



**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

**30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2023**

**VIRTUAL SCHOOL MODEL PILOT – YEAR 1 PROGRESS**

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL WALES MODEL AND UPDATE ON THE PROGRESS OF THE PILOT OF YEAR 1 OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER (CLA) IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES IN DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION, YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND WELSH LANGUAGE (COUNCILLOR R LEWIS)**

**AUTHOR(S):** Ceri Jones, Head of Inclusion Services and  
Linda Hawkins, Virtual School Headteacher

**1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an update to the Corporate Parenting Board on the progress made during year 1 of the Virtual School (for CLA) Pilot – specifically looking at the steps taken to address and complete actions that form the Virtual School Implementation Plan.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Acknowledge the content of the report.  
2.2 Agree to receive a further progress report on the Pilot at a later date.

**3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 This is an information report.

**4. BACKGROUND**

- 4.1 In July 2021, Cabinet agreed to a proposal to progress with a strategy to pilot a Virtual School Model to improve the educational outcomes of children who are looked after.

- 4.2 The Virtual School Model is well established in England and, 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.
- 4.3 Following a scoping exercise to explore an integrated approach to improve educational outcomes for CLA, in May 2020 Sir Alisdair Macdonald, Raising Attainment Advocate, published a research paper commissioned by Welsh Government - *An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales*.
- 4.4 The paper sets out five recommendations, including one to develop a Welsh Virtual School model, which Sir Macdonald describes as an 'organisational tool' that provides effective co-ordination of support for CLA at both a strategic and operational level in England.
- 4.5 Based on the recommendations in the above report, Welsh Government has been persuaded that progressing an integrated approach in Wales similar to the Virtual Schools Model in England and Scotland is key to improving educational outcomes for CLA. As such, they have provided grant funding up to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 to interested local authorities to develop a Virtual School.
- 4.6 In response to the offer of grant funding, RCT submitted a successful expression of interest to Welsh Government, together with a Virtual School Implementation plan that is underpinned by a set of key principles. The implementation plan forms the basis for the initial development of the Virtual School during year 1 of the pilot and progress against actions in the plan will be reported below.

## **5. CURRENT CONTEXT & UPDATE ON PROGRESS**

- 5.1 National data detailed on the Welsh Government Statistics Wales website records that 7,080 children were looked after in Wales on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.
- 5.2 On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023 there were 632 looked after children and young people within RCT, 470 of which are of statutory school age.
- 5.3 On 17<sup>th</sup> March 2023, of the 470 school aged CLA learners, 422 are educated within the local authority and 210 out of county.
- 5.4 In the academic year 2022-2023, 39 CLA learners in RCT have a local authority maintained Individual Development Plan

### **Implementation Plan Activities for 2022-2023**

- 5.5 The Virtual School Implementation Plan submitted to Welsh Government contains 12 planned activities or priority actions for implementation during financial/academic year 2022/23. The following section provides an update on progress in relation to the activities.

## 5.6 **Activity 1: Virtual School Head to take up post in September.**

- 5.7 A key part of the Virtual Schools Model is the role of the Virtual School Head. As recommended by Sir Alisdair Macdonald in his report, *‘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’*

*(An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales, Sir Alasdair Macdonald, 2020.)*

