

An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales

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Background and Context

In December 2019 I was asked by the Welsh Government to carry out a scoping exercise focused on developing an integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for Looked after Children (LAC). In particular I was asked to look at integrated local authority approaches in Wales and Virtual School Headteachers (VSH), which are statutory in England and currently being developed in some parts of Scotland. The context of this review is as part of the Welsh Government's continuing commitment to the vision that every child in Wales – including those who are looked after – has the right to expect an excellent education regardless of their circumstances. For all pupils, but in particular for LAC there is more to success at age 16 than GCSE performance, but this is still currently a key measure and a gap of 43% at Level 2 between the attainment of LAC and the rest of their cohort is unacceptable. There is no doubt that improvement is needed not only on this, but on virtually every other measure.

The Programme for Government, *Taking Wales Forward*, commits to “*examine ways of ensuring looked after children enjoy the same life chances as other children and if necessary reform the way they are looked after*”. This is reinforced by the national strategy *Prosperity for All*, with social care as one of the five priority areas, and actions to:

- *raise the educational attainment and improve the life chances of children in care, adopting a child centred approach, through the collaboration of education, social services and others.*
- *strengthen edge of care services to provide families with timely support to reduce the numbers needing care provision and provide assistance in the key transitional phase post 16 to access further education, jobs and housing for all those leaving care*

Education in Wales: Our national mission commits to delivering a new, transformational curriculum supported by strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being. This plan pledges to strengthen collaborative working to deliver better outcomes for LAC.

The plan also states that it is essential to look holistically at the support provided for LAC. Their educational needs cannot be considered in isolation and have to be addressed along with wider issues such as their well-being, health and placement stability. This is a key theme in *Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after* which reaffirms the intrinsic relationship between the social context of the child and their educational attainment. ‘All parts of the system must act in a coordinated and coherent fashion to ensure significant changes in the life of the child are minimised and managed sensitively, always with the child at the centre of decision-making’. This is further supported by Article 39 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child which states that children who have

experienced trauma should receive additional support to promote physical and psychological recovery and social integration.

Over the last 9 Years Welsh Government has provided significant funding through PDG LAC to support this objective. This funding was initially distributed directly to schools but latterly to Regional Education Consortia in order to ensure a more strategic use.

Current Practice in Wales

“You are told that if you don’t get your GCSE results you are not going to have a future, but that is ridiculous”

“It often feels like you are a ghost at the meetings, that you are being raised by a committee. All the professionals talk about you as if you are not there.”

Quotes from Care Experienced young people.

In discharging their duties under the Children Act 1989 and 2004, responsible authorities were required to designate a specialist practitioner, the Looked After Children Education Co-ordinator (LACE), to co-ordinate each child’s education plan and address the education needs of LAC and care leavers in the local authority area. All duties for LAC in Wales are now under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (SSWB) and there is an intention to re-insert a co-ordinator duty, although this might be influenced by any decisions taken as a result of this review. The *Making a Difference* guidance sets out the duties of LAs as corporate parents under the SSWB Act.

The LACEs have a clear remit to establish and enforce joint procedures and protocols, provide information as appropriate to all involved in corporate parenting and to act as an advocate for young people in public care. In addition they act for the responsible authority in ensuring that every child looked after by them has an effective and high quality Personal Education Plan (PEP).

In the current system therefore, the LACE is the key person in each LA with the responsibility for the educational outcomes of children who are looked after and for supporting them in removing the barriers that they face, in particular the lack of a holistic view of their lives and wellbeing.

There is much excellent practice across Wales and the LACEs have established a network, meeting on a regular basis to share this practice. A few examples, ranging from small initiatives in school clusters to structural change across a whole LA, are set out below. There are many more that could have been included, and many of the examples listed here are found in other LAs.

- Carmarthenshire County Council has developed an integrated education and children’s service. This is headed up by a Senior Officer for corporate parenting focussed on strategy, leading a multi-disciplinary team, including: a Children Looked After (CLA) education team comprised of a LACE plus trauma informed teaching assistants; educational psychologists linking in with

social care team; theraplay practitioner; a counsellor; and school nurses trained as CLA nurses. As a result they are now reporting significant improvements in the attainment of children who are looked after whilst at school and beyond.

