

Exploring the roles and responsibilities of Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experienced Teams in Scotland

Discussion summary from a facilitated workshop Practice Paper

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Context

This paper has been produced as part of a series of discussions undertaken by the Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) and Care Experienced Team (CET) network, alongside Scottish Government and Education Scotland representatives, hosted and convened by CELCIS.

The information contained in this document is drawn from a focused workshop on roles and responsibilities and facilitated session attended by Virtual School Head Teachers, Care Experienced Team members and representatives from Scottish Government and Education Scotland and CELCIS on 21 January 2020.

The methodology for considering roles and responsibilities originates from the Harvard Business Review paper produced by Tammy Erickson¹.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is:

- To support and inform the development of the roles of VSHTs and CETs
- To garner understanding of the wide range of roles and responsibilities currently being undertaken by VSHTs and CET members
- To identify consistencies in the role and remit of a VSHT and CET that will develop a sound understanding of the core components of the job i.e. what it is, and what it is not
- To identify the areas of strength and areas for improvement in the current approaches to the role of VSHT
- To understand which roles and responsibilities have the potential to make the most positive differences to care experienced children and young people with care experience at both a practice and systems level
- To offer suggestion as to the specific roles that would be most effectively undertaken by a VSHT or CET in order to affect positive influence and change for children and young people with care experience

Roles and Remit

Representatives identified a total of 214 responsibilities that they held within their role as VSHT or CET. These responsibilities were both formal, i.e. those included within their job description and informal, and those which they undertook based on the needs of children and young people or the wider service. These identified responsibilities were noted then collated by the group into broader 'headings' or 'themes'

Fifteen broad headings were named by the group, encompassing;

- Data
- Providing direct support to care experienced children and young people
- Strategy
- Reporting
- Budgeting
- Working with partners
- Influencing policy
- Providing support to schools and other education establishments
- Planning meetings
- Communication
- Training
- Line management
- Management
- Quality Assurance
- Developing the remit

The highest number of identified responsibilities was collated under the heading '**data**' with 31 responsibilities noted.

- 29 of the 31 involved the collation, management or interpretation of data
- 23 of the 31 could be described as quality assurance of the data collated, managed and interpreted
- One was related to communication and information management
- One was in relation to awareness of resources

The second largest group of identified responsibilities related to '**strategy**' with 27 noted tasks.

- 14 of these 27 could be described as multiagency and collaborative working
- 13 of these 27 could be described as strategic development tasks
- Two of the 27 were in connection with the area of corporate parenting

A final point within this category that could not be grouped was 'troubleshooting'. Members felt this was an important strategic task as 'troubleshooting' allows for the

identification of practical and systemic areas which require support and planning for improvement.

The third largest group was '**training**' with 25 noted responsibilities.

- 13 of the 27 were clearly evident as delivering training
- Seven of these could be described as multiagency working
- Seven statements were regarding the provision of support to colleagues, this included providing reflective feedback and informal support and supervision
- Three statements described working alongside head teachers or senior managers to appropriately challenge culture, ways of working and procedure
- One statement described the requirement to produce documents and papers to support colleagues at both a practice and systems level
- Four statements regarded creating spaces for discussion, guidance and reflection which was separate from formal training

The fourth largest grouping was '**providing direct support to care experienced children and young people**' with 20 noted responsibilities.

- Seven statements directly described support, including support for both the young person and their family and/ or the wider team/ school/ authority
- Six statements related to awareness of and allocation of the available types (packages) of education
- Three statements related to advocacy for young people.
- Two statements related to listening to the views of young people
- Two statements related to tasks that resulted in an overall improvement in attendance/ attainment
- One statement was in relation to the development of a virtual learning space
- One statement related to providing an informational link for families
- One statement was in relation to the transition of young people across and between local authorities

The fifth largest group was '**working with partners**' with 19 noted responsibilities.

- All of the statements clearly linked to multiagency working and supporting partners
- 18 of the statements were related to multiagency and collaborative working within and between services
- Two statements related to training; either in the delivery of or identification of need
- One statement was in relation to the transition of young people across and between local authorities

The sixth largest group was '**planning meetings**' with 16 noted responsibilities.

