Virtual Schools

Education's Hidden Asset

CCN

POLICY IN FOCUS

About

At the County Councils Network (CCN) one of our core objectives as a national representative body is deliver the most recent insights on the policy issues impacting our member councils, the communities they represent, and the wider local government sector.

Built on engagement with experts in CCN member councils and wider stakeholders, alongside drawing on insights from the network's programme of policy development and research reports, *Policy in Focus* seeks to provide new insights on established and developing areas of local government policy.

Policy in Focus is just one of CCN's regular publications that sits alongside our data driven *CCN Analysis* series, best practice document *County Spotlight* and range of externally commissioned research publications.

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Less than ten years ago the Coalition government introduced a new function in local authorities which has had a transformative impact on the lives of many of the most disadvantaged children across England – **the virtual school.**

Over the past decade the service has quietly built a reputation as a valuable asset strategically and operationally, championing the education of children in care locally, whilst supporting schools to meet the specific needs of this cohort both collectively and individually.

Despite virtual schools having become successfully embedded within most local authorities up and down the country, few people outside of children's services even know these services exist, let alone what they do.

Yet the virtual school has the potential to become an increasingly important service in light of the current direction of government policy.

The recent strategy for children's social care, *Stable Homes, Built On Love*, and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement plan, both published earlier in 2023, place emphasis respectively on (a) expanding early help to better support children at the edge of care; and (b) improving mainstream education so it can better accommodate children with SEND. This dovetails with moves to expand the remit of the virtual school beyond its core duties towards children in the care system to embrace additional wider responsibilities around children with a social worker.

This is in many ways a positive development. The expertise of the virtual school – not only in its existing position as one of the strongest points of contact between a council and its community of local schools, but also its understanding of the educational needs of vulnerable children – will be invaluable in helping keep children on the edge of care appropriately supported in education, and hopefully contribute to reducing the numbers of children coming into the care system, which currently sit at record levels.[1]

It is also important to recognise there is a disproportionate representation of special education needs in the cohort of children that are in, or on the edge of, care.[2] The track record of virtual schools over the past ten years has also demonstrated they can be a crucial support for local schools, including academies, in helping to better meet the needs of these children – particularly those with emotional and behavioural needs – helping to keep

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1 The most recent official figures for 2021-22 stated that there were 82,170 children in care, the highest number ever recorded. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2021-to-2022
2 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jan/80-cent-children-care-need-special-educational-support#:~:text=More%20than%2080%20per%20cent,a%20new%20UCL%2Dled%20study.

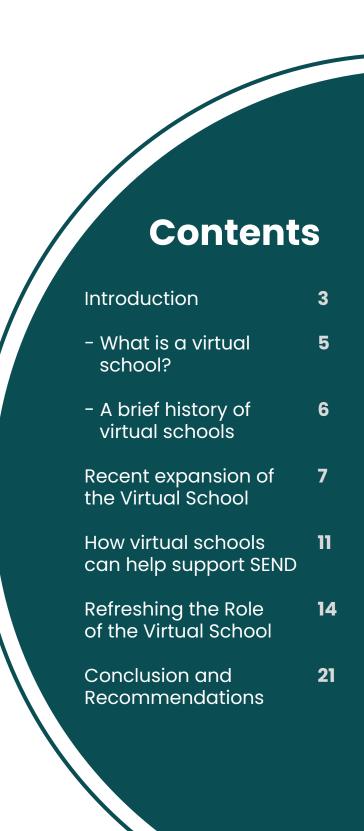them in mainstream education whilst improving attainment and reducing exclusions.

However, as with all policy changes this expansion of remit also carries risks. If the capacity of the virtual school is stretched too far it may not only fail to meet the needs of these new cohorts of children, but also dilute its ability to support children in care where it already has a successful track record.

This short paper – the result of a number of conversations with virtual school head teachers and staff across CCN member councils and beyond – aims to provide an overview of the evolution and work of virtual schools.

It examines how the virtual school can best evolve to complement government policy aims around children's social care and SEND and presents a rationale for why now is the time that their somewhat ad hoc development over the past decade should be consolidated into a more consistent offer across the country.

This includes considering the impact of extending the remit of virtual schools and how their role in relation to children in need must necessarily differ from that towards their core cohort of looked after children, even though both roles retain some common threads, such as the ability to better support schools in meeting special educational needs.

Finally it considers how central and local government should work in partnership to ensure the requisite investment in defining, solidifying, and appropriately resourcing virtual schools to undertake their expanded role as envisioned by the government.

Contents

What is a virtual school?

The term 'virtual school' for most people is likely to conjure up an image of a classroom in cyber space – especially given since the pandemic the idea of online education has moved firmly to the real-life experience of most children and families across the country.

However, this is not what a virtual school is, or has ever intended to be, in terms of the statutory service provided by local authorities.

Virtual schools support education outcomes for looked after children through educational interventions, but also by addressing broader issues that might impact on their attainment such as the psychological factors of attachment, relationships, and mental health.

Virtual schools act as a key link to bring together partnerships across agencies working with the child including schools, social care, health, and SENCO services.

The panel overleaf provides a short overview of the origins of the virtual school and more details on its function, including the more recent moves to extend its role.

