Joining the dots: Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' Network

2020-2021 Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

While the Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) role is statutory in England, an increasing number of local authorities in Scotland have chosen to allocate funding to the development of this role, or of a Care Experience Team (CET) with a similar remit for the education of children and young people with care experience. The Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experience Teams Network ('the Network') is hosted by CELCIS, with the aim of supporting and connecting colleagues in these developing roles in Scottish local authorities.

This evaluation report follows the interim evaluation report, published in March 2021, which focused on the early development of the Network, and of its members' roles. A further phase of evaluation, involving semi-structured interviews with Network members, was carried out in July/August 2021, and the findings from those interviews are presented here. The interviews were, in the main, guided by four focus themes, which emerged from the May 2019 Network meeting and describe members' aspirations for their role. These were:

- Data
- Support and interventions
- Visibility and accessibility
- Capacity building and legacy

Evaluation participants reflected on their progress in relation to these themes. The global COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequent public health guidance and restrictions, had continued to impact on Network members' work. Nevertheless, most felt that good progress had been made in relation to the focus themes.

Access to, and use of, robust and reliable data, was described by most participants as having improved, although challenges remained, particularly in relation to the consistency of information held in social work and education systems.

Progress was also reported in relation to the individualised and bespoke nature of support and interventions, although some participants felt that the increased capacity to respond in these ways had resulted from specific pandemic recovery funding, and raised concerns about sustainability.

In relation to visibility and accessibility, and to capacity building and legacy, the pandemic had offered both advantages and challenges. Remote learning and working had been beneficial for some; for example, it enabled Network members and their teams to meet with large numbers of others to promote visibility of their role, to deliver online training, or to offer direct support to pupils. In contrast, however, some children and young people were not able to engage with this type of communication. Network members also described the mental health and wellbeing impacts on children and families, teachers and other school staff, and on themselves, of the pandemic and these ways of working.

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The role of the Network in providing a space for peer support and discussion was valued by participants. Most were keen to resume some level of face-to-face meetings when possible, and many offered suggestions for future work, including supporting improved data sharing across local authorities.

The findings highlight the central role played by VSHTs and CETs in initiating and developing connections and relationships for the benefit of children and young people with care experience. This is not limited to connections between education and social work, although these are the most prominent, but also include others within the local authority, other Corporate Parents, and a range of other services, organisations, and agencies. The Network must support its members to maintain and develop this key function, in this current phase of the pandemic and beyond.

1. Introduction

Virtual School Head Teachers have been a statutory role within the English education landscape since 2014. Their remit is to oversee the educational progress of all looked after children[1] within a local authority and arrange and provide necessary support in line with children's needs. Whilst the children within this cohort continue to attend their usual 'bricks and mortar' school, the Virtual School Head Teacher provides support to all looked after children within their local authority as though they were in one school. As such, the Virtual School Head Teachers are considered an additional 'layer' of support, enhancing the existing support available to all children.

As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, additional funding has been made available to local authorities in Scotland through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund[2], to support the education of pupils with care experience. A growing number of Scottish local authorities have chosen to allocate this, or funding from other budget streams, to the establishment of a post or team with a focus on the education of children and young people with care experience. The Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experience Teams Network ('the Network') was established by CELCIS in March 2019, with the aim of supporting and connecting those in the developing Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) and Care Experience Team (CET) roles, and has been supported through funding from the Scottish Government since autumn 2020. It includes members who are in VSHT or CET roles in Scottish local authorities, as well as representatives from the Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

At the outset, the Network comprised nine member local authorities. The Network has grown as additional local authorities have moved towards a VSHT or CET model, and the post-holders in these local authorities have become members. At present there are 16 local authority members, representing half of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

The member local authorities as of August 2021 are:

- Aberdeen City Council
- Aberdeenshire Council
- Argyll and Bute Council
- Dumfries and Galloway Council
- Dundee City Council
- East Lothian Council
- Edinburgh City Council
- Fife Council

- Glasgow City Council
- The Highland Council
- Midlothian Council
- North Lanarkshire Council
- Renfrewshire Council
- Scottish Borders Council
- Stirling Council
- South Ayrshire Council

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[1] In this report, the terms 'children' and 'young people' are used interchangeably to refer to all those within the remit of the VSHTs and CETs. 'Looked after' children are those currently in the care of the local authority, while 'care experienced' children are those who have at any time been in the care of the local authority.