- In the Chepstow cluster a LAC family officer is employed to support LAC pupils across the cluster. In a recent questionnaire 90% of LAC pupils said that they valued the support from the family liaison officer
- The LACEs in ERW, in addition to the national network, meet regularly within their region to discuss areas for development and areas for improvement.
- Neath Port Talbot has ensured that trauma and attachment is understood across their LA and a comprehensive training programme has been put in place to cover school leaders, teaching staff and support staff with an emphasis on accurate tracking data.
- The integrated practice in Rhondda Cynon Taf focuses on a trauma informed approach to all their work, including their support to foster parents. There is a strong programme for the development of the Designated Person and CLA-friendly schools.
- In Denbighshire, Education and Children Social Services are integrated with one officer heading the joint department. There is a major commitment across the whole LA, both Councillors and officers, to prioritise their Corporate Parenting role and a particular interest in broadening the outcomes that are used to measure success.
- In Anglesey there is an initiative to try and bring as many of the LAC children back into the community rather than have them placed a long way from 'home' frequently at considerable cost.
- In West Monmouthshire one cluster part funds LAC mentors/leads to be based in each school (where there are significant numbers of LAC) and in one school a Level 3 LSA has been identified who works with all (11) LAC pupils weekly on interventions such as Nurture ABC and Teen Wellbeing Toolkit.

Much of this practice is not dissimilar to what is found in the English Virtual School system. However, there is considerable variation in practice from LA to LA and significantly much of this variation is derived from the different structures within which the LACEs operate.

In some LAs, Social Services and Education are separate departments whilst in others the two services have been joined with one person heading up both such as Denbighshire and Carmarthenshire. This diversity impacts on where the LACEs are 'based' with 18% of them in Children Services Departments, 68% in Education Departments, and the remaining 14% jointly located across both departments. This is also reflected in the backgrounds of the LACEs some of whom have an Education background (68% have Qualified Teacher status) while others come from Social Services or a different background altogether. There is no national job description and although all LACE Co-ordinators work to the same guidelines, which outline a set of tasks that are the minimum expectations (see Appendix A), different practices

have evolved across Wales as the exact roles and responsibilities have been influenced locally by the differing approaches and structures in each authority.

This list of the minimum expected tasks is very broad and this breadth has contributed to the variations in practice, as have the different contexts, not just in terms of size, geography and the number of looked after children (ranging from approximately 75 in Ceredigion to more than 1000 in Cardiff), but also in the level of funding allocated. For each LA there are also children in 3 different situations; those for whom the LA is the corporate parent and who are placed in the 'home' LA; those for whom the LA is the corporate parent but who are placed in a different LA or even a different country; and those who are placed in their LA but are the corporate parental responsibility of a different LA or country.

Differences that have emerged between LAs might not be an issue in managing schools more generally or in social services where the LAs are responding to the different needs of their varying contexts, but with regard to LAC they may well impact adversely on their educational achievements. Many, if not most, looked-after children experience multiple placements and multiple changes of school, frequently across LA or even national boundaries. This often requires swift action to ensure that a young person is not out of school for any length of time. The evidence from LACEs and others indicates that navigating the different systems has not always worked well for LAC - there are examples of pupils being without a school for several months - and has created another unnecessary barrier to meeting the needs of these vulnerable young people, particularly as moving to a new placement is already a time of significant stress.

Advocating for the integration of Education and Children's Social Services might appear to be an appropriate strategy with potential benefits for LAC, in that the children might be more likely to be cared for holistically, and there is certainly excellent practice, with improving outcomes, in some of our integrated LAs. However it is not the purpose of this review to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different models of LA structure but to find strategies that will ensure that however an LA is structured the support for looked after children is integrated to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Issues raised by LACEs and others in the course of the review that could contribute to improving outcomes

Irrespective of the structure in which the LACEs are working, there is much commonality in the issues that emerged from discussions with them, and others in Education and Social Services Departments working with LAC, that need to be addressed if educational outcomes are to be improved.

Staff Training

There is a very strong view that one of the most significant steps that could be taken would be to ensure that all staff in schools undertake Trauma and Attachment Informed training. This would benefit all pupils but it is particularly important in understanding the behaviour and needs of LAC. Many parts of the country are already successfully implementing such programmes much of it funded by PDG LAC and frequently allied with the designation of CLA/LAC Friendly Schools. In addition there is a need for a minimum professional offer for the Designated Person with responsibility for LAC in each school that would not just provide the theoretical background but specifically assist them in better delivering their role.

Data

At present all LACEs have to access to two separate systems, and there is a strongly held view that having access to data, in particular 'live' or at least very recent data is crucial. There are two main aspects of this.

In the first instance up to date information about each child is essential to monitor progress and provide support quickly to where it is needed. Traditionally data has focused on attendance and exclusions but the quality of data on pupil progress has been very variable. Frequently other issues in a child's life can displace the focus on their progress in school but this should be temporary and there is a definite need to allow those with responsibility for LAC access both to a broad range of information about educational outcomes and to the training necessary to ensure that the data is used effectively to support learning.

Secondly in the current situation when LAC move placement frequently there is an issue regarding the transfer of data from one school to another. This can work well but there are many cases when it does not. The use of different IT management systems should not prevent or hinder this from happening.

On an administrative point additional problems have been created by the removal of LAC as a marker on PLASC. There were GDPR reasons for doing this but many LACEs commented on the fact that this has added of another layer of difficulty to tracking the progress of LAC.

