

Part 2:

Report on the work of the Virtual School team during the COVID-19 closure of schools, March-June 2020

The Covid-19 outbreak and the unprecedented decisions made in response have affected all children and young people in Ealing and across the UK, with schools being closed, education being offered and completed at home in a collaboration between schools and families, and opportunities for social interaction reduced to within the family in the early weeks of the outbreak.

Looked after children (LAC) and care leavers are at risk of being amongst the worst affected by the emotional and educational impact of the outbreak and the Ealing virtual school team has been committed to offering additional support to the children and young people over the months since schools closed in March.

CV-19 and the Virtual School team

Ealing Virtual School (VS) teachers adapted quickly to working from home, benefitting from the Council arrangements for all workers based out of the office.

Initially some found working from home a bit isolating and it was hard to be working mostly at the computer screen for a long period of time. Ensuring regular communication and dialogue with colleagues helped to avoid feeling – and indeed being - isolated.

Continuing regular routines helped keep a sense of normality and ensured effective work, as has regular individual contact with the VS team including with the VS data officer.

Weekly team meetings via microsoft teams and check-ins taking place informally have helped with connecting with others, enabling ongoing support and dialogue and shared team initiatives to plan for the children and young people.

The team has identified priorities and staff are continuing to support one another despite the challenge of having less office-based contact; routine work has been supplemented by new or more intensive online activity; skills have been rapidly developed in leading and participating in virtual meetings through skype, zoom and microsoft teams. This has all worked remarkably well but there is still a real and meaningful difference between contact face-to-face and via an internet link and teachers have had to use all their skills in relationship development to overcome the artificiality of only virtual contact with the children and young people.

Much of the routine work of the VS team has been done via email and electronic record-keeping in the past, so this has not been a major change.

Supporting the work of the VS team

As part of the response to changes required as the VS team has adapted to the new ways of working, the behaviour inclusion service (BIS) has offered specific support:

- 1:1 supervision and reflection sessions
- Specific case discussion
- Coffee and chat group meetings offered in partnership with the VS Educational Psychologist
- Sharing articles of interest and relevance to wellbeing/best practice/resources to pass to schools where appropriate
- Delivering training and sharing training materials including holding a development session and discussion regarding needs and underlying behaviours

- Circulation of materials regarding returning to school preparations – a training session is to follow shortly.

Virtual School team activity

An early exercise was to review caseloads to ensure that students were effectively covered and that the workload was fair and manageable. This was particularly important when one team member had to take time off following a bereavement; cases were immediately passed to the rest of the team to ensure continuity of care and support.

Priorities were discussed and agreed at this time and the team shared concerns and possible solutions.

Supporting children, young people and carers

In the early weeks of the lockdown, contact with both foster carers and schools was made weekly, but later a pattern emerged of those carers who were coping well and with confidence and making their own contact with their child's school not needing such regular support, although it has continued to be available at any time. More attention and contact has been offered to those children and carers more in need of educational support. All LAC in education have been contacted regularly over the weeks.

VS teachers have developed an increased awareness of the power of different styles of communication and the use of different language in their online contact with children and young people e.g. the modelling of positive language around school attendance, referring to it as a *'definite goal to be achieved'* as opposed to using negative language such as *'being kicked out of school'*. The way that children and young people think about themselves has a clear impact on their attainment and progression and terms used, help to frame their self-perception.

A key part of the VS teacher's work is to discuss individual issues with schools, social workers (SWs) and carers and to set up or attend meetings to reach solutions.

VS teachers have made daily check-in calls where children and young people are struggling to complete work and have sent accessible learning resources home to engage hard-to-reach children.

All VS teachers have acted as a conduit between schools and young people where communication is proving difficult and have been sharing ideas, educating and informing foster carers about schoolwork and the learning process so that the carers in turn can offer more targeted support to young people.