[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/care-experienced-children-and-young-people-fund-operational-guidance/

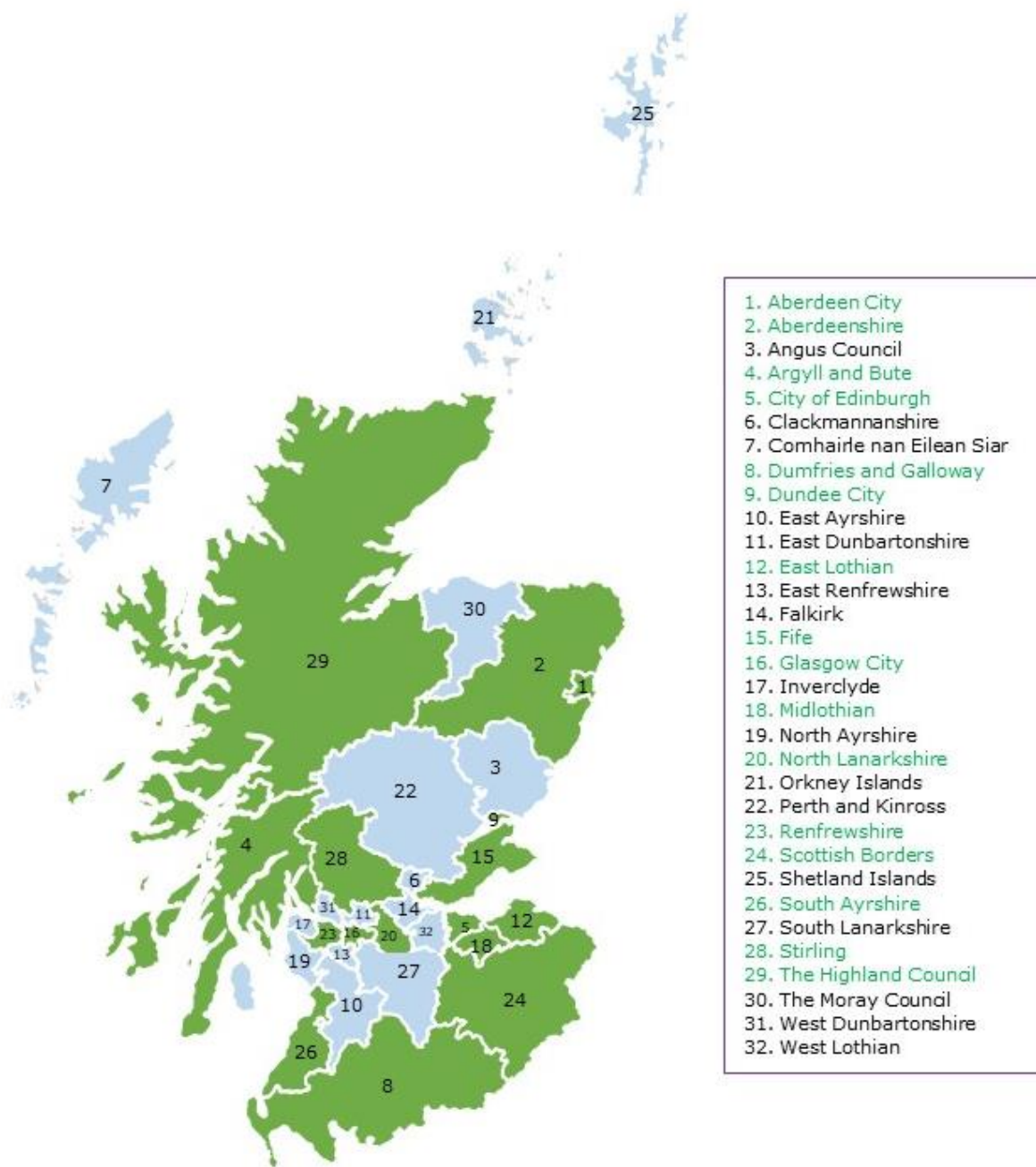Figure 1, below, illustrates the geographical spread of member local authorities.

1. Aberdeen City
2. Aberdeenshire
3. Angus Council
4. Argyll and Bute
5. City of Edinburgh
6. Clackmannanshire
7. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
8. Dumfries and Galloway
9. Dundee City
10. East Ayrshire
11. East Dunbartonshire
12. East Lothian
13. East Renfrewshire
14. Falkirk
15. Fife
16. Glasgow City
17. Inverclyde
18. Midlothian
19. North Ayrshire
20. North Lanarkshire
21. Orkney Islands
22. Perth and Kinross
23. Renfrewshire
24. Scottish Borders
25. Shetland Islands
26. South Ayrshire
27. South Lanarkshire
28. Stirling
29. The Highland Council
30. The Moray Council
31. West Dunbartonshire
32. West Lothian

Figure 1: Local Authority members of the Network, August 2021

Using the most recent children's social work stats (Scottish Government, 2021), we can determine that around 68% of all looked after children in Scotland are represented by a member of the Network. Figures for children and young people with care experience are not collected nationally, and so cannot be calculated in this way.