Admissions

One of the most difficult issues confronting those working with LAC is the question of school admissions. Schools have to admit LAC who move into their area, and except where there are significant additional learning needs schools should not refuse admission on the grounds that they cannot meet a child's needs - even if this means going over their pupil admissions number. Many schools are genuinely inclusive, but, particularly in the secondary sector, the incentives are perverse, as taking in a pupil who might not achieve highly and might have other needs could have a detrimental effect on the school's performance data. The Care Experienced young people who were interviewed are well aware that they are not always welcomed in schools for this reason.

Measuring Success

As highlighted in the quote from a Care Experienced young person, the single-minded focus on GCSEs is not helpful or positive for LAC. That is not to say in any way that aspirations for LAC should be lowered. Quite the reverse. However measuring success only by whatever the current GCSE benchmark is, will almost inevitably lead to a sense of failure for many LAC, their foster parents, their school and all those working with them. A broader range of measures need to be found particularly looking at what happens to LAC beyond the age of 16.

Access to Health Services and CAMHS

This is a specific issue but in fact an illustration of a generic one – the level of funding that the state is prepared to commit to the Corporate Parenting role. At present this varies considerably across the country and is reflected particularly in the ability of the LACEs to access services such as Educational Psychology and CAMHS. In some LAs this can be done quickly but in others there is at best a time lag and at worst extreme difficulty in gaining access to these services. Recent Mental Health data in England has found that 45% of LAC have a mental illness diagnosis making early intervention support crucial if LAC are to achieve in school.

Avoiding Exclusions

There is an understanding that on occasions schools are faced with very challenging behaviour and they wish to be seen treating all pupils in the same way. However *Guidance on the Education of Children Looked After by Local Authorities states that* schools should be especially sensitive to exclusion issues where looked-after children are concerned. Schools should try every practicable means to maintain the learner in school and should seek LA and other professional advice as appropriate. At present it would appear that this guidance is not always being followed with too many LAC still excluded from school.

Current Practice in England

Whereas in Wales the key person is the LACE Co-ordinator, the Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint a Virtual School Head (VSH), for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its LAC. 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.

The use of the word 'virtual' can be confusing as it conjures up the idea that the pupils will be working remotely on their computers. This is not the case. The school is virtual in that it does not exist as a physical institution. Children do not attend it - they attend mainstream schools and remain the responsibility of the school at which

they are enrolled but all aspects of their welfare and progress are monitored and supported by the VSH.

A Virtual School (VS) is therefore an organisational tool which has been created for the effective co-ordination of support for looked after children, including those placed outside the caring authority's boundaries, at both a strategic and operational level. The VSH is the lead officer responsible for ensuring that arrangements are in place to enable this, by focusing relentlessly, as would any headteacher, on improving attendance and raising educational outcomes for 'their pupils' but additionally and importantly, supporting and preparing them for transition to adult life. Other children's workforce professionals, including social workers and independent reviewing officers working with LAC are bound by additional statutory frameworks.

A comprehensive handbook has been developed in England by the National Virtual School Network (NAVSH). This covers all aspects of the role from the Statutory Framework to measuring impact, from advice on emergency placements to accountability. The key elements in the role of a VSH are;

- to influence policy and develop and improve services for looked after children
- to promote individual achievement, health, and wellbeing.
- to provide advice, support and training to professionals, schools and carers
- to improve access to specialist services, including health assessments, mental health assessments and treatment.
- to provide access to professional advice and guidance on education, training and employment.
- to promote additional opportunities for out of school learning and leisure

These overarching aims of the role are expressed in more operational terms in the handbook as six spheres that should guide a VSH's activity. The VSH must:

- know who is on the roll of their virtual school;
- know where they live and where they go to school;
- know, at any time, how they are doing;
- determine what actions to take if they are not doing well enough;
- evaluate the impact of actions taken to improve attainment and progress;
- understand their accountabilities and how their virtual school will be inspected.

There is clearly great similarity between the roles and responsibilities of the Virtual Head in England and the LACE in Wales but there are differences in practice, many of which arise from the decision to make this key post a 'Head' and to place them in Education Departments. The VSHs in England overwhelmingly have a background in education but QTS is not a requirement.

The education of LAC highlights the dilemmas of interprofessional working which has not always facilitated the delivery of the best outcomes for LAC - the problem of recognising educational issues in a social work environment and conversely the lack of understanding of the specific needs of looked after children in schools. Even at an apparently mundane level, the Care Experienced young people who were

interviewed were annoyed that meetings frequently took place at times that suited the professionals but might be at the time of an important or favoured lesson.

The creation of Virtual Schools places the responsibility for educational outcomes of LAC clearly in the Education sector. Experience in England has supported this decision but has also shown that the person appointed needs to understand, or be prepared to learn more about, social work cultures and the pressures and constraints under which social workers and carers operate.