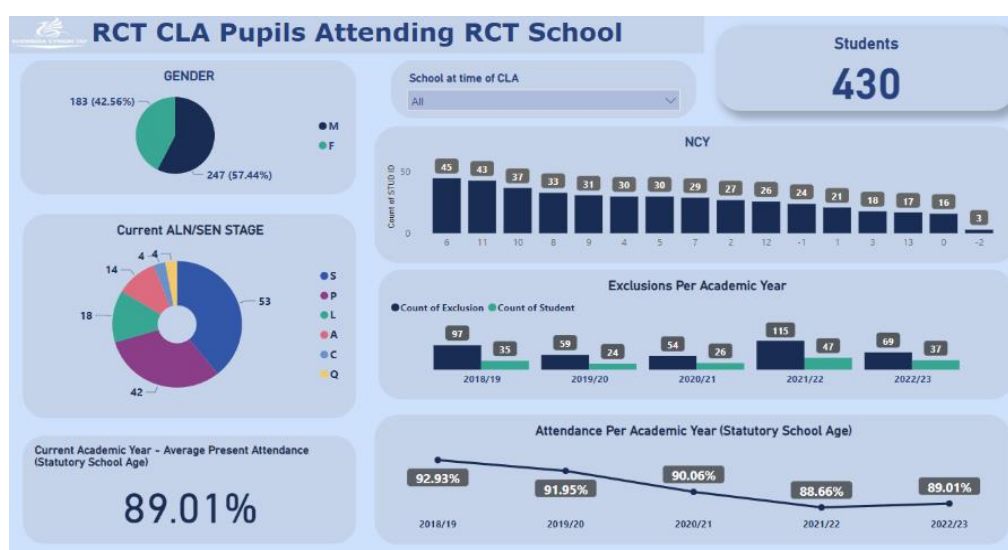
- 5.8 In their Virtual Schools Wales expression of interest document to local authorities, Welsh Government provide a detailed overview of the role of the VSH and the expectations in terms of necessary and desirable qualifications and experience, reflecting Sir Macdonald’s research evidence that *‘peer 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’*.
- 5.9 A VSH was appointed by Access and Inclusion in readiness to take up position in September 2022. This appointment is a 1-year secondment in the first instance, with the likelihood of continuing into a second year based on a full evaluation of the year 1 Virtual School Model pilot in summer term 2022.
- 5.10 In line with the requirement of Welsh Government relating to necessary and desirable qualifications and experience, the RCT VSH has extensive experience of teaching CLA learners with and without Additional Learning Needs (ALN), has experience of senior leadership roles within schools and has vast knowledge of current government policy relating to children looked after and education. The VSH has also had experience of being the Designated Person for CLA in school, the Designated Safeguarding Lead and has had training in Trauma Informed approaches.
- 5.11 In December 2022, the VSH together with the Virtual School Team officially launched the Virtual School Model pilot with an engagement event attended by a range of agencies, including education and social care colleagues and external 3<sup>rd</sup> sector agencies. The launch provided a platform for the Virtual School to share its mission ‘Every Child Deserves a Champion’ and its strategic vision and objectives with a range of partners.
- 5.12 Since September, the VSH has been instrumental in strengthening working relationships with other education services, such as Access and Inclusion Services and the Attendance and Wellbeing Service. For example, the VSH works closely with the Additional Learning Provision Coordinators in quality assuring Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and is a member of the newly formed ALN Post 16 Steering Group. Strategic partnerships are developing with the Heads of Service within Children’s Services, Social Workers and

Independent Reviewing Officers. In addition, joint working with 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations is being developed by the VSH, for example with 'Voices from Care Cymru' who are speaking at the first CLA Forum in March 2023 and with 'CLASS Cymru', who have invited the VSH to be a part of its Network supporting care experienced young people to apply to University.

5.13 Progress in other areas that reflect the main duties of the VSH as outlined by Welsh Government will be reflected in the progress updates relating to the further implementation plan activities below.

5.14 **Activity 2: Review of data processes and data analysis and implementation of new data systems.**

5.15 The Virtual School has been working in collaboration with the Data team within the Education Directorate to create a data system that enables the Virtual School to have continuous access to 'live' data for CLA pupils in RCT schools, to enable the VSH to review and address the needs of CLA learners swiftly and ensure early intervention. As a result, three different 'dashboards' have been created: RCT CLA pupils Attending RCT School; RCT CLA Pupils Attending Out of County School; Other CLA Attending RCT School'. Through the dashboards, live data can be obtained on pupil attendance, exclusions, schools exclusion figures (so timely support can be offered to schools with high exclusion figures), and the number of CLA pupils on reduced timetables. The dashboards provide a visual display of data in pie charts and bar and line graphs and allow the VSH to drill down into different data sets in terms of gender, ALN, year group and school.



5.16 Work is currently underway to further develop the dashboard to include academic outcomes and softer outcomes for mental health and wellbeing.

5.17 In addition, the VSH and the Data team have created a Virtual School involvement on the Capita data management system, ensuring that there is a central location for all Virtual School training, support, meetings, etc. to be

stored. This will facilitate cross agency working and provide a transparent system of information sharing.

**5.18 Activity 3: Pupil voice/parent/carer engagement activities.**

5.19 As a result of strengthened collaboration between the Virtual School and the Participation Team, the VSH was provided with an opportunity to attend a pupil participation event in January 2023. This enabled the VSH to obtain 'pupil voice' to shape the future strategic work of the Virtual School in terms of what care experienced children and young people want from their education. Actions to address this work will be included in the Implementation Plan 2023-2024.

5.20 Voices from Care Cymru have invited the VSH to the 'Local Group' event for RCT on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2023 for care experienced young people aged 14-22 years old. This will be a chance for young people to discuss with the VSH what support is needed in terms of emotional wellbeing for them to do well at school. Again, information obtained from pupils will help inform future strategic work of the Virtual School in terms of their training offer to schools.