Post-16 students have been working remotely through Google classroom and other virtual platforms and can access their online tutors and this is the same for university students. All students have been texted to check if they have access to the lessons and indeed to computers and the internet so that they can work at home online.

Supporting attendance and progress

Consistent engagement with learning, at home or in school, has been addressed by regular contact with both foster carers and schools, supporting and encouraging communication and offering practical support where needed.

Ongoing home learning support has been a standard offer from VS teachers and has been discussed and planned with schools, carers and pupils. Where there have been problems of receiving work or sending it back, pupils or their carers have been encouraged to contact

their allocated VS teacher who has then supported them and their schools with more effective arrangements.

Universities have been contacted where necessary on behalf of students regarding deadlines or extensions.

Most schools and colleges have themselves been excellent at making contact with children and young people and there has always been the offer for LAC to attend school on site. At first, most did not go into their schools, but recently with encouragement, more are doing so.

Perhaps surprisingly, many children and young people have engaged well with home learning and are even enjoying it.

Supporting emotional health and wellbeing of LAC

Support for the emotional health and wellbeing of LAC is part of every VS interaction and conversation with pupils.

In addition, motivational individual talks have been held with older young people living on their own as well as general discussions on how they are doing during these unprecedented times.

Support with student finance enquiries and process for September 2020 has been made available, needs assessments conducted at colleges and communication about support on offer given to social work teams.

The post-16 VS teacher has ensured that welfare and pastoral support is made available by education providers to older young people as well as ensuring access to Google classroom. Most care leavers working from home have an established point of support at their college.

Discussions have been held with 2020 graduates to establish and support future plans.

There have been some unexpected benefits from staff and pupils working from home – one VS teacher by the end of a meeting with a very anxious young person had not only got her to talk but had introduced her to her hens as well – much to everyone's amusement! This is a funny anecdote but it illustrates the way in which VS teachers have capitalised on the more flexible styles of communication offered by less formal settings for meetings, and how it helps young people to trust and engage with the VS teacher and with their own learning needs.

Key Stage transition (Nursery↔Reception, Years 6↔7, 9↔10 and 11↔post-16)

Transition to the next key stage can stretch the resilience and adaptability of children and young people and does so more for those who are LAC.

VS teachers have responsibility for smoothing this transition and in particular for ensuring that nursery children, year 6 pupils and year 11 school leavers have an appropriate school or college to go to in September, all complicated now by the current change in usual practices and the closure of educational establishments to visitors. Teachers are keeping a clear focus on progression routes for all LAC pupils, but for those in those year groups in particular.

PEP meetings now include the completion of a discrete *Transition form*, developed by the VS team, that offers the opportunity to outline areas in need of support.

There have been focused check-ins with Year 11 young people to help them to reflect on options and ensure appropriate onward applications for work or college are made in a timely fashion.

Contingency planning is being discussed by the VS teachers responsible for KS4 with the Post-16 VS teacher in transition meetings held via Teams and social workers and carers have accessed VS advice for students on level 1 and 2 courses.

Contact is being made with post-16 providers to check what is on offer at education provisions online for LAC and Care ; the VS is supporting provisions to check how well prepared and engaged learners are in their placement and discussions held with colleges and SWs about young people that especially cause concern and with whom the VS would like the college to maintain regular contact.

Contact has been made with care leavers including university students to check how they are managing and discuss plans for the year ahead; references for students have been completed and support given to a young person transferring university

Year 12s, 13s, potential university students and current university students have all been supported with transition to university or the next stage of their course and Summer 2020 graduates have been helped to update their CVs.

Enrichment

Offering high quality enrichment activities so that young people can gain experience of a wider world is always an important part of the work of the virtual school.

Sue Tarry continues to take the lead in this area with her usual commitment and enthusiasm; commenting that for the first time in many years this May half term was spent at home.

Some activities already planned, e.g. to *Jamie's Farm* for a week's residential living, have had to be postponed.

