
Sefton Council 

Sefton Virtual School

Report to O&S (CS&S)

November 2021

Introduction

Sefton Virtual School exists as a collaborative endeavour to ensure that the education of Sefton's Looked After Children (LAC) is a key priority for all professionals in line with the 'One Council' focus on improving the lives of the most vulnerable. The aim of the Virtual School is to meet Sefton's Pledge to Children in Care to ensure that each child is supported to fulfil their potential in school. The benefits of a stable and aspirational school or educational placement for children who are in the care of the local authority are widely documented as critical to improving life outcomes and social mobility. This report will complement the 2019-2020 Annual Report. The 2020-2021 Annual Report has been delayed due to data collection and ICT difficulties but is in progress and is expected to be available soon.

Overview of the Virtual School

Currently, the Virtual School is comprised of 420 pupils of school age, 237 of whom are in primary schools and 183 in secondary schools, which is a significant increase (12%) on the number of school age children in care in the previous year. Most pupils attend schools located within the borough. The remainder of children, who are placed outside of Sefton, are largely being educated within neighbouring local authorities within the North West. Since September 2021, the Virtual Head Teacher has extended responsibility for promoting improved educational outcomes for children with a social worker. This is a strategic position, and it will involve raising aspirations and improving support for our most vulnerable children. It must be emphasised that it is in addition to the statutory responsibilities for Looked After Children and will neither replace nor mimic these duties.

The following tables show an overview of the composition of the Virtual School:

Pupils by Year Group at Primary School

Year Group	2020	2021
Reception	21	36
Year 1	31	28
Year 2	26	33
Year 3	20	34
Year 4	38	32
Year 5	24	24
Year 6	37	50
Total	197	237

Pupils by Year Group at Secondary School

Year	2020	2021
Group		
Year 7	34	33
Year 8	25	36
Year 9	38	39
Year 10	42	30
Year 11	40	45
Total	179	183

Placement of Pupils

The majority of pupils are educated within the borough. The number of pupils attending provision within the borough is 71.4%, 3.1% less than the last academic year. Of those children who are educated out of borough, most children are educated in neighbouring local authorities, within a relatively short distance from Sefton. A breakdown of the school locations is provided in the following table:

Placement of Pupils by Local Authority

Out of Borough	Total number of Pupils
Blackburn with Darwin	1
Bolton	2
Cumbria	2
Lincolnshire	1
Halton	6
Hampshire	1
Kirklees	4
Knowsley	12
Lancashire	25
Liverpool	33
Shropshire	2
Somerset	2
St Helens	8
Stockport	2
Telford and Wrekin	1
Waltham Forest	1
Wandsworth	2
Wigan	1
Wirral	14
Total	120

Ofsted Grade of School attended by Looked After Children

The Ofsted grades of the schools attended by pupils continues to be monitored on a regular basis and, wherever possible, pupils are guided to good and outstanding provision. There is now a designated member of the Sefton Admissions team to support Looked After Children.

Ofsted Grade of Schools Attended by Looked After Children at Primary School

Ofsted Category	% of pupils	
	2020	2021
1	6.2	8.8
2	82.8	79.5
3	10.0	10.9
4	1.0	0.8
Total	100	100

88.3% of primary pupils attend good or outstanding schools, which is similar to the previous year.

Ofsted Grade of School Attended by Looked After Children at Secondary School

Ofsted Category	2020	2021
	1	16.8
2	63.1	44.4
3	12.8	25
4	7.3	12
total	100	100

63% of looked after children attend good or outstanding secondary schools, a decrease of 16.9% since 2020.