5.21 In the summer term the Virtual School and the Participation Team will organise a joint celebration event for children, young people and their carers to take part in celebrating each other and rewarding effort and success.

5.22 As part of the core activity of the Virtual School Management Committee (see below) a care experienced child/young person will be invited to attend Management Committee meetings (on a rota system) and where appropriate their views will help inform and shape decisions made by the committee.

5.23 Key processes and protocols recently implemented by the Virtual School take a person-centred approach with a focus upon capturing pupil voice and also the views of parents/carers and those involved in the care of the child/young person. For example, as part of the new Out of County Monitoring Protocol pupils' views will be collected in relation to their education. This will be done ideally face to face or online, dependant on the preference of the pupil. This work will be supported by the use of Person-Centred Planning Tools. In addition, the new Personal Education Plan (PEP) has been developed as a person-centred tool that must be co-constructed by all people who are involved in the care of the child or young person, including the Social Worker. Questions within the PEP include 'What is important to me', 'What is important for me', 'What's working/not working'. The child/young person's goals and aspirations are also reflected in the PEP, along with who will help them achieve.

**5.24 Activity 4: Establishment of multi-agency Virtual School Management Committee.**

5.25 In line with the findings of Sir Alasdair MacDonald regarding the effectiveness of the Virtual School having a Management Committee just as mainstream

schools have governing bodies to provide an additional level of local scrutiny, support, and accountability, the RCT Virtual School is currently in the process of establishing its own Management Committee. The Management Committee will provide support and challenge in collaboration with senior management in both the Education and Children's Services directorates to ensure agreed Virtual School priorities and the Virtual School Development Plan remains on track.

- 5.26 The Management Committee will take a similar model to that of the Management Committees aligned to Pupil Referral Units. The Management Committee will have multi-agency representation from the four compulsory stakeholders' groups: school, local authority, parent/carer and community. It is anticipated that representations from primary, secondary, special, Welsh medium and faith schools will be included.
- 5.27 The first meeting of the Management Committee will take place during summer term 2022.
- 5.28 **Activity 5: Learning visits to established Virtual Schools in England.**
- 5.29 The VSH has become a member of the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) and in September 2022 embarked on their 'New to Role' Programme. The programme includes relevant topics for the Virtual School Wales model, including 'Transitions' and 'Courageous Leadership'. Through this course the VSH has had the opportunity to network and form links with several Virtual Schools in England. In March 2023, the VSH attended the NAVSH Annual Conference which provided face to face dialogue with other VSHs in England.
- 5.30 Since September 2022, several other local authorities in Wales are also developing a Virtual School Model. To support the development of Virtual Schools Wales networking, the VSH collaborated with the VSH in Powys to facilitate a Virtual School information session for all interested local authorities in Wales. The session was highly attended and, as a result, a second session is planned for 25<sup>th</sup> April 2023 in order to share ideas on tracking the progress and outcomes of CLA learners in terms of the new Curriculum in Wales.
- 5.31 **Activity 6: Establishment of Designated CLA persons' forum.**
- 5.32 In September 2022, the role of the Designated Person (DP) for CLA in schools became a statutory requirement. The DP has responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of children who are looked after in school. This duty applies regardless of whether or not there are looked after children on the school roll, as schools need to be sufficiently prepared to respond quickly to the needs of CLA who they may receive at very short notice. Supporting the DP to undertake their role effectively is a key responsibility of the Virtual School.

