodies, many virtual schools have a Management Committee to provide an additional layer of scrutiny, accountability and support for the Virtual School and Head.

6.8   As a result of his review, Macdonald made a clear recommendation for Welsh Government to consider the development of a Welsh virtual school model.

'Welsh Government should consider requiring all Local Authorities in Wales to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH) and establish Virtual Schools, for the purpose of discharging the LAs' duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children' (Macdonald, May 2020).

6.9 In the context of RCT, the introduction of a Virtual School Head as recommended in the above report would strengthen the strategic approach to supporting CLA learners at senior management level in education. The Virtual School Head would work collaboratively with other Headteachers within the structure of a virtual school system. This would ensure a clear overview of the needs of all CLA pupils, a consistent approach to promoting educational opportunities for all CLA pupils across the local authority and equity of access to all areas of learning experience within the new curriculum, with particular focus upon supporting the emotional and mental health wellbeing development of CLA learners.

6.10 Responding to the CLA population of learners as a discrete school would enable identified data sets from across RCT schools to be pulled into one place as the 'virtual school data set'. The Virtual School Head would have continuous access to a range of 'live', up-to -date data regarding CLA pupils, including, attendance, exclusions, progress trackers and wellbeing measures, that would enable them to respond without delay to address individual needs thus facilitating early intervention and preventative approaches.

6.11 Robust data analysis would enable the Virtual School Head to undertake effective systemic evaluation of outcomes in order to identify strategic priorities for development on a local authority wide basis, in addition to robust support and challenge where concerns relating to individual schools are identified.

6.12 The Virtual School Head would have a clear understanding of effective pedagogical approaches in relation to vulnerable learners, and curriculum development. This would enable them to support the strategic development of the new Curriculum for Wales 2022 to ensure that CLA learners can access to a broad and balanced curriculum that effectively meets their individual needs.

6.13 As noted previously, CLA learners are a particularly vulnerable cohort of learners with a much higher incidence of severe and persistent SEN/ALN than non-CLA learners. The implementation of new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018 (ALNET) and the ALN Code (2020) in September 2021 will bring enhanced statutory ALN duties for local authorities in relation to CLA learners, such as the requirement for all CLA learners of statutory school age to have local authority maintained Individual Development Plans (IDP). The Virtual School Model would enhance the local authority's capacity to undertake its new statutory duties and establish effective quality assurance processes alongside Access and Inclusion services to ensure that CLA learners access effective and high quality additional learning provision (ALP) that is tailored to meet their significant and complex ALN.

6.14 The Virtual School Head would play a strategic role alongside Central South Consortium School Improvement Partners in identifying areas of good practice in schools and facilitating effective school to school support in line with Welsh Government's approach to developing a sustainable self-improving education system.

6.15 The Virtual School Head would work in partnership with CSC in relation to regional funding for CLA and would have responsibility for coordinating and quality assuring the effective use of the PDGLAC within RCT.

6.16 The issue of admissions was cited by Macdonald as one of the most difficult issues facing local authorities in Wales. Research of the English Virtual School Model provides evidence that the senior status of the Virtual School Head has facilitated the admission of CLA learners into the most suitable educational placements. The appointment of a Virtual School Head in RCT would strengthen the Local Authority's approach to ensuring the most appropriate placements are accessed by CLA learners in a timely manner.

6.17 The Virtual School Head would have a vital safeguarding role in relation to ensuring that CLA learners are healthy and safe. They would have a key role in supporting schools to address the wellbeing needs of CLA learners on both a strategic and an individual pupil level. This would include support and challenge to schools in relation to the attendance and exclusions of CLA learners, the coordination of specific and targeted interventions, including multi-agency involvement from external specialists, and, crucially, would support the strategic implementation of the recently launched Welsh Government *'Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being'* with RCT.

6.18 Macdonald also highlights the importance of the Virtual School Head as the lead officer within the LA for ensuring that robust processes are in place to prepare CLA learners for their transition to adult life. The appointment of a Virtual School Head in RCT would provide enhanced capacity to implement robust multi-agency approaches to support CLA learners through all key transitions.

6.19 The Welsh Government strategy *'Education in Wales: Our National Mission'*, recognises the need to take a holistic approach to addressing the needs of learners. It acknowledges that a child's educational progress will be affected by a range of wider issues, such as well-being, health and their care arrangements. It is also a key theme in the Welsh Government strategy *Raising ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after' (2016)*. Evidence presented by Macdonald indicates that the introduction of the Virtual School Model in England has significantly enhanced collaboration between Education Departments and Social Services. It is anticipated that the adoption of a Virtual School Model in RCT would enhance the local authority's capacity to take a more integrated approach to supporting CLA learners, with an emphasis upon purposeful cross-directorate collaborative working.

6.20 In his report, Macdonald makes a total of 5 recommendations:

1. The development of a Welsh Virtual School model.
2. The level of resourcing required to enable an integrated approach that improves outcomes.
3. The importance of high-quality data.
4. The implications for training.
5. The need to broaden measures of what constitutes educational outcomes for LAC.