IN FOCUS:

TYPICAL FUNCTIONS OF A VIRTUAL SCHOOL

Supporting care experienced children and young people to access and achieve in education and training

Promoting care experienced children and young peoples' need to access high quality support, which meets their needs in a timely way

Working closely with all those involved in providing education to ensure they understand the issues and challenges facing our children and young people

Working to reduce the challenges resulting from changes of care placement or school

Challenging barriers to engagement and good attendance

WE ARE EQUAL

Promoting equality and equity

Virtual schools were established by the Children and Families Act 2014. This placed a statutory responsibility on local authorities in England to appoint a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSH) to take on the role of championing the education of all children looked after by the council. Children in care are recognised as suffering significantly poorer educational outcomes than other cohorts of children, as well as being more likely to have SEND conditions. The virtual school was introduced as part of a package of measures to support children in care and care leavers and help to narrow the outcomes gap in terms of attainment and achievement for this group.

Local authorities were encouraged to innovate when developing this new role in thinking how it could best respond to the needs of children, families and schools in their local area. This has led to a varied evolution of provision in different parts of the country. Some VSHs work largely alone acting as a strategic influence co-ordinating work with schools, education professionals, and social care teams working with relevant children across their patch. Others have been afforded specific resource and lead larger teams which work directly with children and schools to perform the same function.

Virtual schools are funded out of wider local authority budgets for education and care, as well as, in some circumstances, resources drawn from the core block of the Dedicated School Grant (DSG). It is important to note, given the close relationship of the virtual school to school improvement services that the phased dissolution of this stream of funding by 2023 is likely to have impacted on many councils' budget allocation for the service in 2023/24.

Virtual schools also hold an important funding function themselves – as they distribute the aggregated local budget of Pupil Premium Plus (PP+). PP+ is the enhanced amount of pupil premium attached to all looked after children in a local authority. The amount of PP+ in 2022/23 stood at £2,410 per child (as compared to regular pupil premium of £985 and £1,385 for eligible primary and secondary pupils respectively). Given the spread of looked after children across different schools this approach allows for more effective pooled use of PP+ funding than could be generated by one school alone – for example joint training across a Multi Academy Trust (MAT).

Although the core remit of the VSH is to support the cohort eligible for PP+ in practice some virtual schools have been supporting a wider group of vulnerable children across the authority (sometimes including care leavers). This is at the discretion of the council and the Director of Children's Social Care (DCS) in particular, but will also be determined by the funding available to support the service.

Guidance issued in autumn 2021 expanded the remit of the virtual school to cover all children with a social worker on a temporary basis to March 2022. This change has now been extended and formalised into the virtual school's remit, but funding to support it has not been clarified.

More recently the government has moved to expand the remit of the virtual school beyond looked after children to the additional cohort of children with a social worker. This extension was broadly seen a positive development. As one DCS of a county council commented:

> *"I believe the new duties that have come in for all children with a social worker is a really good move. It allows the expertise of the virtual school to be spread around."*

Interviewees for this paper recognised that this move reflected the success of virtual schools over the past decade. However, it was also felt that it brings new challenges, and for the extension to be successful it was important that policy makers recognised that supporting this new cohort would require a different approach to how virtual schools currently operate.

It is likely this was partly because there is naturally a clear alignment between the educational needs of children in the care system and those on the edge of it. Indeed supporting children in need to thrive in school can make a significant contribution to wider early help plans, and potentially help prevent some going on to being taken into care.

However, there were some significant caveats in how far virtual schools, as currently constituted, could replicate the more intensive support provided within their core service for this wider group of children – not least because of the far larger numbers involved. Whereas it is possible for a virtual school to retain a fairly intimate knowledge of the educational journeys of a few hundred

children, this is not as feasible for a few thousand.

As one virtual school pointed out – at any one time they are likely to have around 800-900 pupils with a team of twelve staff (FTE) to support them. However, since the extension they have an additional 4,000 children in need within oversight, but only one member of staff funded to be designated to manage this cohort. The guidance for the extension has stressed that this role is to be strategic. However, this is not always fully understood by schools or sometimes even other services within the local authority:

> *"...we will still get people going 'oh but couldn't you just... there's this one child... couldn't you just...' and we have to explain we can't do that for one without doing it for the other 3,999."*

Primarily, within the envelope of present resources, the role of the virtual school with regard to children in need needs to remain firmly and transparently strategic, to prevent it becoming bogged down with a more intensive level of casework that can sometimes be necessary for their core children in care cohort. This is not feasible, or particularly desirable given it also leaves open the potential to undermine the parent's role in supporting the education of the child.

It is important to note this crucial overarching difference between children in care and the new cohort covered by the extension – the extent of parental responsibility. Part of the job of the virtual school is to replicate the role that most parents play in championing their own children's education for those children to whom the council is the corporate parent.

There is, therefore, more scope for a focus on individual children and casework for children in care that is simply not justified for the other groups of children who will in most cases have parents to represent their interests.

Indeed, direct involvement at an individual level may even cause conflict with parents in some cases, particularly over, say, special educational needs and appropriate support or placements. That is not to say the virtual school may not form part of a wider package of support for schools or social workers to enlarge their options for how to meet the educational needs of these children; but it is less appropriate for it to intervene in individual cases.