This is the statutory context and a brief outline of the aims of the legislation, but as already noted, and as with LACEs in Wales, there is great variety in the way that the role of VSH has evolved and developed across England and how Virtual Schools now operate. The reasons for these differences are similar to the experience in Wales including geographical context, numbers of LAC and crucially the priority given to this by each Council, which is reflected in the resources allocated to the VS, there being considerable variation in England as in Wales.

While there may, therefore, be inherent benefits in adopting a Virtual School model, it is clear that for significant improvement in outcomes this needs to be allied to a commitment from LAs to a higher level of resource being allocated to the VS.

However, even within the context of this difference in the level of funding, the creation of the VSH position has resulted in a greater degree of consistency and common practice and has raised the profile of improving educational and other outcomes for LAC. Given the ambition of this review to improve outcomes, the focus here will be on some of the best practice and what can be achieved by combining a VS model with appropriate funding.

Perhaps what is most obviously apparent is the impact of the VSH's status, and the power to influence that goes with this. While members of their teams focus on the operational aspects of supporting their LAC the VSH can operate strategically, a feature noted in research and recent peer reviews. This view was not confined to those professionals from an education background. Social workers in England generally welcome the senior post as a significant enhancement of the work and in helping guide them through the complex modern world of education, planning children's education alongside their care experience, and, where necessary, helping liaise with or challenge schools.

For example on the issue of admissions, the VSH is able to put pressure on mainstream Headteachers to ensure that they adhere to statutory requirements and that appropriate places are secured for LAC, if necessary taking them to court. As in Wales, securing the best school place is not always easy, but it is clear that having the authority that goes with being a Head adds considerably to their ability to achieve this, particularly when the VSH is a member of the Placement Panel. Where the VSH is unhappy with the support being provided for LAC over more specific issues, such as being placed in a school that is in an OFSTED category or changing school during Key Stage 4, they can and do challenge schools and again if necessary use their statutory power to intervene.

What is also very striking is the strength of the team and the variety of staff that are found in the strongest VS. For example in the London boroughs of Lewisham and Hackney and rural North Yorkshire with approximately 500, 750 and 420 looked after children on their rolls, the Virtual heads have 10-12 professionals in their teams - teams that are directly managed by the VSH - including Deputy and Assistant Headteachers, Social Pedagogues, Educational Psychologists, Data Managers, Family Therapists, Mentors, Advisors for Transition at 16 and 18, Occupational Therapists and importantly Administrative Staff. (Not all of these are full-time and not all of them are found in all 3 LAs.) The number of LAC in most LAs in Wales would not 'generate' the funding of staffing on this scale - although the 4 or 5 largest might - but LAs could combine resources.

Irrespective of the level of funding, in most Virtual Schools the VSH has control of both staffing and the budget thereby enabling them to direct resources to where they are most needed. As a statutory post in England the Virtual Head's salary is paid by the Council but other posts and resourcing are funded in a variety of ways – from High Needs Funding, directly from Social Services and through the Pupil Premium (PDG).

Pupil Premium (PDG) funding for looked after children goes to the Virtual School, a practice similar to the PDG LAC funding in Wales going to Regional Consortia, and mainstream schools can apply for the amount allocated to the pupils in their school. However the VSH has to approve this and ensure that it is being appropriately used. This frequently means rejecting bids that simply allocate a computer to each LAC or use the funds for something that is an LA responsibility such as transport

There is huge pressure across both England and Wales for CAMHS support and therefore those VSHs who have dedicated access to CAMHS and Educational Psychology are at a significant advantage. As an example, when a child had been recently placed out of LA, the VSH from the 'home LA' was able to provide an Educational Psychologist to carry out an urgent assessment. This was excellent for the child but of course it illustrates again the difference between LAs in the level of funding.

One of the key issues, again in both England and Wales, arises from this placement of LAC out of LA. This adds another layer to the difficulty of ensuring that each LAC's educational needs are being met but from conversations with VSHs it is clear that having a Virtual School in every LA and being able to go straight to a fellow VSH can speed up finding a suitable school place and make it much more likely that a positive outcome will be achieved.

As with LACEs an important part of the Virtual School is to ensure that the pupils are attending school. Many of the English Virtual Schools buy in the services of commercial companies to provide attendance data. Through this they are able to have live data on a daily basis so that any issues can be immediately seen and, if required, action can be taken. Situations vary hugely with context but in urban areas children who are not in school and possibly on the streets are at risk of being picked up by County Lines. As in Wales all LACs need a PEP and this is a major part of the VS role but again use of commercial firms to reduce the time spent on admin and report writing has become common.

Similarly with exclusions the Virtual School is informed and can intervene. The policy of avoiding wherever possible the exclusion of LAC from school is not universally accepted in England and this is complicated by the existence of Academies and Free Schools. However in such cases the LAC does, in the VSH, have a powerful advocate.