Attendance

Attendance figures have historically been a matter of concern, particularly in Secondary school. Several measures (increased challenge to carers, incentives, increased frequency of monitoring) have been put in place to address this. In a year where school attendance was disrupted for all, with lockdowns were in place until March 2021 and absences due to infection or isolation measures after schools had opened, the emphasis of the Virtual School was to ensure that children were safe, equipped for remote learning and attending school where possible. As a vulnerable cohort, Looked After Children could attend school during periods of lockdown, but the uptake was initially low, due to medical shielding, illness or fear of infection. In collaboration with the Attendance team, the Virtual School team visited the homes of Looked After Children who were not in school, using the 'First Day Response' system. All of these visits were logged and any concerns regarding the welfare of the children were acted upon. 18% of the pupils contacted at home by the 'First Day Response' team returned to school during spring 2021. When schools reopened, attendance was actively encouraged, unless there was a medical reason for absence. In the summer term, the Virtual School created a celebration of effort and/or attendance during lockdown called 'Lockdown Learning Heroes'. This was open to all children with a social worker, and certificates and vouchers were distributed at the end of the summer term. Due to problems with the Capita system, attendance data for the end of of term is not yet available.

From September 2021, there a termly reward for those pupils with over 95% attendance, and for those whose attendance has improved. The Virtual Head Teacher meets weekly with the Corporate parenting Service manager to discuss children who are persistently absent, or who do not attend full time, and action is taken. The Virtual School Attendance Officer now provides termly attendance updates and fortnightly updates on pupils accessing less than full time education.

Virtual School Arrangements and Duties

Our duties:

- Ensuring that all children in care attend schools judged by Ofsted as good or outstanding
- Ensuring all children in care have a high quality and effective Personal Education Plan
- Allocating and ensuring the appropriate use of Pupil Premium Plus for Looked After Children
- Supporting and challenging schools to have high aspirations and raise engagement and attainment
- Intervening to improve school attendance and reduce exclusion

- Providing professional development for designated teachers, foster carers, governors and social workers
- Providing educational advice, support and guidance to families and schools in relation to children that have left care for adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders
- Enabling children in care to have a voice so they can influence the activity of professionals who serve them

The team consists of a Virtual Head Teacher (appointed 1st November 2021), Deputy Virtual Head Teacher (vacant), PEP Administration Officer, three Looked After Children Education Coordinators (two are qualified teachers) and a Family Welfare and Attendance Officer. A new Education Coordinator post was recently advertised. This will increase capacity to enable the Virtual School to improve its offer to pupils after they have completed their statutory education (16-18 years) to support them in education and reduce NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) figures, as well as working with the Social Care Adolescent and Leaving Care Teams, Career Connect, colleges, training providers, other partners and carers in order to raise aspirations, develop education and training offers and reduce NEET numbers.

The team continues to work closely to ensure that Looked After Children can participate fully in all aspects of school life and that appropriate support is put in place to ensure this group of young people achieve across the curriculum. The focus of Education Coordinators this year is on undertaking casework to prevent exclusions and unnecessary school moves, improve attendance, and ensure access to appropriate 'catch up' interventions and mental health provision, where appropriate. Every Looked After Child has a right to a Personal Education Plan (PEP). This has three parts, comprising: basic information, pupil voice and the school's education plan. Completion rates from schools remain high (over 90%). There continues to be some variation in the quality of plans, but this is improving, as payment of Pupil Premium Plus (£1600 per year, divided into 3 instalments) to support the plan is no longer automatic upon completion of the PEP. Where a PEP does not pass quality assurance, the school is contacted, and payment withheld until the plan has been revisited and improved. LAC Education Co-ordinators work closely with schools to identify targets that are relevant and achievable, and to implement interventions that will achieve those targets. Key priorities are wellbeing and engagement, progress, attendance and challenging our schools and partners to have higher aspirations for our Looked After Children. All PEPs have a focus on reading and a requirement to intervene where a child's reading ability does not match their chronological age.

The Virtual School and Career Connect (Sefton's commissioned careers advice service) work in partnership to reduce the number of those who are not in education or training (NEET). Collaborative working between the Education Co-ordinators and Career Connect advisors is embedded. Recent interventions with Year 11 and Year 12 cohorts resulted in intervention with young people who were not in (or in danger of leaving) education, employment and training. This work is valuable, but this cohort needs closer tracking and support, hence the development of the new role within the team. From September, a plan is in place to regularly review Years 11, 10 and 9 to identify those most at risk of becoming NEET and work with colleagues to improve outcomes.