Ultimately the authorities interviewed for this paper could see the benefits of extending the scope of the virtual school, but with two important caveats.

Firstly, that councils should be given time and space to see how they can best use the strategic resource of the virtual school to support the new cohorts:

> *"I would caution against giving too much to virtual schools without really seeing... where we fit in across the system."*

And secondly, there must be appropriate resources allocated by both central and local government to match the new expectations:

> *"What's happening is they'll give us children in need... but then give us no more people...."*

> *"It's a new burden - and it needs to be properly funded."*

If these conditions are met then councils will be well placed to ensure virtual schools can improve outcomes for this new cohort as well as children in care.

Data is at the heart of the work of virtual schools underpinning their strategic role. It is by using data that they are able to obtain a clear picture of the educational journeys of their authority's children in care. This allows them to identify specific issues early on, as well as concentrate the attention of stakeholders on the educational needs of children in care – identifying areas for improvement and challenging processes within schools and local authorities:

"We need to think how we use the data to effectively portray our cohort."

"Virtual schools are shining a light on gaps in systems... all those gaps that miss out why education is so particularly important for this group of children."

Yet although the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) have produced useful advice for VSHs around collecting and using data, a common theme of conversations for this paper was the need for more clarity over standards for data collection from central government that would allow more consistency across the country and better join up with other education and health datasets.

For instance one interviewee described how their authority recorded all GCSE outcomes for children in care, whereas some only collated data for those children who are entered for exams. Similarly some record school attendance from when the child comes into care rather than the whole year. This can create discrepancies across data sets, particularly when comparing the performance of children in care across different local authorities.

"It would be useful to have consistency... about this is how we're measuring, this is when we're measuring from... this is the data we're collecting and why. And then having that as consistent across all virtual schools."

As the role of the virtual school is expanded it is important that the impact on their use of data is acknowledged. Whilst VSHs had collated extensive and effective datasets on their core cohort of children, this was aided by the amount of data which is already collected on looked after children but also the direct benefits schools recognised from working with the virtual school – not least accessing pupil premium plus.

"They know us and they trust us, and so they have been much more forthcoming with the data with us than I think they are necessarily with GCSEs as a whole. Because yes they're like 'oh yes we can see we've had we've had benefit from the virtual school previously... we can see that this will be helpful for us so, yes, we can provide you with the data'. Whereas they wouldn't necessarily provide it to a central point where it just disappears and you don't get any benefit from it."

By contrast data on those with a social worker was not so easy to access, especially as it often required schools co-operation to do so:

"Some of our schools don't feed in to our central GCSE data network, because they don't have to because they are academies and they don't want to. So getting good quality data on those children with a social worker can be tricky."

This was also to some extent to do with schools not necessarily understanding the direct benefits to them – given the broader strategic aims around the virtual school's role in relation to children in need.

"Obviously schools are a little bit unclear or unsure about the delineation of the roles [of the virtual school towards different groups of children] because children with a social worker, it's not caseworking, it is just looking at the cohort as a whole, seeing what the trends are seeing what innovations support we can put in for that cohort."

Therefore for the virtual school to be able to support a broader cross-section of children effectively there will need to be more onus on schools collecting such data and providing it to local authorities.

Finally, one issue that also emerged was the need to better describe the role of the virtual school in England to authorities in the other home nations, given some children in care may end up in placements cross border – particularly for local authorities situated near the borders. One interviewee stated how the only school that did not send them data was for an out-of-area placement in Wales. Another consultant working with an English local authority, but based in Scotland, indicated that although Scottish local authorities are increasingly aware of the value of a virtual school, and some had put in place similar arrangements themselves, there was no statutory basis for this in the nation meaning not all Scottish schools fully understood why they may be asked to engage with an English authority around data for some children on their roll.

More widely, the virtual school has a demonstrable role in helping to support children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Many virtual schools use the aggregated pupil premium to put in specialist behavioural and emotional training for teachers – often disseminating learning from neuroscience, which has been rapidly improving its understanding of the minds and behavioural traits of children who have been traumatised or abused.

The training teaches the underpinning principles of the science and then shows how simple techniques can help staff in schools to support children with emotional and behavioural needs, better managing disruptive behaviour and enabling the child to return to a state ready for learning more quickly.

One of the key drivers of reform underpinning the SEND Improvement Plan is the focus on identifying and addressing lower level need at an earlier stage before problems are exacerbated. This is predicated on understanding that the impact of most SEND conditions is not 'fixed' and is likely to fluctuate throughout a child's life.

Whilst a small number of children with profound conditions may be likely to need consistent high levels of support throughout their educational journey, many others in receipt of an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) will experience an educational need that can be greatly improved or resolved with additional support – this is particularly the case with emotional and behavioural needs, especially those that might arise from unresolved traumatic experiences in the child's life outside school.

Illustrating this, one experienced leader in educational reform in an interview for this report pointed out:

> *"Pretty much all children will have a special education need at some time"*

However, the longer that such need has time to embed, the more problems can exacerbate, and the disruption to the child's education becomes more difficult to catch up from. Given our growing understanding of how trauma can impact on children's behaviour and ability to learn, it is unsurprising that there is a significant overlap between the virtual school's core cohort of children in care, and the wider population of children with SEND (see inset section overleaf).