In addition to these operational and strategic aspects there are three other important points worth noting. As with mainstream schools which have Governing Bodies, many Virtual Schools have a Management Committee. This provides another layer of scrutiny, accountability and support for the VSH and the VS.

Secondly being a Head, the VSH is also a member of all LA headteacher groups and can attend all meetings to represent LAC, to ensure that all schools are aware of their responsibilities and to hold schools to account.

And thirdly VSHs have a National Association of Virtual Heads, already mentioned, which is not only a forum for sharing practice and initiating research but also a body that can advise and lobby government.

At present the Welsh Education System is embarking on an ambitious programme that is very different from what is happening in England and it is not therefore necessarily a strong or appropriate argument to advocate that aligning Wales with England is a good idea. However there are numerous placements of LAC not just across LA boundaries but also across national boundaries particularly in England but also on occasion with Scotland. There would certainly appear to be a case, in the interests of these children, in having systems in all three countries that are aligned.

Current Practice in Scotland

In Scotland Virtual Schools are not statutory but a pilot has been running in the City of Aberdeen and several other LAs are looking at their possible introduction. Directors of Education in Scotland must ensure that their LA promotes the educational achievement of the children they look after regardless of where they are placed. Quoting from the Aberdeen VSH toolkit which is a local not a national document, unlike the English Handbook mentioned above - 'the core purpose of the VS Headteacher is to be relentless in driving up improvements in the educational progress and attainment/achievement of all children looked after by the Authority'. They also have a role in working in partnership with other Authorities to support the progress of children in their schools but looked after by another authority.

The rationale behind the adoption of the VS model in Aberdeen as set out in their handbook is that 'because children who are being looked after are educated across a large number of schools the VSH has a uniquely powerful role in tracking their progress as if they were in a single school, and as a headteacher can collaborate and plan jointly with headteachers and others across the system who share responsibility for the children'.

The five key areas of responsibility are set out below and, of course, are very similar to those of LACEs in Wales and Virtual School Heads in England.

- To make sure that there is a system to rigorously track and monitor the attainment of children who are looked after.
- To ensure that all children who are looked after have a robust and effective plan that supports access to appropriate and timely support and is in keeping with the Children and Young People's Act.
- To champion the educational needs of looked after children across the authority and those placed out-of authority.
- To line manage a team of Education Support Officers supporting Looked After Children.
- To provide support and advice to schools and to the service and advocacy for children and young people who are looked after.

The theory appears to be backed up by excellent practice in Aberdeen, with the Virtual School Head holding a senior post in the authority, sitting at the interface between schools, education and social care departments and in a unique position to monitor the educational progress of looked after children. As in England the recognition of the importance given to the role by the LA is seen in the status given to the VSH.

As in England the VSH is able to operate at a strategic level and manages a team which includes Education Support Officers (ESO) who do much of the face-to-face work with the young people, schools, alternative provision and foster parents. The ESOs have a teaching background, and ideally have an in-depth knowledge of additional learning needs and pastoral care. Experience of working with children and young people, who have experienced trauma and have attachment issues or have required support relating to the distressed behaviours, is also seen as beneficial as they can support schools with strategies and approaches and help teachers and support staff understand why the children are presenting in such a way. They also deliver professional learning and have the credibility with teachers. An ESO post is a promoted post equivalent to a Middle Leader in a school and they are expected to have had a leadership role in their previous posts.

Again, not surprisingly, accurate and up-to-date data about the children's progress, attendance and placements, was considered necessary to enhance the impact of the VSH as were information sharing arrangements between education and social services. Considerable emphasis is placed on the statutory requirement to transfer information when a LAC changes placement.

When circumstances dictate that a young person must be accommodated at short notice in Aberdeen, the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher is to assume immediately the role of corporate parent, and as such, work with schools and services to put in place appropriate provision, even if short term. This immediate response allows all partners the opportunity to effectively plan a longer-term approach whilst being safe in the knowledge that the child's needs are being catered for within an educational setting.

Practice in Europe

There was no opportunity to engage with countries beyond the UK but the VSH in Hackney did highlight one element of practice that is widespread in Europe, but has not been widely adopted here, Social Pedagogy. This plays a high profile role in many European countries, and is concerned with the way a society thinks about their children, how they care for them, how they educate them and how they bring them up. It is a holistic approach grounded in the young people's voice and is concerned with wellbeing, happiness, empowerment and relationships. It sees education as inseparable from other aspects of a child's wellbeing.

On the continent the professionals working in children's homes in, for example, Denmark and Germany are Social Pedagogues, a graduate profession. In addition Social Pedagogy plays a major part in the training provided to many others working with LAC including foster parents. In contrast to the way much practice and thinking has developed in the UK in response to issues of abuse and child protection, Social Pedagogy has at its heart a requirement for adults and carers to form close relationships with the young people they are responsible for. The VSH in Hackney employs 4 Social Pedagogues, all of whom are EU citizens.