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1.1 Evaluation Outline

The overarching goal of this evaluation is to support the Network and its members in making their roles as effective as possible, using a developmental evaluation approach (Patton, 2006).

The evaluation has the following aims:

1. To record, describe, and explain the development of the VSHT/CET role in the relevant local authorities, including remits and responsibilities, and any early indicators of change.
2. To describe and explain the development and role of the Network.
3. To evidence and explain the extent to which the Network has met its aims (described below).

For evaluation purposes, the development of the Network is described in five phases, as outlined in Table 1, below. The interim evaluation report focuses on the period from the inception of the Network until December 2020 (Phases 1 to 3), and on evaluation aims 1 and 2.

Table 1: Phases of Network development (for evaluation purposes)

Dates	Phase
March 2019 – March 2020	Phase 1: Organic and responsive development of Network
March - August 2020	Phase 2: Initial COVID-19 response (school buildings closed[3])
August - December 2020	Phase 3: The first part of the new school year (school buildings open)
Jan - March 2021	Phase 4: Second phase of school building closures / return to home learning for most children, with phased return to classrooms from late February
April – June 2021	Phase 5: Schools fully re-opened

N.b. This table has been amended from that in the March 2021 interim report, to reflect the second period of school building closures from January 2021.

The interim evaluation report also outlines the approach to evaluation in more depth. It describes in detail the development of the VSHT and CET roles in Scotland, and the breadth of Network members' remits, including changes as part of the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This final report for the initial funding period

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[3] In this report, 'school building closures' refers to the periods in which most children were not attending school but were at home and learning remotely; recognising that school staff continued working, and many school buildings remained open to specific groups of pupils as 'Hub' provision, such as for children of key workers.

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focuses on the time period covered by Phases 4 and 5 (January-June 2021), and on evaluation aim 3.

1.2 Network Aims

This report describes progress towards the aims and aspirations of Network members, as identified in the May 2019 Network meeting. At that meeting, members discussed their responses to the following statement and questions:

Imagine that we're sitting together […] in two years and the work of this specific group has been a success.

- How do we know it has been a success?
- What is different due to the successful work this group has done?
- What exists that didn't exist before?

The responses of the group to these questions were recorded in the meeting notes as a series of statements, developed by the group and informed by their existing knowledge, previous experiences, training, and learning, the priorities and plans in their own local authorities, and their personal understanding of local contexts. Key themes emerging from these notes were then identified and used to develop topic guides for evaluation interviews.

The themes, referred to in this report as 'focus themes', were:

- Data
- Support and interventions (for children and young people)
- Visibility and accessibility (of the VSHTs and CETs)
- Capacity building and legacy

Broadly, the Network members in May 2019 envisaged robust and accurate, locally and nationally aligned data collection systems, which would allow a clear overview of where children and young people with care experience are, and how they are experiencing education and making progress. These systems would facilitate the sharing of information across local authority boundaries where necessary, to enable smoother transitions for children educated 'out of authority' (i.e. whose education takes place in a local authority which is not their 'home' local authority). The data would also be used to inform a deeper understanding of effective funding use.

The data collected would include indicators of achievement, attainment, and wellbeing, both through routine monitoring as well as self-report or self-assessment by the children and young people. It would show improvements for children and young people with care experience, and a reduced gap in comparison to indicators for all children and young people.

Support and interventions for children and young people would have increased capacity to respond in individualised and bespoke ways, and would be robust and sustainable.

Additionally, there would be increased visibility of the VSHTs and CETs as a point of contact, and increased awareness amongst all those with Corporate Parenting responsibilities, whether 'front line' or otherwise, of the needs of children and young people with care experience. VSHTs and CETs would have attended to the legacy and sustainability of their role, through upskilling others with roles in supporting the education of children and young people with care experience.

The four 'focus themes', along with illustrative statements for each, guided the discussions in evaluation interviews. A copy of the themes and statements used in the interviews is available in Appendix 1. Additionally, evaluation participants were asked to reflect on any benefits they felt their membership of the Network provided, and any gaps or further supports that the Network might usefully provide in the future, and any reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during evaluation phases 4 and 5.