- Six statements could be linked to multiagency and collaborative working
- Six statements described providing direct support; either to children and young people or colleagues
- Two statements were aligned with listening to and advocating for young people
- One statement related to achieving best outcomes for families/ parents/ carers by providing specialist knowledge and input

The seventh group was '**influencing policy**' with 15 noted responsibilities.

- Nine statements related to influencing policy at a local level
- Three statements linked to advocacy for young people; ensuring that children and young people's voices were included in new and existing policy
- Two statements linked to multiagency working
- One statement linked to finance management; ensuring that spending is based on need rather than resource

The eighth group was '**communication**' with 13 noted responsibilities.

- Four statements related to multiagency working
- Three statements related to using and developing a range of communication methods
- One statement related to supporting and appropriately challenging and supporting head teachers
- One statement related to management tasks; sharing responsibilities

The ninth group was '**budgeting**' with 12 noted responsibilities.

- Eight statements directly related to budget management
- Two statements related to developing procedures around finance; particularly around the process for specific individual supports for children and young people
- One statement related to influencing policy regarding funding
- One statement related to procurement of services

The tenth group was '**management**' which had 11 noted responsibilities.

- Three statements linked to operational line management tasks
- Two statements linked to multiagency working; managing colleagues in other services
- Three statements linked to project management tasks; coordination and oversight of support planning
- Two statements related to the provision of a quality service and quality assurance tasks undertaken by colleagues

The eleventh group was '**reporting**' which had eight noted responsibilities.

- All of the eight statements linked directly with reporting to a variety of bodies; these included local and national groups and boards and the associated tasks described reporting in both written and verbal formats

The twelfth group was '**remit**' which had seven noted responsibilities.

- These seven statements linked to an overall remit of providing support, advice, guidance and expertise on a range of areas specific to the needs of care experienced children and young people's education. These statements could be broadly viewed as 'consultancy' for colleagues within and between services and partner organisations.

The thirteenth group was '**line management**' with five noted responsibilities.

- All five statements directly linked to line managing staff; the majority were linked to the development of teams and supporting staff to implement agreed plans for children and young people and operational and strategic plans.

The fourteenth group was '**school interventions**' with five noted responsibilities.

- Two statements regarded working with schools and head teachers to build their capacity to provide appropriate support
- One statement linked with communication
- One statement linked with ensuring specialist support to care experienced children and young people was provided in a mainstream school setting
- One statement related to working directly with the families of care experienced children and young people to maintain school placements

The fifteenth and final group was '**quality assurance**' with one noted responsibility.

- This statement could be considered quality assurance in relation to providing a high level of service
- There was broad agreement by all members that quality assurance was a theme that ran through every responsibility noted

Analysis

The highest number of identified responsibilities were collated under the heading '**data**'.

The lowest number of identified responsibilities were collated under the heading '**quality assurance**', however the thread of quality assurance was clearly evident within the majority of other tasks notes within the exercise.

Given the interactive nature of the exercise used to collect this information, the inclusion of information under particular headings is open to individual interpretation and as a result there were a number of responsibilities that could be evident across a range of heading areas. This exercise also highlighted the intersectional nature of the responsibilities held by VSHTs and CET members.

While there was a specific heading around '**working with partners**' there was a total of 54 responsibilities noted across the headings that could be identified as multi-agency working. This was the highest noted responsibility and strongly highlights its significance within the remit of a VSHT. The importance of this area of work of a VSHT was highlighted in the Children in Need review undertaken in 2009 which found that the role is one of 'only a handful of statutory roles within Local Authorities and positioned strategically between Director of Education and Director of Social Care, they are in a strong position to make the necessary connections on both an operational and strategic level that support this vulnerable group to overcome barriers to success'.ⁱⁱ

The least represented heading was '**Quality Assurance**' where there was one responsibility noted and this was specifically in regards to all looked after children having robust and effective plans (to ensure that all children who are looked after have a robust and effective plan that supports access to appropriate and timely support and is in keeping with Children and Young People's Act).