There has been interest in Social Pedagogy in Wales particularly in the Fostering Network, but as yet there has been limited engagement from mainstream Education and Social Services.

Recommendations

The recommendations set out below cover these five main areas.

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

As already noted there is much excellent practice in Wales, but with too many different structures, too much variation in the level of resourcing and an overall lack of consistency in the support that is provided. There is also no doubt that most of the recommendations are already being practised somewhere in Wales, although probably none of them in every LA. However one of the primary objectives of the review is to create not only better outcomes for LAC but also a more uniform system across the country so that we better integrate support for our LAC wherever they live, wherever they are educated and critically whenever they move.

1.The Development of a Welsh Virtual School Model

Recommendation

That 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. The VSH should work directly to a Senior Officer in the LA and be in a position to influence both education and social care strategy. The VSH should be employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in Wales. Careful consideration should be given to writing statutory guidance to benefit and learn from the best practice in England and Scotland including the creation of Management Committees, the delegation of the budget and giving the VSH the line management responsibility for all the VS staff.

The primary aim of the review was to find ways to improve the educational outcomes of looked after children through implementing an integrated approach across Wales. In so doing the responsibility for high quality Corporate Parenting should take precedence over other local issues such as the LA structure, differential funding and local politics. The current diversity in the way LAs are organised has resulted in too much variation in provision, inefficient use of resources and ultimately inadequate support for LAC. Based on the evidence from England and Scotland, creating Virtual Schools would offer a more coherent, focused, consistent and effective approach.

- The current strategy in Wales has resulted in multiple and, in some cases, complicated approaches and structures. Adopting a Virtual School model would place the primary responsibility clearly in Education Departments and lead to a uniform national model.
- The VSH would, of course, need to understand and be prepared to learn about social work practice and embrace social care outcome targets as well as education ones ensuring that information on children in care was recorded on the same 'system.'
- Crucially, making this a Head post, a more senior position than that of LACEs, would immediately give status to the role. It would give out a very strong message to schools and enable each VSH to better challenge and hold to account Headteachers and all those with responsibilities for supporting LAC, regarding issues such as admissions, exclusions, progress and other educational outcomes. In England when Virtual Schools were introduced, where Heads were appointed with lower levels of experience, they quickly recognised that they were at a disadvantage.
- In a recent report the results from an evaluation of peer reviews showed that the power and influence of the VSH depended considerably on the extent to which they were accepted as peers by other school heads. It seems that those

appointed from a strong educational background are best placed to undertake these responsibilities.

- The VSH would, having this equal status with other Headteachers, attend their meetings and conferences and be a member of the Corporate Parenting Panel. Practice could be strengthened where the VSH embraced social care outcome targets as well as education ones and when information on children in care is recorded on the same 'system.'
- The concomitant creation of Virtual School Management Committees would add another important local level of scrutiny, support and accountability. A diverse membership including social workers, foster parents and head teacher members representing primary, secondary and special schools would be a great asset.
- The VSH supported by the Management Committee would have control of the VS budget and could respond quickly and commission the resource that might best meet the identified need.
- Having line management responsibility for a VSH staff team would result in more efficient use of resources and enable the VS to respond quickly and appropriately to need.
- Collectively the VSHs could become a powerful group nationally in developing the best possible support for LAC as NAVSH has in England
- In securing a more integrated approach across Wales, having the same model in all LAs would facilitate the support to LAC particularly those who are placed in another LA or in England or Scotland.

ICF Consulting's independent evaluation of the Pupil Development Grant for looked after children (PDG-LAC) suggests that "recruiting a Virtual School Head (VSH) or having a similarly designated member of staff at LA level who is a senior, experienced educational professional and whose sole remit is to support LAC through strategic planning, clear monitoring and evaluation and networking with wider stakeholders" would support the effectiveness of managing and delivering grant funding.

In setting up Virtual Schools there is much to be learned from England and increasingly from Scotland and there is an opportunity to develop a model which builds on their experience but which is firmly based in the Welsh context.

2. The level of resourcing required to enable an integrated approach that improves outcomes

Recommendation

As part of the establishment of Virtual Schools a review should be carried out that aims to maximise the impact of current spending and identifies where new resources are required. There will always be differences in levels of funding but in creating the post of Virtual Head, clearly delineating their statutory responsibilities could result in more equitable support for LAC, irrespective of where they are placed. The PDG LAC funding should go to the VS budget.

In Wales and England the best practice shows both a strategy that looks holistically at the funding of support across departments for LAC but also an approach that is prepared to find the additional resources required to meet the LA responsibility for LAC. Pooling existing resources in the budget of the VS would be more efficient but the real gains would come from creating dedicated teams working to the VSH. This could be a team serving one or more LAs.