- 5.33 The first Designated CLA Persons' Forum took the form of the Virtual School Launch in December. The Launch provided a platform to introduce the Virtual School Team to the DPs for CLA in schools. Updates on recent developments as a result of the introduction of the Virtual School Model were provided to the DPs, including the new streamlined communication system via the new Virtual School Inbox.
- 5.34 The second forum took place in March and included a presentation from the Education, Employment and Training Team regarding the work of their CLA Team: Care 2 Work. The Virtual School team shared the Quality Assurance process for the PEPs to provide Designated Persons with expectations in terms of the PEPs.
- 5.35 The final Forum for this academic Year will be on 6<sup>th</sup> June and will include an address from a Care Experienced Adult who now works with CLA young people at Park Prison and a presentation from the University of South Wales and Cardiff University about supporting care experienced young people to access university.
- 5.36 In addition to the forums, enhanced support for the DPs includes: a revised training offer (the DPs training needs were audited during the Launch), including Trauma Informed Practices, CLA Experienced Guest Speakers, CLA Governor Training, termly PEP training, termly 'drop-ins' for bespoke support.
- 5.37 **Activity 7: Implement and review Out of County (OOC) monitoring protocol.**
- 5.38 The VSH has created a new OOC monitoring protocol to ensure the local authority is fulfilling its statutory duties as a Corporate Parent in relation to educational provision made for CLA who attend schools outside of RCT. These pupils are our 'hardest to reach' cohort and as such a robust system of monitoring a range of data such as attendance, exclusions, education progress/attainment, engagement and wellbeing is essential for CLA pupils with complex needs.
- 5.39 The protocol includes a cycle of information gathering, tracking and support. It includes a 'Welcome and Expectations' document for schools to complete when they receive an RCT pupil, a termly questionnaire, which includes tools to capture pupil voice, certificates to celebrate achievement (can be learning or otherwise), and a system to identify pupils in the most need of support. The protocol will identify OOC placements that require enhanced challenge where concerns have been highlighted.
- 5.40 **Activity 8: Review current statutory processes for CLA with an ALN to include Quality Assurance of Individual Development Plans and Person-Centred Practice.**
- 5.41 The implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (ALNET) Act 2018 and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code 2021 necessitates new duties for schools in terms of CLA pupils. Point 3.119 of the

Act recognises the fact that a significant proportion of CLA children and young people are likely to have an Additional Learning Need (ALN), and Section 14 of the Code provides for the Individual Development Plan (IDP) to be included in the Personal Education Plan (PEP) of a child who is looked after.

- 5.42 The Virtual School has worked in collaboration with colleagues in Access and Inclusion to ensure that robust processes are in place to work with schools to ensure that the local authority and schools are compliant with new statutory ALN processes. This includes support to facilitate person-centred meetings, and a rigorous Quality Assurance process to ensure that pupils' IDPs contain appropriate Additional Learning Provision to address their identified needs and that their IDPs are issued within the new statutory timescale of 12 weeks.
- 5.43 Local performance indicators are now in place to monitor compliance with the above statutory timescale. Current data shows that since April 2022, 89.7% of the 39 CLA IDPs have been issued within the designated 12-week timeframe. The VSH will continue to monitor compliance and take appropriate action as necessary.
- 5.44 **Activity 9: Review impact of current CPD/training programme for schools/foster carers/social services/Education services re: CLA and undertake audit of future training needs.**
- 5.45 Since auditing the training needs of schools at the Launch, the Virtual School has developed a GOOGLE evaluation form in order to evaluate all training provided by the Virtual School (for all stakeholders). As part of this evaluation the question 'what further training do you require in terms of CLA and Education?' is included. In addition, the evaluation form includes data that will enable the Virtual School to measure impact in relation to effectiveness of the course, training methods, delivery, and content. This will ensure that the Virtual School regularly audits and reviews future training needs and can engage in a cycle of self-improvement.
- 5.46 **Activity 10: Review of multi-agency transition protocol for post-16/19 CLA.**
- 5.47 The VSH is a member of the newly formed Post-16 steering group. In light of the new ALN legislation with its enhanced age range of 0-25 it is anticipated that a higher number of CLA with ALN will seek to access Further Education. Many of these pupils will access their local Further Education College, but there will be exceptional cases whereby a pupil will require placement in a specialist college. The VSH will play a key role in liaising with multiple agencies in relation to post-16/19 education for CLA with ALN as the post-19 ALN legislation becomes enacted during the national ALN implementation timetable.
- 5.48 Initial scoping has identified gaps in the support for CLA young people in terms of post-16 support. In response, the Virtual School is planning a joint project with the EET team to provide early intervention in terms of Careers



education, support and guidance. This project will start in September 2023 and will target year 11 CLA.

- 5.49 The VSH is taking part in an enhanced transition project with a secondary school in Aberdare that has one of the highest numbers of CLA pupils on roll in collaboration with the Access and Inclusion Further Education ALN Lead and the Social Worker. The VSH has also consulted with the Greenlight Project and the Gatsby Benchmarks to ensure cohesion in terms of delivering a comprehensive transition offer to care experienced young people. This work is in its early stages and it is too early to measure impact at this point.
- 5.50 The VSH has very recently become a member of the CLASS (Care Leavers and Student Support) Network in order to track care experienced young people who go to Higher Education and ensure that there is timely, appropriate support available to them.
- 5.51 **Activity 11: VSH to collaborate with regional PDGLAC Co-ordinator to ensure effective use of grant funding.**
- 5.52 The VSH has attended LACES meetings chaired by the regional PDG/LAC Co-ordinator. The Virtual School Education Co-ordinator has also attended. The group has evaluated the cluster bids submitted by schools for the PDG/LAC funding and processes have been identified to improve the specificity of the bids. The evaluation template for the grant will also be improved to ensure schools are fully accountable for expenditure of the grant.
- 5.53 **Review current RCT CLA Education Team structure and make recommendations for change.**
- 5.54 As we progress through the year 1 and year 2 pilot, the VSH in collaboration with other colleagues in Access and Inclusion and informed by good practice shared by other Virtual Schools via the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), is now undertaking a scoping exercise of the current roles and responsibilities of the Virtual School team. This will inform future development of the school structure.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