There has however been additional time for reflection available and enrichment activities have continued in other ways:

- Over the past year the Ealing VS has taken part in an exciting initiative with the Harrow School which has offered a weekly session at the school of targeted tuition and then an hour's activity, which could be anything from debating, sports or the arts. This has gone from strength to strength with an initial group of 4 children attending to a group of 12 who attended in early March.

Now this work is no longer possible, the VS pupils have been offered online tuition from the Harrow teachers during the Covid-19 lockdown period. This has enabled children who were not living close to Harrow, and so were previously unable to attend the sessions, to be included. Year 10s have been specifically targeted for this opportunity; subjects offered are mainly maths, science and English with languages and humanities included but the offer can be more bespoke. One girl received help with music, her particular interest.

The VS this term has 14 children engaged with the tuition from Harrow School, seven of whom are living out of Ealing. We hope to maintain this wider access in the future.

All lessons are on-line and thanks to the fantastic generosity of the Harrow teachers some of our young people have continued with their tuition throughout the past half term. The feedback from pupils has been excellent.

One example is of a Year 10 boy who said at his PEP that he loved history; Ms Tarry requested this for him from Harrow and they were able to set this subject up as a weekly lesson. This boy has missed a lot of education and experienced several moves of homes and schools. With the combination of his base school agreeing for him to go back a year and the opportunity to have some expert help with his most loved subject, this could be a life changing experience for him.

- With the collaboration with John Lyon's Charity and neighbouring virtual schools the VS team is conducting a competition focused on what our young people have produced and are happy and most proud of during these times. This can be in the form of art- work, writing or photographs. Prizes are to be offered and these will be experiential ones which offer trips and activities. It will be interesting to see the work submitted.
- For younger children planning of Junior Council activities and the ensuing feedback and presentations is under way, awaiting the resumption of social contact. This may also be included in the work of the *Academy 21* project being planned – see below.
- Post-16 referrals have been made for the Harrow School initiative and the Lumina summer university online programme for students considering Oxbridge.

Outcomes of enrichment activities are found in raised academic levels and confidence to enhance learning and in taking on new opportunities and raising aspirations. When presented with the offer of e.g. tuition or another enrichment experience some Ealing children first say 'No,' or, 'I am doing fine and ok with my work'. The response is always that it is because they are doing so well and are such a good student that they are being offered the opportunity, which raises their self-esteem and can help to change their view of themselves and their learning.

SEN

VS teachers have worked on a range of special educational needs (SEN) issues including routine oversight, support and advisory work on addressing the needs of children and young people with SEN.

They have worked with colleagues to support them with SEN processes, to follow up Educational Psychologist (EP) assessments and to check on the stages of Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) applications, taking forward any EHCPs which have not yet been finalised. This has involved, as usual, working closely with Ealing SEN Service and linking up agencies in Ealing and out-borough.

Dr Gabrielle Pelter, EP in the virtual school team, has also worked within her role to support pupils with SEN.

A new focus for her has been weekly or fortnightly meetings with the allocated VS SEN EHCP Co-ordinator. This has been a very successful collaboration between the virtual school and SENAS. In the last few months she has achieved the following:

- Facilitated change to existing systems and procedures to ensure that LAC do not 'fall through the net' in SEN systems; to ensure they are easily identifiable, so they do not get missed

- Progressed and followed up on individual cases, often brought to the attention of the VS EP through SEN Plan meetings with VS teachers. This may involve:
 - Following up with other Local Authorities (LAs) to find out updates on progress for identifying education placements, particularly when LAC and care leavers move between Local Authorities
 - Following up with allocated EHCP Co-ordinators to ensure actions are completed and progress is made for supporting young people and identifying placements.
 - Ensuring relevant SEN paperwork (e.g. EHCPs) has been sent and received as soon as possible, to ensure smooth transitions when a CYP moves boroughs
 - Discussing LAC who will be placed in Ealing as soon as possible, to allow the allocated EHC Co-ordinator to begin to identify possible education placements quickly and thus avoid LAC being without an education placement when they move into the borough
 - Discussing the needs of CYP where there has been miscommunication/ misinformation about needs amongst professionals, particularly when a CYP has moved boroughs. Effective SENAS and virtual school EP joint working has enabled miscommunications to be rectified in a timely way
 - Collaboratively planning next steps for more complex cases and facilitating effective communication between professionals involved (e.g. Social Worker, VS EP, Ealing EHC Co-ordinators and VS teacher) by coordinating meetings/phone calls etc. as necessary.