A number of job responsibilities that could have been identified as Quality Assurance were evidenced under other headings (26 of 214); most specifically in the 'Data' heading (23 of 31). It may be that VSHTs do not view their role in collecting, collating and analysing data as being 'quality assurance', or it is such an intrinsic part of the role to quality assure that it has been reframed as data. It is also acknowledged that the collection, analysis and feedback of appropriate data is so integral to effective quality assurance that there had been a fluid transition across the two headings.

The weighting of responsibilities towards data as opposed to quality assurance may be an acknowledgement of the overarching role of the VSHT; that they are not a QA manager. Questions may also be raised around the ability of the VSHT to act in the role of QA and how open their education colleagues/ partner agencies are

supporting and enabling that aspect of their role. By reframing the monitoring of quality provision as a need to collect and collate data it may feel less burdensome to individual schools and settings and therefore be more freely provided.

There was a broad consensus amongst members however that a core part of the role involved ensuring high quality planning for children, at both an individual and cohort level. There was agreement that this part of the role is so fundamental and intersectional to the other areas or themes that it has become an implicit rather than explicit part of the role.

It was also acknowledged that there is a high level of awareness of the importance of data, particularly within the participant group with data being a current agenda item and was a focus of the previous network meeting that this language / terminology may have been at the forefront of thinking.

13 of the 25 responsibilities recorded under '**training**' were clearly evident as delivering training. A further two responsibilities that could be classed as training were recorded under 'working with partners'.

Some points appeared not to be linked directly with delivering training i.e. coordinating Designated Manager networks, reviewing training courses, developing awareness and understanding within partner agencies and 'oversight of improvement methodologies to ensure understanding of what changes have resulted in improvement'. Some of these responsibilities may have also comfortably sat under alternative headings.

The responsibility of the VSHTs and CET members in participating in training was both formal and informal and included internal and external multi agency partners.

It is interesting to note that the responsibility to 'challenge' schools and teachers (three statements) came under the heading of training. This may indicate that the use of training would be a primary means of challenging and reflecting on practice and could provide a means to identify areas for improvement and development in a supportive and participative way. This may be a reflection of the different levels of understanding of the wider education sector in relation to care experienced children and young people and those in the role of VSHT and CET members. It may be that those in this role find themselves having to 'challenge' views, approaches or practice and that it is felt that the lens of training is the most appropriate or effective platform to do this from.

The responsibility to 'support and challenge head teachers' was also recorded under '**communication**'. This may be a reflection of the role the VSHT and CET members find themselves in; a limited or misunderstood awareness of the job role and the needs of care experienced children and young people, for example the responsibility of 'challenges schools on what support is present'. This leads to wider questions around the levels and areas of resistance that VSHTs and CETs can encounter,

regarding for example; allocation of budgets and resources and accessibility to services.

'Supporting care experienced young people' had 20 noted responsibilities. While care experienced children and young people was the heading, the statements encompassed providing support to both the young person, their family, and the wider team, school and authority. The provision of support across these groups was also identified across other headings in a total of 19 further statements.

Statements range from what would appear to be one to one support: 'support CEYP struggling in school' (supporting care experienced children and young people) and 'to ensure that I maintain positive relationships with those in my care and enable the child/ young person to be fully involved in their own future planning or represent their views accurately' (Remit) to 'know our children and young people (but not all-too many)'; which would suggest a more advisory/ oversight/ strategic role.

Further suggestion of a more strategic than operational role comes in the form of statements suggesting that the VSHT would only become involved where a situation has escalated i.e. 'contentious cases'.

Two statements related to interactions with the families of care experienced children and young people, under the headings of **'planning meetings'** and **'school interventions'**. There was no indication under **'management'** or **'line management'** that this was something that others involved in the VSHT team took responsibility for. Given the recommendations of the Independent Care Reviewⁱⁱⁱ and that family is one of the foundations; (Family: If children are living with their family and are safe and feel loved, they should stay there. Their family should be given all the help they need to stay together. If they need extra help when things get difficult, they should get it.) It may be a responsibility that VSHTs and CETs could helpfully model ways of working for colleagues and other staff.

