

WIRRAL COUNCIL

WIRRAL SCHOOLS FORUM 26th June 2019

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN

The Virtual School

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. BACKGROUND

On 1st April 2014, as part of the Children and Families Bill, it became a legal requirement for every local authority to appoint a Virtual School Head to oversee the education of children in care. Wirral has always been committed to this responsibility and has had a nominated Virtual School Head in post for a number of years; this role became full time from April 2017. The New Virtual Head was appointed to post from September 2018.

There are currently 588 children in care from Reception to year 11 on Wirral Virtual School roll 106 in other Local Authorities, so the Virtual School's first task is to monitor the completion and quality of Personal Education Plans, attendance and attainment & progress of these children wherever they go to school. The out of borough schools are quite wide-spread and collecting attendance information quite a challenge.

Current figures by Year Group - (Total and Out of Borough, OB)

Year	F2	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
Total	43	29	31	56	33	46	41	51	63	50	73	72
OB	8	7	6	10	5	6	8	7	10	6	15	18

The current structure of the Virtual School comprises of:

Virtual Head

2 x full time EPO's

2 x part time EPO's

Part time admin

The current staffing structure only allows a basic service as we are down one part time Education Progress Officers (EPO's) and relying on the remaining staff to manage the case load of nearly 200 children each. We are not strategic nor providing schools with support as we remain inward looking and largely unskilled in the kind of support schools and social workers require from us.

The role of the Virtual Head is stifled by day to day issues which require urgent attention and leave no time to identify need or provide an exemplary service to our most vulnerable children. The current staff have no school experience and are therefore reliant on

guidance and support regarding the quality of plans for children and expected outcomes. There is a need for a permanent member of staff to be able to support them.

3.

Since April 2017, The Virtual School has 'top sliced' Pupil Premium Plus which rose from £1900 per child to £2300 and The Virtual Head made the decision to retain the increase of £400 per child to enable the service provided to improve and be able to support schools better. However, schools were not advised of this and this oversight has caused significant issues across the authority which is the intention of the Virtual Head to address.

Furthermore, the 'top sliced' funding was not earmarked for any particular service and was simply sent back to schools at the end of the financial year. This is not a good situation to be in as The Virtual Head cannot track and monitor use of the funding nor comment on the impact that the Government Funding has had on the progress of Children in care.

The Virtual Head has attended many meetings with Heads to explain the reasons behind the 'top slicing' and to ensure them that they will all benefit in the long term from a Virtual School that is able and skilled in offering advice, support and expertise in dealing with the many issues that our Children in care often present.

It is the Virtual Head's intention to:

- **Strengthen the capacity of the Virtual School** by appointing a '**Deputy**' who will take on the day to day running of the school in the absence of the Head leaving her with more time to network and investigate good practice. The appointed person will also have responsibility for a proportion of the Children in Care thus reducing the numbers allocated to EPO's and therefore improving the service they are able to provide. It would benefit the service greatly if all EPO's go to full time as this would provide another 3 days working time which would have the same desired affect.
 - **Cost of Deputy head - £50 k**
 - **Cost of full time EPO's - £30 k**
- The Virtual Head intends that all Wirral Schools become '**Attachment Aware Schools**' and all staff have training in what Attachment is, how this manifests through challenging behaviour and strategies that can be used to support both children and staff through some of the more difficult times. Attachment Trauma is often the reason behind the challenging behaviour frequently displayed by children in care and is the product of neglect and trauma in early years. This training would be cascaded across the authority over a number of years beginning with `15 schools in 2019 – 2020 academic year. This would link with The Alex Timpson Programme which supports and monitors the impact of the training on the schools to provide evidence of impact on Children in care and their schools.
 - Cost of training **£9000** each year.
 - Cost of The Alex Timpson support is nil.
- The service provided by the Virtual School would benefit greatly from permanent staff to be able to deliver training across the authority in dealing with the increasing issue **of Social, Emotional and Mental Health and have researched a Programme** that would enable the EPO's to be trained as trainers and deliver this in schools on a rolling programme. The cost for this would be offset by a reduction

in exclusions and further equip schools in strategies for enabling children in care (and others) to receive the right kind of support when it is needed.

- Cost of this training for 2 members of Virtual School staff would be **£10 k** and this could be easily cascaded to every school, in and out of borough over the forthcoming years.
- Another plan is to introduce **Positive Behaviour Strategies** across the authority and have contacted colleagues in an organisation called BILD which is the centre for the advancement of Positive Behaviour Support. The purpose of this is to improve the quality of the person's life and the quality of life for those around them. PBS means that people receive the right support at the right time and will certainly skill school staff in identifying the actual cause of challenging behaviour, to understand it and offer support through it. This is an excellent model used in many residential schools managing our most complex children and there is an evidence base of research which substantiates the impact of this practice.
 - Cost for piloting this in a robust model in one school in the authority would initially be **£15,000** which would then come down as we move forward from year to year when senior coached become equipped to cascade this into other schools.
- One resource commissioned this year that is proving successful is the support of a company called **Safebase** who work with schools experiencing difficulties presented by a particular child. Their services include staff training, group supervision and assessment of need and all schools who have been involved this year have commented very favourable on how this has impacted positively on staff and children. It is the intention to draw up a monitoring system to measure the impact of this as we progress forward.
 - The cost of this will vary from year to year depending on need and, as other strategies impact, may be required less and less. This year, The Virtual School have commissioned **£10 k** of support.
- Another commissioned service proving successful is '**Teens to Toddlers**' who work with a group of young people in their teens who are at risk of not achieving their academic potential and build resilience and empathy with them through engaging them in supporting little ones in a school setting. This intervention was used for the first time this year and they will provide feedback evidencing the impact this has had on each young person included in the project.
 - Cost is **£4000** per annum
- **Designated Teacher Training**
Termly meetings with all Designated Teachers to strengthen skills and practice in all issues relating to Children in care.
 - Ongoing cost of venue and on-line resources purchased £5000
- **Boxall Profiling** - Licence to be purchased to allow all school to access Boxall and assess and monitor SEMH etc for all children in care.

➤ Approximately £3000 per annum but to be confirmed.

- Purchasing specialist time from Educational Psychologists, Attendance Officers and Behavioural Support in the future would greatly enhance the provision offered to schools across the authority and is something to be considered in the next steps.

Total cost over this year would be £133 K leaving capacity to be able to parachute support into schools when a child is in crisis as the team have been doing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Forum noted the report

Paul Boyce

Corporate Director for Children