Working with Social Care colleagues

Local high schools have talked positively of the quality of their contact with social workers, finding it both more frequent and productive. This is the experience of the VS staff also.

As usual, VS teachers have worked with social care colleagues to plan for key stage transitions and SEN processes.

They have also ensured funding is in place for pupils moving school and supported SWs to identify schools for children who have moved, advising so they follow each borough's admission and SEN processes to place them.

VS attendance at PEPs is always valuable and the opportunity for VS teachers to attend more meetings through the use of technology is and will continue to be very positive.

VS teachers have also been able, while working from home, to set up and attend more meetings with pupils, families and professional colleagues, including attending more PEPs (between 50%-98% of R-Yr11 teachers' caseloads over Spring and Summer terms) and some LAC reviews too, as time has been saved on travel. This has enabled more direct working with children living out of borough, a change which will be further embedded post CV-19.

The increased VS attendance at meetings has also been helpful in the development of positive working relationships between social care and the VS, with some SWs expressing their gratitude for the learning opportunity available through the attendance and shared experience of the VS teacher being in the meeting and the confidence they have gained from that.

VS teachers have over the last twelve weeks written up a number of PEPs to support social care colleagues who have been engaged in front line work. This has also been a useful development and modelling exercise for newer SW colleagues. VS teachers have monitored PEP completion with regard to their own case-loads and supported SWs to complete any previously overlooked.

The VS post-16 teacher has offered targeted information and advice on how to complete PEPs and the related processes, through training and individual discussions with workers. She has also delivered training to new Leaving Care Team workers via MS teams on education and PEPs, during lockdown in May 2020; a second training specifically on PEPs is scheduled for 11th June 2020 for staff who missed the first and those who would like a refresher.

Reports have been provided for panel to support young people returning to education post-16 and discussions held with social care regarding their cases for the care leavers' panel.

The post-16 teacher has also made contact with colleges on behalf of social workers, chasing up Spring PEP reviews and supporting setting up summer PEP meetings.

Work has been undertaken with the VS data officer and the VS team to update a process sheet for PEPs and the VS information leaflet for colleagues has been updated.

Teachers have found the PEP meetings to be more relaxed when conducted with children and young people in their homes. Children have mostly been willing to engage in zoom or team meetings, most preferring to leave the camera off. Teachers have used their cameras, to introduce themselves and establish a more personal contact with the children. Teachers have reported positively on this virtual approach, commenting that in many cases it has worked better than holding a more formal meeting in school with everyone seated around the table and where there can be the element of the pupil feeling scrutinised.

An example is of a Year 7 child coming on camera to show his VS teacher the Viking helmet he had been working on, enabling the VS teacher to discuss the area in which he was living through her familiarity with the Viking Trail. These small points of contact are invaluable in helping young people far from home feel understood and less isolated and so better able to think about themselves with the significant adults involved.

There is an established policy for such meetings, ensuring that effective data protection and safeguarding measures are always in place.

Recording of Data – VS Tracker and Mosaic

All VS teachers' work over the time since lockdown has been rigorously recorded on the VS Activity Tracker which records basic data, with the detail also recorded by notes on the social care database *Mosaic* to ensure information is accurately and effectively shared with IROs and SWs, preventing duplication and communication overload.

Support to Designated Teachers and contact with senior leaders in schools.