There is a high level of crossover between the headings **'management'** and **'line management'** with eight line management tasks identified over both of these groups. This included managing staff across a variety of roles to varying degrees – teachers / officers / clerical staff / mentors / welfare officers / education support officers / wellbeing workers / virtual school team. One statement identified the responsibility for providing supervision to staff that they line manage. While it is acknowledged that typically education staff do not receive formal one to one supervision; given the variety of roles that are involved in the VSHT team, and the high level of crossover into social care roles, where one to one supervision is a mandatory requirement of registration with the SSSC, it may be beneficial to consider the merits of this process to the staff team. A recent report by Barnardo's^{iv} has advocated for the use of formal supervision for the education workforce due to

the vicarious trauma that can exist for staff working to support children and young people with complex and traumatic circumstances.

Under the '**management**' heading, three statements linked to line management as discussed above. The remaining responsibilities included project coordination, pilot studies and managing projects. Similar tasks could also be noted in '**supporting care experienced children and young people**' notably 'organising tutoring / developing virtual learning space'. In order to reflect the skills and challenges involved in such tasks, it may be more effective to collate such responsibilities under the broad heading of '**project development/ project management**'.

Whilst leadership was not present as a theme, it is evident from the descriptive information within the roles and responsibilities that this is a key part of the role of VSHT and CET. There were a significant amount of leadership behaviours noted in each of the tasks, under a variety of themes. These included role modelling, empowering, challenging and encouraging innovation and creativity. Similar to the quality assurance theme within this task, it may be that leadership, at a variety of levels, is such an implicit and intrinsic part of the role that it is not overtly named.

Conclusion

The responses show that VSHTs and CETs are involved in a wide variety of work with the aim of improving educational experiences for care experienced children and young people. This work though, looks quite different depending on which local authority people work within and where their role is placed within a local authority.

Through discussion as part of this task, it is evident that many VSHTs and CETs have been involved in tasks and fulfilled roles in response to need within their local authority. However it is less evident whether this is due to the VSHT or CET being the most appropriate person to meet this need, or due to other systemic and practice barriers which can, at times, prevent appropriate support being arranged.

There is also the consideration of where these roles are placed strategically within local authorities. The variation described above may be attributed to the fact that VSHTs and CETs are placed in different parts of the system, and with access to different resources across local areas. Some VSHTs or CETs are well integrated at a senior level within their local authority and work across health, social work and education, whilst others sit quite separately to these central teams and have access to fewer strategic resources.

VSHTs and CETs are undoubtedly involved in work to affect positive change for children and families, however this work varies significantly in each local area. The emergence of this role in Scotland has been relatively rapid which may have caused some services to develop organically rather than strategically. There is evidence of a need to clearly articulate what a VSHT or CET is (and therefore what they are

not), what their core strategic aims and responsibilities are and what specific tasks their role should undertake. Without this clear articulation, broad understanding and national consistency there is a risk that evidence of impact of this unique and important role will be difficult to gather and understand. Importantly there is also the risk of inequity to children and young people in need of care and protection due to variation between the ways in which these roles work in each local authority area.

Next steps

In order to deepen understanding of the role in each local area taking this approach forward it would be helpful to deepen and broaden knowledge of the role of each area of the network.

Based on the information gathered from this piece of work it would be helpful to collect further information on:

- Strategic responsibilities
- The model being used and others who may be responsible for delivery (e.g. structure of each local authority team and responsibilities of any wider team members)
- Which young people are expected to benefit from the existence of this role (e.g. specific groups of looked after children)

CELCIS will work with the network to develop a method of gathering this information and furthering knowledge in this area. This will allow a clearer articulation and understanding of the specific practice and systems work being undertaken in each local area involved, and crucially, support understanding of how the role can be developed and implemented most effectively.

ⁱ <https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-biggest-mistake-you-probab>

ⁱⁱ [Help, protection, education](#): concluding the Children in Need review (June 2019)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf>

^{iv}

https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Supervision%20in%20Education%20-%20Healthier%20Schools%20For%20All%20-%20Executive%20Summary_0.pdf

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