Training opportunities have again been provided to stakeholders, including designated teachers, foster carers, career entry (newly qualified) teachers and school governors. The sessions have included information regarding the experiences of the young people, promoting inclusion, promoting reading and the requirement to support the education of children in care as a priority. Training to Sefton Governors is aimed at ensuring governing bodies are aware of their statutory responsibilities in relation to Looked After Children and understand how they should offer support and challenge to their schools. An information leaflet for governors was created for distribution through Governor services. Training on supporting vulnerable children in education has been developed, in partnership with a senior colleague from Corporate parenting and a panel of Head Teachers, for all social workers in Children's Services. This will be delivered later this term. A wider programme of training is needed, and this will be addressed when a Deputy Virtual Head is appointed.

The Virtual School continues to commission substantial support from Sefton Educational Psychology Service. A termly planning meeting is held to manage referrals, and this facilitates timely assessment of identified children. Schools also commission this service, but the Virtual School arrangement means that our cohort is prioritised.

Several projects to improve mental health for vulnerable children have been funded in schools. Where there are several Looked After Children in a school, additional funds have been awarded to provide timely intervention and/ or staff training to address barriers to mental wellbeing, and thus improve resilience and engagement. This will also have a beneficial impact on other vulnerable children in the same school.

Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) Spending

This year, Sefton has continued to distribute much of the funding (£1600 per pupil) to schools. The Virtual School retains the balance to allow for flexibility to meet individual pupil need and support whole school interventions. In line with the guidance, the pupil premium is managed by the Virtual School Head and is used for the benefit of the child's education needs, as described in the PEP. The rest of the PP+ grant is retained to form a budget that is used for targeted interventions such as*:

- Support (educational/ emotional/ behavioural) for children who do not receive High Needs Funding to stay in school
- Mental health/ wellbeing interventions
- Educational Psychology support
- College equipment/ tuition for post-16 students where this is not available through other means
- 1:1 tuition for reading, maths or English
- A new book each term for every child (0-18)
- Stationery for home learning
- Laptops for home learning
- Increasing the staffing resource in the Virtual School.

* *This is not an exhaustive list.*

Understanding Pupil Progression

During 2021, Sefton has been unable to access data usually provided by the NCER Nexus Children Looked After Project. Therefore, data collection for those pupils who attend schools both in and out of borough continues to be collected manually. This presents a challenge, as not all schools supply this information and there is no statutory requirement for them to do so. PEP documentation requests that schools report whether children are meeting expected standards for their age to enable the Virtual School to track progress and monitor the effectiveness of strategies identified in the PEP. Reading skills must be improved to allow children to access all areas of the curriculum and develop confidence and independent study skills.

2021 Key Stage 4 data

This cohort has been affected by interruption to their education and those with poor engagement were particularly badly affected, as the pandemic further affected attendance. This had a high impact, as grades were dependent on teacher assessment, for which evidence of schoolwork and assessment was required. Out of a cohort of 52, 11 (21%) gained 5 or more GCSEs, including English and maths. 6 (11%) refused to attend and did not produce sufficient evidence to be afforded a grade. The remainder were entered for awards relevant to their level of ability (BTec, functional skills, etc.). 10 (19%) had become Looked After during the pandemic (since March 2020), 9 had Education and Health Care Plans and 10 had identified Special Educational Needs. Due to the mobile nature of this cohort, comparison with previous years is not realistic. Given the disruption to the education and lived experience of this cohort, a focus on recovery is imperative. Our aim is to support them in any way possible throughout Year 12 to enable them to make progress and ensure that they access education, employment or training.

After a period of disruption and isolation for all children, our focus for the coming year is to work with schools, carers and all relevant agencies to help our children to happy, healthy, heard and aspiring to a brighter future.