It is therefore logical that the virtual school can often be well placed to assist more local schools with meeting one of the core objectives of the SEND Improvement Plan – to better support more children with SEND so they are able to remain in mainstream schooling.

However, it is important to recognise that despite the overlaps, SEND covers a very wide range of needs and conditions, not all of which are linked to the sort of behavioural or emotional need which virtual schools are most likely to be equipped to support.

There is definitely a part to that can be played by the virtual school in supporting the local schools in an authority – both maintained schools and academies – to improve their ability to support some children within the mainstream system. But this must not be misunderstood as saying the virtual school could, or should, have a direct role in supporting children

with SEND which require the oversight of staff specialised in this area.

It was also stressed that local authorities should be careful about amalgamating the services too closely within their structures so as not to dilute the very important role the virtual school plays for its core cohort of children in care.

> *"SEND teams are there for a reason. They are specialists in what they do. We are not. Whilst we have children who have SEND needs, it's very different legalities, very different situations."*

Closer working between the virtual school and SEND teams at a strategic level, however, was seen as positive and could help provide better understanding of the needs and educational journeys of these children, as well as supporting more schools to identify need at earlier stages.

One additional point which was made by representatives of the National Association of Virtual School Head

Teachers (NAVSH) was their desire to have their scope of responsibility extended to also cover Previously Looked After Children (PLAC). Part of the rationale comes from the virtual school's understanding the deep-rooted issues of disordered attachment or experience of trauma in early childhood.

Even children successfully placed in adoption or returned from care to their birth families early in life, may retain memories of early child trauma which it is increasingly being understood may not present in behaviour until as late as adolescence – in common with other children in care.

Transferring this minimal amount of PP+ funding from schools to virtual schools would enable them to extend their support to this small, but vulnerable, additional cohort of children, and would be firmly in line with the objectives of prevention set out in the current government's policy direction, given the propensity for this cohort to develop similar special educational needs as children in care.

Children in, or on the edge of, the care system are vastly more likely to have some form of special educational need. Figures as recently as 2020 showed that 55.9% of looked after children and 46% of children in need were classed as having SEND, compared to just 14.9% in the general population. [3]

One reason for this is that, in most instances, children's SEND needs are not apparent until they are properly identified. Most often these are likely to be first picked up by attentive parents who then champion their child's needs until they receive formal recognition via an EHCP or other lower level support.

However, for children on the edge of care this may not be the case, as other dynamics in family life may prevent the parent from recognising or understanding that their child needs extra educational support. The longer that such need has time to embed, the more problems can exacerbate, and the disruption to the child's education becomes more difficult to catch up from. Thus many children that come into the care system later in their childhood are often found to have substantial and multiple instances of SEND which then need addressing.

The virtual school can be an important help in pushing for these needs to be identified. This is particularly true for conditions relating to Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEM) needs. Such conditions are found more commonly in children in the care system – very often related to trauma they may have suffered that underlie the reasons that have led them into care, and these conditions can often not fully emerge until the child reaches adolescence, sometimes years after they may have entered the care system.

The good news though is that there has been a vast increase in the neuroscientific understanding of such conditions over the past quarter of a century – this is in turn improving our ability to develop new techniques for supporting children with such needs.

That is why many virtual schools commission specific training around attachment and trauma designed to support local schools in better understanding and supporting these children so they are able to stay in mainstream education rather than ending up in alternative provision or expensive specialist placements. More detail on this type of training can be found in Appendix A.

3 *Outcomes for looked after children by local authorities in England* (DfE/National Statistics 2019) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884758/CLA_Outcomes_Main_Text_2019.pdf

Virtual schools have become established fixtures across most CCN member councils over the past ten years. But there are limited statutory requirements governing the service, meaning that the size, scope and role of a virtual school varies substantially from authority to authority, beyond the appointment of a Virtual School Head Teacher (VSH).

All of the member authorities interviewed for this paper underlined this fact that the role of the virtual school has been relatively undefined since its inception. This flexible approach was deliberate, intended to provide councils the ability to innovate to find the best way in which it can use the service most effectively to meet local needs.

Several interviewees for this project indicated how valuable this flexibility had been for establishing virtual schools and allowing them the freedom to innovate to meet local needs and test 'what works'. This was despite the fact that the loose definition of the VSH role had also meant shaping the scope of the post had at times also been quite challenging. As one VSH remarked about their role in comparison to previous work in other parts of the council:

> *"You have to be more of an entrepreneur. It's about innovation."*

However, after nearly a decade it is clear that the way many local authorities are using their VSH has matured sufficiently to consider making the role more defined going forward.

Now feels an appropriate juncture for the government to consider looking at this issue, at a point where the success of the service means that the responsibilities of virtual schools are being extended to cover children with a social worker. As this paper has already stressed, this in itself will necessitate changes to way the service works anyway.

The operational resource that a virtual school can invest in supporting individual cases among a cohort of a few hundred children in care (depending on the size of the council) is vastly different from that which they can apply to several thousand children in need as they are currently configured. They will need to work differently for this group and clearer definitions will support them both in how they prioritise their extended workload. It will also provide clearer boundaries for how their role is recognised both by local schools and communities, as well as within the council itself.