Fourteen of the 16 local authority representatives in the Network took part in an evaluation interview via Microsoft Teams, in June/July 2021. Interviews lasted between approximately 40 and 85 minutes, and were transcribed. Transcripts were then analysed in relation to the focus themes, and also with attention to any additional emerging themes.

The evaluation participants' quotes in this report may have been edited for clarity and/or to help maintain the anonymity of individual evaluation participants. Throughout this report, the term 'post-holder' is used to denote the Virtual School Head Teacher, or member of a Care Experienced Team, who is part of the Network and took part in an evaluation interview. It is not intended to imply that there is only one such individual in the local authority being described. While many of the broad findings in this report parallel those in the interim report, in most instances participants had further reflections and insights, and gave more depth and detail in their responses.

Readers are cautioned that Section 4.2 contains brief references to young people seeking to end their lives.

2. Findings – Variations within and between local authorities

The findings described in this section demonstrate the range of variation in the experiences of VSHTs and CETs, including:

- Local authority structures and role functions
- The balance of strategic and operational work
- The response of schools and others to their work

> Evaluation participants **highlighted** the **importance** of **initiating and developing relationships** as the **foundation** of their work.

In discussing these areas of variation, the evaluation participants highlighted the importance of initiating and developing relationships as the foundation of their work. They described how their roles and position within the local authority allowed them to create and strengthen connections between education and social work, and this was particularly well facilitated for some by having shared team members or 'dual role' colleagues who worked between both professional groups.

The role of the VSHT or CET also helped to facilitate connections between other relevant groups within, and external to, local authorities. This enabled post-holders to highlight the educational needs of individuals and of the looked after and care experienced population, and to ensure that steps were taken to meet those needs.

Building on existing relationships was a helpful factor for some post-holders in establishing the VSHT or CET role, and where there was perhaps some resistance to the VSHT or CET, participants noted that sensitively developing these connections was important in promoting understanding of the role and its function.

2.1 Local authority structures and role functions

Evaluation participants reinforced that a wide variety of models, structures, and functions of their roles existed in the different local authorities, as outlined in the interim evaluation report. Participants reflected on how these different models were working in their own contexts.

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Most common areas of variation between local authorities:

Job title and seniority	The job title and level of seniority of the post-holder (for example, Virtual School Head Teacher, or Quality Improvement Officer)
Background	Post holders' professional background and experience (for example, varying levels of experience in main grade teaching and promoted posts, or of primary, secondary, and additional support needs schools)
Line management	Line management in relation to the posts, including who the post-holder was managed by, and whether they had management responsibility for others
Budget	What control or influence, if any, the post-holder had of budget expenditure and their role in seeking funding
Remit	Whether their remit was wholly in relation to looked after and/or care experienced young people, or also included other groups or areas of focus for a proportion of their working hours
Continuity	The continuity of the post; that is, whether it was permanent, fixed-term contract, limited-term secondment, or another arrangement
Contract	Whether the contractual arrangements aligned with terms and conditions typical of teaching posts (i.e., no contractual expectation to work during the schools' summer holidays), or another model
Strategic vs operational	The balance of strategic and operational work, and the reasons for this balance in each local authority

Participants' experiences of building relationships with others, and whether they had the seniority and resources to work in the ways they felt were needed, were also varied. Nevertheless most understood the reasons for the structures and arrangements in place

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in their own local authorities, and tended to feel that these were working, or beginning to work, well in their local context.

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Participants referred to the dual positioning of their role as 'being able to talk both languages' (Participant 1), having 'a leg on both sides of the fence' (Participant 6), and as having knowledge of, or connections in, 'both camps' (Participants 10 and 13).

> "I kind of straddle the two. I was based in the education office but spent as much time in the social work office."
> (Participant 3)

One emerging theme in relation to the structure of the local authority and the positioning of the VSHT or CET role within this was the value of roles or teams which were situated in some way within both education and social work. In some instances, this duality was a feature of the wider team, such as where there was an integrated Children's Services structure within a local authority, in which for example the post-holder was from an education background but line managed by, or line manager of, others with social work or other professional backgrounds. Other participants described 'shared' members of staff, often in administrative or data analyst roles, who perhaps worked part of their time for the education team or virtual school, and another part in a social work team. Even where these were described as informal links rather than positions within a local authority structure, they were reportedly very positive and helpful in promoting joint working, raising awareness, developing credibility, and accessing information.