A strategic contribution has been made by the virtual school's head to support the work of schools, LAC DTs and senior inclusion leaders with the challenges during this period. In particular, the VSH has presented a paper for schools and officers grappling with encouraging attendance of vulnerable groups and offering some strategies and approaches to encourage attendance at school. The VSH has worked with the primary school head teacher lead on the COVID-19 Safeguarding and Wellbeing group and has chaired network meetings of school senior leaders to share good practice and support schools. The VSH has contributed to strategic developments and regularly participates to the Ealing Learning Partnership (ELP) and Children's Services management team meetings, straddling the school and home-learning and safeguarding aspects. The VSH has maintained good contact with London VSH colleagues on operational and strategic issues faced during the COVID-19 lockdown period and kept abreast of NAVSH information on LAC and post LAC matters. The VS have also been able to maintain and develop the John Lyon's Charity work in partnership with the 4 London virtual school members authorities.

Work has been ongoing by the VS team with designated teachers and foster carers to help young people that are finding home-working difficult or falling behind, including developing flexible timetables; making phone and video calls; staggering the supply of activities so the pupil is not overwhelmed and extending deadlines. In addition, the VSH has advised parents of adopted children and individual schools with pupil matters.

E-safety policy and training for foster carers from fostering support team

At the beginning of the lockdown, the VSH worked with the social care training team to ensure that foster carers were provided with E-safety information to raise the profile of this with children and young people having increased internet access.

Challenges in the current situation

Some foster carers and schools have not been able to use video call technology, leading to telephone conference calls which result in poorer quality of discourse in larger PEP meetings. This has been addressed by additional follow-up through emails and phone conversations to ensure everyone's views are considered and all actions agreed but is definitely more time-consuming.

Access to good quality laptops with adequate internet access has been a challenge for some pupils and carers, particularly where schools use email to communicate and send work out and internet-based resources to complete set tasks. They have been supported by the provision of paper resources until the provision of their allocated laptops under the government digital initiative, 'free laptop' scheme.

Some young people have expressed great anxiety about the pandemic. This has been flagged with social workers, carers and schools and tailored interventions devised to support understanding of and to address the risks and concerns.

The number of enquiries from all avenues – young people, SWs and DTs has been immense for Post 16 and the number of enquiries for Post 16 advice has been much higher than it normally would be.

Requests for PEPs and PEP advice also increased due to new LCT workers and although the capacity to attend PEPs is greater due to not travelling, it can increase the workload in other ways.

It has been a challenge to make contact with all young people in Years 12 and 13 due to the numbers so there has been a targeted approach; SWs can contact if any issues do come up.

Supporting the government laptop initiative

The virtual school head has had a key role in the scheme to identify vulnerable young people with social workers and the Post-16 teacher has worked with the LCT to identify and allocate to care leavers through their colleges and individually. The VS team have worked with social workers to identify all LAC pupils and students who are entitled to the use of a laptop and where necessary a dongle, under the recent government scheme – see:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

VS teachers have collaborated with social care in updating and adding all referrals on to the central list in MS Teams so that laptops have been allocated to all the entitled children and young people – a massive logistical exercise across Children's Services.

In addition, laptops have been sought independently for urgent requests and the post-16 VS teacher has supported this and also worked to support carers in how to order a laptop online.

A21 initiative

Plans are in place to access the Academy 21 learning platform to provide a secure forum for holding virtual groups for VS children and young people. These will be useful to increase contact and offer more enrichment opportunities now but will also be effective in the future for extending contact and interventions with children accommodated out-borough.

One example of the use of this will be to host Junior Council (JC) meetings and ongoing to develop the JC to include children who live further afield.

Bridie McDonagh 12.06.20

Examples of resources and information provided by Dr Gabrielle Pelter VS EP



Back to school - using psychological



Joint DHSC & DFE Ministerial Letter.pdf



Temp Changes to EHC NAs and EHCPs