To develop more consistency virtual schools would need better guidance on a number of issues detailed below. Such guidance should be based on widespread consultation with key stakeholders including VSH, schools, and DCSs to understand what constitutes best practice in virtual schools and how the service can best be expanded to add value to the educational journey of the new cohort it is inheriting duties towards.

a) Size and staffing

All the councils interviewed for this report had reasonably staffed virtual schools as (larger) county authorities and expressed from their experience that this had added value. Indeed those interviewed – including DCSs - were keen to stress the benefits of having a properly resourced virtual school in their local authority.

Interviewees, though, often stressed that the size of a virtual school can vary by as much as several dozen people down to some areas where the VSH post was practically a lone resource.

"[It's] wonderful if you sit in a local authority where they fund it well. But we know that lots of virtual schools are one or a handful of people, and maybe given a massive remit with no capacity."

Often this reflected how far senior leaders in a given authority saw their virtual school as having an operational dynamic or a purely strategic role (see 'Scope' below).

The work of smaller services would be more focused on administering pupil premium plus to be spent in local schools (often through collective local initiatives such as offering staff training); helping co-ordinate the strategic response of social care, health and others to ensure the educational needs of children in care are being met appropriately; as well as monitoring the educational progress of those children for benchmarking processes across the authority.

Those with more resource had more opportunity alongside these core tasks, to engage directly with local schools and undertake casework around individual children if and where necessary at a more operational level.

This was considered by many virtual school staff as a core component of their work, replicating the important role parents play in championing their children's individual education opportunities for this vulnerable cohort of looked after children where the local authority is in most cases the de facto (corporate) parent.

"We have always prided ourselves on being the pushy parent for vulnerable children."

However, one of the key findings of this research has been that virtual schools can't take on more responsibilities without having more people – at least not without jeopardising the valuable existing work that has burnished their reputation as they've become more established:

"I run a massive piece of work – two really big programmes – it's me on my own. And I can't get anyone to give me more staff. But it's having an amazing impact - I can get hundreds of people to stand up and say 'this is really transforming my school' or 'this really changes the way I think' or 'I now practice differently'. But no one's measuring that."

"...what happens is you get more and more pulled into operational work rather than strategic work."

This does, though, also raise skills and recruitment issues, given virtual schools are currently suffering the same challenges in recruiting the right staff as other parts of the public sector and the wider economy.

One interviewee, for example, spoke of their difficulty replacing an educational psychologist position that had become vacant. Several others talked about the unusually broad set of skills and experience which were ideally needed for working effectively in a virtual school, particularly in leadership and outward facing positions – generally these were not 'trainable' in the same way as other more specified roles in education or social work might be.

b) Location within local services

The efficacy of a virtual school, though, depends not only on their levels of staffing, but also on where the VSH role was situated within an authority.

The role of the virtual school naturally straddles education and social care, but this muddies expectations of which part of the council the service should sit within their wider structures – that can lead to different perspectives and priorities in the services work, as well as visibility and engagement within the local area.

Those interviewed for this paper were clear that sitting in education rather than social care was perceived to make a difference not only in relationship building with schools, but also better suited the strategic aspect of the VSH:

> *"Sitting in education makes sense. Part of the job is helping social care to understand education. For care workers education often doesn't have the same urgency (because of timescales – social care are focused on the here and now not the longer term benefits)."*

However, it was recognised that as the local authority role in local education dynamics continues to decline this may not always be as feasible going forward for some councils as they look to amalgamate their structures to reflect this.

c) School stakeholder relations

The value the virtual school plays in helping to 'glue' different aspects of the multi-agency response around a child in care can be underestimated.

Much of the research for this report has highlighted how a good virtual school can be viewed more positively by stakeholders than other parts of the council, not least by schools.

The virtual school's regular engagement with local schools appears to be an increasingly useful means of keeping schools and local authorities in productive collaboration over the past decade as academies have been becoming more established and both stakeholders are learning to operate effectively within a more mixed economy of education provision.

Whereas some MATs remain suspicious of too much council interference in their business, it appears virtual schools are better trusted than other parts of the local authority – with the assistance in supporting schools to meet the needs of their most vulnerable pupils highly valued by school leaders.

Of course, it is recognised that inevitably some of this goodwill towards the virtual school was likely to result from the leverage created by the ability for schools to access pupil premium plus funding via it.

Nevertheless it was widely recognised that the pooled use of this individually small amount of per-pupil funding brings economies of scale locally that lone schools or even MATs would struggle to utilise as effectively on their own.

For individual schools and MATs engagement through a virtual school can also help them strengthen links with local services and maintain good neighbourhood relations with other nearby schools, without undermining their autonomy as an academy or MAT.

This is, though, a crucial juncture to clarify the extent to which schools should be engaging with their virtual school, as the final school improvement powers are removed from local authorities and passed fully to MATs. Several interviewees expressed their fears that as school improvement teams were wound down they would be expected to undertake some of the duties formerly held by those teams:

"With school improvement services going are virtual schools going to end up... that we end up getting masses of duties put in about [reducing] exclusions, [alongside] all the children in need work..."