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2.2 Strategic and operational activity

Most commonly, the main feature described by participants when asked to talk about their role was their attendance at meetings, which spanned a wide range of strategic and operational groups both within and outwith their local authority. This included, for example, Corporate Parenting groups, planning groups for strategic work, and discussions around meeting the needs of individual young people. Their involvement in these meetings was sometimes described as being 'the education person' or 'bringing a care experience lens' to the work. Evaluation participants noted that attending a large number of meetings was sometimes facilitated by the use of online platforms, meaning that they were able to attend more meetings, more frequently, which was seen in some ways as a positive emerging from the challenges of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also challenges associated with this, which are further discussed in Section 4 of this report.

Their responses to incoming enquiries included:

- Listening, offering suggestions, facilitating identification of what might help

- Signposting to other services or organisations

- Getting in touch personally with school or social work

- Getting in touch with central local authority managers or similar, to make them aware of issues

- Arranging meetings

- Allocating staff or other resources

The meetings described in the interviews were at varying strategic levels or for operational purposes, and these reflected the variations in the balance of strategic and operational work of VSHTs and CETs between local authorities. Some participants, for example, had a frequent and direct role in responding to enquiries from schools, social workers, and families.

Some were directly involved in supporting individual young people, while for others, the role was more explicitly about supporting schools to identify solutions and develop staff skills and capacity to meet the needs of pupils with care experience.

"I don't have day to day contact, I know that some of the virtual head teachers take young people to the gym and all that kind of stuff and do a lot of tutoring and all that themselves. No, that is absolutely not my role"
(Participant 2)

While the reasons for these variations were not immediately apparent, there was a sense from the interviews of a spectrum of strategic and operational work relating to how long the post had been established. One participant described the importance of starting at a more operational level, in order to gain a genuine sense of the situation and needs, while others implied that their work had become more strategic as schools and others had become more aware, and more confident, of understanding and addressing the challenges they identified. The role of VSHTs and CETs in building capacity within schools to identify and meet the needs of pupils with care experience is described throughout this report, and may have contributed to the increased awareness and confidence amongst school staff.

2.3 Response to the role

Network members described the different ways in which their role was understood, accepted and supported by those they work with. The predominant theme was the pivotal role of VSHTs and CETs in building relationships, with those working in schools as well as more broadly, which was largely working well. Several participants described that they had also been welcomed within local authority structures, and considered that an increasing number of related permanent posts showed a commitment to the Virtual School/CET approach.

> "I think the message is loud and clear that we really believe in this model and think it's going to work. And there's an absolutely necessity for it."
> (Participant 5)
>
> "…in our Council, virtual school's been really well received, I do feel my name's bandied about quite a lot"
> (Participant 13)

Some however reported variations in the response of school staff or leadership, while differences in how the Virtual School or CET was regarded at a local authority level were also apparent. While many schools were welcoming of the VSHT or CET, and indeed had proactively sought their support, some were also reported to be more resistant to the role, and to the offers and suggestions of the VSHTs in relation to support for pupils with care experience. Some Network members who discussed this issue acknowledged the sensitivity of approaching schools to offer support, and the resistance that school managers might feel if they experienced the role as 'someone telling them what to do':

> "…as a head teacher and I get it. I understand it. You know they, you don't want someone coming along telling you what to do in your school"
> (Participant 8)

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Participants who had previously held promoted posts within education[4] noted that their existing relationships, connections, and credibility sometimes facilitated their current work. Where school leaders were felt to be resistant to the VSHT or CET, participants considered it part of their role to explain and evidence their approach, for example by providing evidence such as statistical data or case studies, to encourage the engagement of schools. In some instances, school leaders were described as having clear opinions on what the support from VSHTs and CETs should look like in their school, which sometimes resulted in resistance to other options.

> "…some schools in particular would like a menu that they can choose from so they can just say 'There's a care experienced young person who's not doing very well, let's just contact virtual school and we'll have a number 14 and two number 25s, thank you.' And I need to find a way of, I suppose, letting people know exactly what we do […] And sometimes you need, people just need to get it out, and then they can actually find their own solutions and we can support them to do it."
> (Participant 13)

> "I suppose a lot of schools jump at the chance of having, for example, PSA [pupil support assistant] hours, but then that's like a sticking plaster, or it's maybe not the best use, we need to build capacities so that supports are used effectively, and they're targeted at the right time and they're appropriate to the young person."
> (Participant 6)