The decision to allocate PDG LAC funding to the Regional Education Consortia as opposed to individual schools was a more efficient and effective use of the funding. While acknowledging the risks associated with dependence on grant funding, using this to provide part of the VSH budget would currently facilitate better and more strategic support. Rather than trying to specify levels of funding, statutory guidance should establish minimum requirements of the support that has to be provided. This could include dedicated access to Educational Psychology and CAMHS.

One further area for research which is beyond the scope of the review concerns the cost of residential placements. Several LAs reported the cost of residential care – often as much as £250,000 per pupil per year - as a major issue. At least one LA, Anglesey, as already noted, is trying to bring its LAC back into the home LA. Unfortunately the nature of the way in which funding is distributed probably means that this expenditure, if saved, could not be re-directed to the VS budget.

3. The Importance of High Quality Data

Recommendation

Virtual Schools should have access to the live data of all LAC in their LA just as would any other Headteacher. Similarly, just as the data of a mainstream school pupil moving schools would be transferred to their new school, so should the VSH in the 'new' LA have that data. Consideration should be given again to 'flagging' LAC on PLASC.

All staff in any way connected with LAC emphasise the importance of access to up-to-date data for the reasons highlighted above in the feedback from LACEs. Clearly there are technical issues to be addressed, but if support and outcomes for LAC are to be improved, this has to be a priority and solutions need to be found. In so doing it could be an opportunity where learning from experience in England could enable the development of a stronger Welsh model. While understanding the GDPR requirements it would be good to consider again at the possibility of identifying LAC in PLASC.

In addition, a national model could lead the development of IT that facilitated good PEP practice, that tracked live attendance, that enabled access to progress and attainment data and that led the way in measuring emotional well-being.

4. The Implications for Training

Recommendation

All staff involved in working with LAs in schools should receive training in Trauma and Attachment informed practice. This should be a compulsory component in Initial Teacher Education. This would benefit LAC but also all pupils especially other vulnerable children.

A very strong case is made by LACEs and by the many schools in Wales that have been trained, for the impact that an understanding of Trauma and Attachment can make. Whatever support can be provided through LACEs or Virtual Schools, all pupils spend the vast majority of their time in school in 'regular' classrooms with 'regular' teachers. Anything that can be done to provide these teachers with greater understanding of how to support children's wellbeing will have a significant impact. This would also support the aims of the new curriculum with its focus on wellbeing in both understanding behaviour and knowing how to respond.

5. The need to broaden measures of what constitutes educational outcomes for LAC

Recommendation

Without lowering aspirations for LAC, Welsh Government and Qualification Wales should broaden the metrics used to measure outcomes for all pupils but specifically for LAC and in particular at age 16 and 18.

Evaluating the success of different approaches is very difficult as the measures used to make judgments about the attainment of pupils are in many cases inappropriate for LAC. The feedback from Care Experienced young people is that, while they recognise that qualifications are important and they would not want anyone to be denied the opportunity to pursue their studies in higher education, they find the obsession of schools with GCSE at best annoying and at worst damaging. They understand that schools want them to achieve. They can also articulate clearly that this is not entirely altruistic in that they know that schools are judged on their overall performance and pupils with low results can have a negative effect on the school. However they also articulate very clearly that throughout their education and particularly at age 16 there are important and frequently very stressful things going on in their lives.

The Welsh Government is currently reviewing its qualifications and assessment regime and also how they judge schools. If ways of measuring successful outcomes for LAC could be developed there could be benefits for all young people. To continue focusing on GCSEs and on an attainment gap which may narrow but will never close is not helpful.

However as any change may take some time to be developed and implemented use of the current system to reach conclusions about LAC as a 'category' should be done very carefully. Aggregating LAC into local or national percentages is not meaningful.

Approximately 60% of LAC have Additional Learning Needs, many of them quite complex; in most schools and LAs numbers of LAC are small and percentages are statistically unreliable; and many LAC have to cope with changing schools during Key Stage 4. This does not mean that we lower aspirations, rather it is a recognition that it is individual progress and a range of outcomes that matter. The attainment data for those LAC in England who do not have ALN and who have not moved during KS4 is not greatly different from national averages - although this does raise an issue, criticising the robustness of data on some occasions but then on using it when it suits.

It is not the place of this review to go into detail regarding alternatives but suggestions that have been made by those working with LAC include; a greater focus on progress made in subjects as opposed to final results; progression routes at age 16 and 18 including numbers of NEETS; measurement of wellbeing and particularly resilience; and significantly follow-up at age 21 and 25.

Additional Recommendations

In carrying out the research a range of other issues were raised and although some of these are beyond the specific brief of the review they are included as they have the potential, if adopted or at least researched, to make contributions to the outcomes achieved by LAC.