These fears were borne not only from the impact on the services' limited resources explored earlier in this paper, but also the risk that some schools may start to view the virtual school as a de facto school improvement service and reduce their engagement.

To counter this it was important that more guidance was provided to both schools and local authorities from the centre about expectations for how virtual schools should be operating now that the local authority role in relation to school improvement had ceased.

This was alongside better understanding amongst schools of the expectations of engagement with virtual schools should be (providing data etc. particularly in light of the new cohort of children the virtual school is gaining responsibility for tracking the progress of).

d) Status

The visibility and status of the VSH is vital to the success of a virtual school. As a primarily strategic service, so much of the value of the virtual school comes from the influence this post is able to wield.

This is both within the council and in the wider community of local schools as the VSH undertakes various roles as diplomat, advisor, broker, pushy parent etc.

It is only with by being invested with a level of authority that the value of the virtual school can be maximised as a crucial bridge between education, social care and health.

At present the level at which the VSH sits varies across the country – some may operate at Assistant Director (AD) level, but others may be annexed further down the service structures, even below Head of Service.

One VSH interviewed for this paper – who had not operated as high as AD in their authority as VSH, but held more senior roles earlier in their career – reflected on how much their seniority and experience had helped them to interject in meetings and challenge decision-making within a very large council in ways which they feared younger or more inexperienced colleagues may have more difficulty in doing.

Similarly without sufficient status it was questioned how much impact a VSH might be able to have with head teachers, senior health managers, or other external stakeholders they may need to influence.

e) Scope

Perhaps the most important reform that needs to be made in refreshing the role of the virtual school is for more guidance to be given on what its expected scope should be – particularly in light of the extended responsibilities the service has started to accrue.

Most acutely this involves determining to what level virtual schools were a purely strategic service and better guidelines for when it is appropriate to be more operationally involved.

Interviewees for this report were clear in their view that whereas individual casework may be appropriate to support the virtual school's core cohort of children in care, it was neither appropriate or feasible for either children in need or those with SEND.

For these groups there was definite value the virtual school could bring to bear at a strategic level, but without substantially increased resources – and indeed expertise – getting involved in individual cases was more likely to dilute the existing success of the service, and at worst potentially cause friction with schools and parents to boot.

However, it was also stressed that at present not everyone fully understood the VSH was a strategic role not an operational one. Sometimes schools, social workers, health workers and others had contacted the virtual school expecting it to assist in case work with individual children.

Although some had taken on case work occasionally – usually on an assistance, rather than leadership, basis – this was felt to detract from where the real value of the virtual school lay. Still, some VSHs felt that they were under more pressure to make this their core business:

"If it's going to be strategic. It needs to be strategic. Schools need to know it's strategic. Social Workers need to know it's strategic. Most importantly senior management need to know that it's strategic and understand that it's strategic."

Properly demarcating these boundaries around what virtual schools can and can't be expected to do is especially important as their responsibilities extend, particularly as the school improvement teams are withdrawn and the local authority role in education is changing.

The best resourced virtual schools at present would struggle to cope with extensive casework, even around their core cohort of children in care, let alone all children with a social worker

"If the decision comes to do casework we would do it, but we don't have the resources – certainly not to do all children with a social worker. Senior management need to know [The VSH Role is] strategic. "

That is not to say councils were oppositional to this change. Many felt that the extension of the remit of the VSH role to cover all children with a social worker added real value to their authority by better linking up provision for this cohort which so often overlap with the needs of children in care.

However, there were concerns that this reform was only likely to be successful with a commensurate increase in resource for virtual schools to reflect the larger number of children they would be supporting.

Of value too, would be a wider review with the aim of better defining and articulating how virtual schools should be being used. This should be based on evidence of what works and be used to help ensure more consistency across the country in how effectively virtual schools are utilised.

f) Measuring success

All of the interviewees for this project mentioned their frustration that the impact of the virtual school is not presently being captured as effectively as they would like:

> *"It's having an amazing impact. I can get hundreds of people to stand up and go* 'this is transforming my school', *or* 'this is changing the way I think' *or* 'I now practice differently'. *But no-one's measuring that."*

Part of this is due to the reliance on traditional measures of pupil performance , like exam results, which often have less efficacy for virtual schools due to the extended learning journey of the cohort they work with.

Most of us will have experienced trouble concentrating at work at some point during a stressful period in our lives such as a bereavement, getting divorced, moving house, or being a victim of a crime. It is unsurprising that vulnerable children would experience the same difficulty in concentrating in similar circumstances, even before factoring in the lack of parental support many are likely to lack in comparison to their contemporaries.

However, unlike for adults in jobs – where other employees are likely to take up additional responsibility on a temporary basis to support a sick or bereaved colleague until they are up to full speed again – schoolchildren do not have any leeway with regard to their education. Every day lost can lead to these children falling behind their peers regardless of their actual ability. This is why so many children in care often have delayed learning journeys and can take longer to pass exams etc.

This is important as it demonstrates why to fully understand the impact of the virtual school on the cohort it supports, measures of attainment need to take this extended learning period into account.

For instance measures of GCSE attainment for pupils of the Virtual School should cover not only those achieved in Year 11 but also across the further education period (16-19) when it is known many retake – and pass – subjects such as Maths and English which are so crucial to their lives. Similarly support for care leavers until 25 if they attend university means some take up this option later than the standard transfer at 18 or 19.