- 6.1 There are a number of current priorities that will embed deeper into the ethos and remit of the Virtual School moving into the second year of the Pilot. There are also several ideas for excellent practice that have evolved from the priorities of year one and will be developed further over the next year. Through robust self-evaluation of the current Implementation Plan and responses from other stakeholders, the VSH will draw up a School Improvement Plan for 2023-2024, outlining key priorities for the Virtual School. These include:
- Building upon positive links made with other service areas within both Education, Children's Services and other 3<sup>rd</sup> sector agencies in order to continue to champion care experienced children and young people.

- To implement a new protocol for measuring the learning progress of care experienced children and young people over time.
- To enhance pupil and parent/carer engagement.
- To establish an effective Management Committee.
- To continue to support DPs in schools through continued high-quality training through forums and bespoke training.
- To complete one year of full Out of County Monitoring to ensure robust cohesion between RCT and schools in other local authorities that have RCT pupils on roll and evaluate whether this has an impact on pupil attendance and learning and softer outcomes.
- To monitor the effectiveness of the new PCP tool.
- To ensure CLA local authority maintained IDPs are issued in a timely manner to ensure the appropriate provision is in place to support the pupil's progress.
- To demonstrate impact of the use of new data systems in terms of challenging schools in relation to attendance, exclusions, learning outcomes, softer outcomes, e.g. wellbeing and mental health for their CLA learners.

## **7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS / SOCIO-ECONOMIC DUTY**

7.1 This is an information report.

## **8. WELSH LANGUAGE IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 This is an information report.

## **9. CONSULTATION / INVOLVEMENT**

9.1 This is an information report.

## **10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

10.1 This is an information report.

## **11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

11.1 The legal requirements for children who are looked after who have special educational needs or an additional learning need are set down within the Education Act 1996, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) Act (Wales) 2018 and the associated statutory Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code (Wales) 2021.

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

12.1 There are links to RCTCBC's Education and Inclusion Services Strategic Plan for 2022 to 2025 and its mission: '*To deliver equity and excellence in Education and enhanced well-being for all*', most notably:

- Strategic Priority 2: Supporting educational settings to deliver a transformational curriculum, high quality teaching and learning and improved outcomes for all.
- Strategic Priority 3: Ensuring equity and support for vulnerable learners and their families

12.2 The information in the report contributes to the priorities within the Council's Corporate Plan, 'Making a Difference'.

12.3 The implementation of the new Welsh Government ALN legislation and the processes and systems developed at a local council level will ensure that some of RCTCBC's most vulnerable learners will have the best chance of achieving positive outcomes.

12.4 The above also contributes in particular to the following wellbeing goals:

- A prosperous Wales
- A resilient Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities.

12.5 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<sup>1</sup> and a key element of RCTCBC's Corporate Plan.

## **13. STRATEGIC OR RELEVANT TO ELECTORAL WARDS**

13.1 The Virtual School Model is a universal provision that will support the Council in improving the outcomes and wellbeing of all CLA learners in Rhondda Cynon Taf and as such is a strategic provision relevant to all wards.

## **14. CONCLUSION**

14.1 The Virtual School Model pilot is currently in its early stages. As can be seen from the above information, good progress has been made in relation to the 12 planned activities outlined within the Virtual School Implementation Plan. A full evaluation of the Implementation Plan and its impact thus far on improving educational provision for RCT's CLA learners will take place at the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> [Wellbeing and Future Generations Act 2015](#)

academic year. This will ensure that appropriate areas for development and priorities are also identified for year 2 of the pilot.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

**AS AMENDED BY**

**THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985**

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

**30<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2023**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES IN  
DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR EDUCATION, YOUTH  
PARTICIPATION AND WELSH LANGUAGE (COUNCILLOR R LEWIS)**

**Item: AN OVERVIEW OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL WALES MODEL AND UPDATE  
ON THE PROGRESS OF THE PILOT OF YEAR 1 OF THE VIRTUAL  
SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER (CLA) IN RHONDDA CYNON  
TAF**

**Background Papers**

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