Welsh Language

In making placements consideration must be given to LAC whose first language is Welsh. There are instances of very young children whose first language is Welsh and whose knowledge of English is very limited, being placed in families, schools and locations where only English is spoken.

Supervision

Those working in Social Services have an entitlement to Supervision, focused on their wellbeing, but currently this is not the case for LACEs. If a decision is taken to create Virtual Schools any member of the VS team who is working face to face with young people should have the same entitlement to Supervision.

Adopted Learners

In making any changes to regulations or statutory guidance, formerly looked after children who are now adopted should be given the same level of entitlement and access by Welsh Government to any specific educational support that is allocated to looked after or other vulnerable children. Interestingly the young people who were interviewed for the purpose of the review disliked the term LAC or CLA (Children Looked After) and preferred the term Care Experienced. They felt that any young person who has experienced care for however long should be entitled to support. This would therefore include adopted children who, by virtue of being adopted, have spent time in care and many of whom face similar issues and for whom attachment

and trauma are equally important. This echoes the views of adopted children and young people who often feel their needs are not recognised and supported within educational provision.

Early Intervention

As in all aspects of education the view expressed by the LACEs and others is that every effort should be made to intervene as early as possible whether this is for a CAMHS referral, or any other support, and systems need to be streamlined to enable speedy and effective responses.

Social Pedagogy

Research is needed into the possible use of Social Pedagogy, initially through training programmes for relevant staff, although at a later date by investigating the development of Social Pedagogues as a profession. As described in the section on Current Practice in England there is increasing interest in its suitability as an approach to working with LAC. Its holistic view of children, its belief that education is inseparable from other aspects of a child's life, its focus on wellbeing, its successful practice across much of Europe, and above all its resonance with the new Welsh Curriculum.

Possible Changes of Vocabulary Used

There are two possible changes in the language being used. Firstly the young people themselves dislike the term LAC. Their preference would be for the much more inclusive Care Experienced. And secondly given the misconceptions that arise from the use of 'virtual' it might be better to go for a rather lengthy alternative a combined title of 'Head of the Virtual School and Head of Education for Looked After Children' (or Head of Education for Care Experienced Young People) and use whichever is most suited to the circumstance or the audience in question.

Sir Alasdair Macdonald

May 2020

Appendix A

The guidelines for Looked After Children Education Co-ordinator.

As the designated local authority officer, the LACE Coordinator, as a minimum, is expected

to perform the following roles:

- work towards the Welsh Government's objectives on the education of looked after children
- promote the education of **all** looked after children for whom the local authority is the corporate parent, whether placed in or out of the authority
- liaise with their counterparts across counties to effectively meet the needs of the looked after child when placement changes occur across counties
- monitor attendance, exclusion, progress, well-being and achievement data; collate and analyse performance information on an individual and collective basis. Use the calculation of 'value-added' data and 3 year rolling averages
- establish and maintain a list – through the admissions process - of looked after children who are placed in the authority by other local authorities
- liaise with the relevant lead person of the corporate parent local authority i.e. social worker, virtual headteacher (from English local authorities) or LACE Coordinators on educational provision and transitional arrangement as appropriate
- in conjunction with social workers, ensure that schools know which children are in care
- develop and promote a means of engaging looked after children and obtaining their views on educational provision. The individual needs, requirements and opinions of looked after children should be considered when places for them are made available on interventions and programmes
- act as a conduit between social services, schools and other education professionals on Special Educational Needs (SEN), admission arrangements, policy etc.
- liaise with Careers Wales, Youth Services, the Leaving Care Team and other relevant managers to ensure appropriate and timely support and access to universal entitlements
- provide support and challenge to local authorities relating to school admissions and exclusions
- working with schools, help minimise the impact of disruptive home circumstances on the looked after child's learning by arranging 'catch up' sessions, one-to-one support or other targeted support
- disseminate good practice including training for elected members, foster carers, social workers, school governors and the designated person for looked after children in schools
- ensure high quality PEPs/Individual Development Plans (IDPs)¹⁰ are in place for each child and provide guidance on their implementation
- submit robust budget proposals that enable the purchase and allocation of educational resources for looked after children as appropriate – in the case of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) for looked after children close working with consortia and individual schools is essential

- establish and maintain a list of designated persons for looked after children in each school in their authority and for schools attended by children placed out-of-authority
- attend looked after children reviews as appropriate
- contribute to strategies and operational plans to promote the engagement, attendance and achievement of looked after children and of vulnerable groups
- help deliver the local authority strategy and policy for looked after children in the consortia region
- report to corporate parenting panel / elected members / senior management team on the educational outcomes of looked after children against the local authority strategy
- work closely with the Engagement and Progression Coordinator (EPC) to ensure that looked after children who are at risk of disengagement are supported and have a planned transition to an appropriate post-16 setting.