The extended learning journey that the children supported by the virtual school are more likely to be on needs to be accounted for.

This should be accompanied by better ways of benchmarking the child's relative educational performance from the point they enter the care system to better show how their learning journey may be accelerated from then on.

Similar measures should also be devised to evaluate how the virtual schools' impact relates to the new additional cohorts under their remit which are likely to be different to those for the core group of children in care.

Hertfordshire – the value of intervention

A young boy in Hertfordshire was at age 6 diagnosed with autism and ADHD. He was subsequently placed in a special school for social, emotional and behaviour difficulty, (then SEBD). He continued in primary special provision eventually transferring to secondary. However in Year 8 he was taken into Local Authority care which brought him under the oversight of Hertfordshire's Virtual School.

In Year 10 he was allocated an education support worker by the virtual school and that one-to-one support filled the role of teaching things he could not do on his own, in particular maths. At the time he did not really like mathematics – the subject that his whole career is built around and that he has achieved academic success at.

He is now a very eloquent young man who is able to reflect on the shortfalls in his education with perspective and objective comment. In his words the school he attended in primary and in secondary were *"not very well prepared for academic teaching or what that meant"*. However, after the intervention of the Virtual School the personalised approach and the 'one trusted adult' gave him confidence to fight to sit higher grade GCSEs and overcome the scepticism the school had about his ambition to go to university.

When asked what more teachers could do, his response is simple; 'Believe'. This young man went on from the special school against their advice – but supported by the Virtual School – into a mainstream 6th Form. The structure of the school experience has proved to be very well suited to his personality, and whilst there were difficulties settling, his enthusiasm for learning and undoubted academic capacity enabled him to flourish. He went to university and has now completed his PhD.

His view is that he had many barriers from his disability and reasons to be in care. However, he felt that the system provided him with more *"hoops to jump through"* and now wonders how many others are like him. He did not want to be in – in his words – a school "where people throw chairs at you", but to be given an opportunity to learn in a more mainstream environment. The Virtual School, in this case, were in a very good position to recognise his talent and support him to success, and help him challenge the aspects of a system that were failing to meet his individual needs, just as a diligent parent would.

It is hoped that this report has helped shed some light on the work of virtual schools. Too often national and local policy initiatives can fail to grow as intended or end up being discontinued after a limited period – it is only the most effective which last. As they approach their tenth anniversary it is clear that virtual schools are one of the most successful initiatives introduced into children's services over the past decade.

However, too often the role of virtual schools is misunderstood. This a partly a consequence of what has helped to make them successful – the freedom and flexibility local authorities have been given to develop a service works most effectively within the locality it is designed for. However, virtual schools are no longer developing, but have approached a level of maturity in their work – to the extent that their responsibilities are being extended. There is great practice across the country, but also a variable offer that lacks consistency. As such, perhaps now is the right time to take stock and reassess their role so that virtual schools continue to develop and add even more value during their second decade. The recommendations below are designed to help support this process.

Recommendations

1) Central government should conduct a Review of the operation of virtual schools across England

This Review should be focus on gaining greater understanding nationally of the role virtual schools are playing in different parts of the country, particularly as they assume the new cohort of children with a social worker into their operations. The Review should seek to inform a national plan for the expected development of virtual schools in the coming years.

2) Local authority leaders should ensure they are familiarised with the operations of their virtual school and how it supports their wider local education strategy

Although now an established service, the visibility of virtual schools remains low even within local authorities themselves. Local authority members and officers in leadership positions should ensure they fully understand how their virtual school is currently operating and identify where there may be scope to improve its impact through investment or location within the service framework.

3) Communications across local authorities and schools should make clear the role of the virtual school is primarily strategic not operational

Whilst the extension of the virtual school role to cover children in need is welcome, it must be made clear to all stakeholders engaging with the service that it is strategic and cannot take on casework with regard to this cohort.

4) Schools must be encouraged at a national level to share data with virtual schools and assured of the extent to which this is legal and possible

A crucial role of the virtual school is to monitor data with regard to the cohorts of children they are responsible for. This data can be more difficult to obtain about children with a social worker without the support of schools. It is important that government makes it clear to schools – especially Academies – that they are expected to help virtual schools gather data in order to support the education of vulnerable children in the locality. This advice must also extend to other home nations where English children are in out of area placements in cross-border schools.

5) National and local policy makers should assess the role virtual schools might play in supporting the SEND Improvement agenda

Whilst responsibility for supporting children with SEND must remain with specialist teams, the strategic role that virtual schools can play in helping mainstream schools to understand and support some special education needs – particularly emotional and behavioural needs – should be fully appreciated and considered for investment as part of the Government's SEND Improvement plan at national and local level.

6) Government should allocate pupil premium plus funding for previously looked After children to virtual schools

Given the overlap in needs of previously looked after children (PLAC) with those of children in care, responsibility and funding for this small but vulnerable cohort should be amalgamated into wider virtual school so that it can be pooled and used most effectively across an authority to support this group.