6.21 It is important to highlight that Macdonald's recommendations in relation to resourcing an integrated approach to supporting CLA learners and the importance of high quality data are made within the context of a Virtual School Model, again providing a clear steer for the adoption of such a model. All recommendations will form part of the strategic development of the pilot virtual school model at a local level.

7. PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE

7.1 Based on the evidence above, the proposals for change are as follows:
- To undertake a pilot for one academic year or three terms of a Virtual School Model.

7.2 It is proposed to:
- Appoint a Virtual School Head to a fixed term secondment/temporary post of three terms to become the strategic lead in coordinating support for CLA learners, including those RCT CLA learners placed outside the caring authority's boundaries, at both a strategic and operational level, and under the direction of the Head of Inclusion Services and Director of Education and Inclusion Services and in collaboration with the Director of Children Services.
- Re-align line management of the CLA Education Team to the Virtual School Head (currently line management is undertaken by the Deputy Head of Educational Psychology).
- Establish an interim management committee with multi-agency representation/membership to provide enhanced scrutiny, accountability and support for the Virtual School Head and Virtual School.

7.3 The proposed pilot structure for the Virtual School can be found in Appendix 2.

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment and a Welsh Language Impact Assessment however will be prepared if approval is granted to progress with the above proposal.

9. CONSULTATION

9.1 If approval is granted to progress with the above proposal to implement a pilot of the Virtual School Model, consultation will be undertaken with relevant stakeholders in relation to the immediate priorities for the Virtual School.

Ongoing consultation will be undertaken with stakeholders as part of the evaluation of the pilot and to inform the Council's future planning in relation to support for CLA learners.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 If the above proposal is to proceed, funding will be required to appoint a temporary Virtual School Head on a leadership salary of L12-18 (£55,338-£64,143 per annum, excluding oncosts). It proposed that this is jointly funded from existing resources within Children Services and Education and Inclusion Service budgets.

11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

11.1 Section 315 of the Education Act 1996 requires Local Authorities to ensure that SEN/ALN provision is kept under review. Sections 1:20 and 1:21 of The SEN Code of Practice also requires local authorities to evaluate the effectiveness of school funding arrangements in supporting and raising the achievements of children and young people with SEN.

11.2 The ALNET Act (2018) and the ALN Code (2020) provide a legal framework to ensure that the additional learning needs of all learners are met. Chapter 14 of the Code specifies the enhanced statutory duties of local authorities in relation to supporting children who are looked after who have additional learning needs.

11.3 The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 provides a legal framework to deliver a transformational curriculum, Curriculum for Wales 2022, that focuses upon developing strong and inclusive schools for all pupils.

12. LINKS TO CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT 2015

12.1 The proposals will ensure that two of RCTCBC's three key priorities will be met. These include:
- Economy: Building a strong economy.
- People: Promoting independence and positive lives for everyone.

12.2 The proposals will ensure that some of RCTCBC's most vulnerable learners will have the best chance of achieving positive outcomes. The proposals will ensure more efficient and effective use of resources which promotes the development of social inclusion and positive outcomes for learners.

12.3 Organising services so that they are focussed on early intervention and prevention is a key statutory requirement of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015[1] and a key element of RCTCBC's Corporate Plan.

13. CONCLUSION

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[1] Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015

13.1 In light of both the national focus upon improving educational outcomes for CLA learners and RCT's commitment to removing the barriers to achievement for its CLA learners, Education and Children's Services recognise that we need to adopt a transformational approach to supporting our CLA learners.

13.2 A learner's educational needs cannot be addressed in isolation from other significant factors in their life which include their mental wellbeing, physical health and the stability of their care arrangements.

13.3 The recently published report (May 2020) commissioned by the Welsh Government *'An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales',* written by Sir Alasdair Macdonald, provides a clear rationale for adopting a Virtual School Model as an effective integrated approach to promoting the educational achievements of CLA learners.

13.4 In response to the above report, Welsh Government have commissioned an independent research organisation, IFF Research, to undertake further research and engagement with partners to understand how the recommendations could be implemented and progress made quickly. RCT has taken part in the second stage of this research and we are currently awaiting Welsh Government's response to the research findings.

13.5 Securing improved educational outcomes for CLA learners requires strong collaborative approaches between multiple agencies and services. We must consider how to prioritise resources to ensure that collaborative practice is embedded within the systems we work to ensure that all those who support CLA learners are effective in delivering better outcomes for care experienced learners. The Virtual School Model would enhance the local authority's capacity to take an integrated approach to supporting CLA learners, with an emphasis upon purposeful cross-directorate collaborative working.

13.6 It is recommended therefore, that approval is given to progress with the above proposal so that Education and Children's Services can begin to transform the Council's model of support for CLA learners and enable them to achieve the best possible educational outcomes.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Item:
Background Papers - none

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