Oxfordshire Virtual School's University Partnership

Oxfordshire virtual school – run by the county council – teamed up with Oxford University to develop a partnership of engagement and outreach for children in care, providing new opportunities for cultural and academic development, made possible by virtual classroom learning.

Initiatives have included 'university sampling', where one day each term Magdalen College at the university invited nine to 12 years olds to connect with experts about their research and learning. Children were given an opportunity to work in the university, eat in the dining hall, and meet students.

The partnership reflects the vision of virtual schools enhancing the council's role of corporate parent – like all good parents the council hopes to maximise the opportunities for the young people in its care.

Students participating in the university outreach sessions found them very illuminating, with one pupil feeding back:

"Going to Magdalen College was pretty inspiring really, it was interesting to meet people who actually work there. The guy who is an expert on C.S. Lewis was brilliant. He knew everything about 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe'! I am looking forward to going back."

Read more <u>here</u>

Improving careers inspiration in Shropshire

Shropshire Council's wholly-owned housing company Cornovii Homes, and Morris Property, worked together to share careers insights and success stories to inspire and inform young people who access the council's Virtual School.

As part of this partnership, for each of its development sites, Cornovii Homes supported one school with a unique offer focussed on raising the aspirations, skills, and insights of young people.

Alongside this offer, Cornovii Homes and Morris Property staff provided personalised support sessions for Virtual School pupils wanting to find out more and enabled them to plan and manage lifelong career journeys and aspirations Throughout the initiative, they engaged more young people with the working world, helping to inspire and prepare them for exciting future careers.

Read more <u>here</u>

APPENDIX A
The importance of attachment - and trauma - informed practice

To understand much of the work of the virtual school it is necessary to understand why attachment and trauma-informed practice have become so important when working with children in the care system. Below is a brief overview of why attachment and trauma matter and why virtual schools are helping more schools to understand their impact on children.

Attachment

Attachment theory was originally developed by John Bowlby during the 1950s and 60s. In short, the theory describes the innate ability of human infants to 'attach' to an adult – usually the mother – as a form of survival strategy, and how the manner of this attachment then shapes the child's intellectual and emotional development subsequently.

Attachment theory has grown in importance in education and social care over the past two decades due to advances in neuroscience by scientists such as Bruce Perry. These have begun to demonstrate how a child's brain is physiologically shaped by the relationships they develop. This is particularly important early in life – the brain will be 90% of its adult size by the time a child reaches the age of two – but also throughout childhood, and particularly in adolescence where it naturally goes through another period of change to prepare for adulthood.

We know from attachment theory that close, attuned and loving relationships are key to the healthy development of a human being. From extreme tragedies such as the Romanian orphanages scandal in the 1990s, we know what can happen to a child's development if they experience severe neglect. What we can now demonstrate is that the basis of healthy development is relationships: the brain is a social organ and human beings are hardwired to connect with each other *(Lieberman 2014)*.

An understanding of attachment – and where it may have been disordered for the child – can be vital to interpreting and managing the behaviour of children with severe emotional or behavioural needs.For children in care it is highly probably that most will have experienced some form of disordered attachment. Therefore for teachers and other professionals working with these children, the training in attachment provided by virtual schools can be revolutionary in helping them to see how they can support the child to manage their emotions and behaviours within school – and outside – to allow them to better engage with their education.

Trauma

Trauma-informed practice has become far more prevalent within the education and social care systems over the past decade as more professionals have recognised the importance of understanding its impact on children's development and life chances. Although traumatic experience is obviously not exclusively restricted to children who have come into care, the chances of this cohort having experienced some form of trauma – and particularly over extended periods of time – is much greater than the general population.

Children who experience neglectful and abusive relationships, particularly in their early years, are very vulnerable to developing stress response systems that are over-sensitive or burned-out *(Brown et al 2010)*. If a child lives with the experience of fear or its needs are not met over a long period of time, the brain will create connections that reflect such lived experiences according to the same processes described in the Attachment section.

If a child experiences fear as a frequent part of their lived experience, it makes sense that the corresponding part of their brain development will reflect this. Unfortunately, this also means that the child may be very sensitive and hyper-vigilant to the environment because they are hard-wired at a deep level to expect and respond to fearful stimuli *(Cozolino 2014, Van der Kolk, 2014)*. Their physiology is therefore much more primed to live in the fight/flight/freeze state. Research has shown that those who have experienced trauma over long periods of time have higher levels of cortisol than the general population – they are effectively living every day in flight/fight/freeze. This means that their physiology has not learned how to manage stress; they have far less capacity for self-regulation.

Again, virtual schools have become an essential means to support schools and teachers in understanding and mitigating the impact of trauma – particularly on how it can present in the form of social or emotional special needs. Whilst attachment and trauma are never an excuse for disruptive behaviour, understanding the root cause of these issues can be vital in helping schools to put in place strategies that can mitigate these instances and put children back on the path to learning and achievement.

CCN

THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

CCN is the voice of England's counties. Representing the local authorities in county areas, the network is a cross-party organisation which develops policy, commissions research, and presents evidence-based solutions to issues on behalf of the largest grouping of councils in England.

In total, the 20 county councils and 17 unitary councils that make up the CCN represent 26 million residents, account for 39% of England's GVA, and deliver high-quality services that matter the most to local communities.

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