Some participants described that the focus of their work, on for example particular age groups, was not always what schools were hoping to access. These situations were sometimes the result of a mismatch between the asks of an individual school leader or community, and the goals and approaches of the VSHT or CET, which may have been directed from local authority level. One participant also described the need sometimes for changes in the school culture or ethos:

> "There's only me and there's only so much I can do, and ultimately it's about senior leaders in schools embracing this and taking it on, and for me they should be taking it on in terms of their ethos and culture in schools and their commitment to kind of GIRFEC and stuff. It shouldn't be as an add on, and there are some head teachers who will feel that this is an add on."
> (Participant 2)

The sense of resistance to the work of VSHTs/CETs was not only felt at a school level, but was also experienced by a small number of participants at a local authority level, where there was sometimes an apparent lack of understanding of the purpose of the role, or concern that such a role would lead to schools not taking direct responsibility for their pupils with care experience.

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[4] Promoted posts in Scottish schools are those above main grade classroom teaching; e.g. Principal Teachers, Depute Headteachers, and Head Teachers.

> "I've learned so much, and I've worked so hard and I care about these young people so I know what [the LA] needs to do. But that's not what [the person in charge] wants to do."
> (Participant 7)

At a national level, some participants felt that the continuation of funding reflected a stronger indication at Scottish Government level of the value of the VS/CET model. Others however felt that this message could be more emphatic.

> "I feel that every authority should have that support for care experienced young people and there should be that team or that person, it just should be, yeah, I think it should be a permanent post [...] that's just my personal opinion, but I certainly think that there's some things that government should kind of push, and that should be, should be what it is."
> (Participant 6)

3. Findings – Focus Themes

This section describes the key points which emerged in relation to the four focus themes in the interviews, drawn from the aims identified from the Network meeting in May 2019.

- Most evaluation participants felt that good progress has been made towards accessing robust and accurate data, allowing them to feel confident that they have identified most of the individual children and young people within their remit.
- Having the data to identify the children and young people within their remit, and monitor their attendance and academic progress, was not the same as knowing them as individuals in the same way as in a 'bricks and mortar' school.
- Challenges remain around accessing data relating to children being educated 'out of authority', especially around details such as attendance, attainment, and exclusions.
- Support and interventions were sometimes at a whole local authority, cluster, or school level, but this was complemented by attention to understanding the needs of individual pupils and finding ways to meet these needs. There was concern about the availability and capacity of supports and interventions, and ongoing funding for these in the later post-pandemic period.
- Post-holders used information from a variety of sources, not only routinely collected numerical data, to inform decision-making. They recognised that the routine data might not yet show significant improvements, and that the COVID-19 pandemic would have impacted on this.
- Several illustrated their impact in relation to improvements for children and young people, and in relationships and capacity building, through 'case examples'.

> **Relationships with other groups**, teams, and organisations had **facilitated progress** in the use of data.

The Promise Scotland (2021b)'s *Change Programme 1* describes that the "current data landscape is fractured and populates itself via a series of discrete data requests made to multiple agencies. It needs to be rationalised to become more cohesive and connected" (p.16). This is reflected in the experiences of the Network members in accessing, quality assuring, and making use of data but in many cases, their relationships with other groups, teams, and organisations had nevertheless facilitated progress in the use of data. A shared or 'dual role' team member, working across both education and social work, had also been a key facilitator in some local authorities.

3.1 Data

Knowing who all 'their' children are

Several participants highlighted that 'knowing the children' was about more than just having readily available and accurate data. One reflected that as a Head Teacher of a 'bricks and mortar' school, they would expect to know the pupils as individuals, by name and by sight, as well as knowing something of their background, individual strengths and challenges. While a few participants indicated that they were making progress towards this depth of knowledge of the children in their current remit, others suggested that the nature of a 'virtual school', the size and geographical spread of the cohort, as well as the challenges presented by public health restrictions on in-person visits, were a barrier to the development of these sorts of individual relationships.

> "…when I say 'know them', it's not, I would not know who they are as a person or anything like that, like you might in a school. I think realistically, try to do that you know would be near on impossible. But I certainly know everything else around where they are, how they're doing."
> (Participant 12)

Most participants felt that they had access to data which allowed them to identify who and where 'their children' are, although there were a number of caveats. Several reported that although they were reasonably confident of having accurate information on the current formally looked after pupils, the information they held on the broader care experienced cohort (for example, adopted children, some kinship arrangements, those not of compulsory education age), or those attending educational placements outwith their home local authority, was less robust. The reasons for this were generally related to a mismatch between the information held by social work, and that held by education. Information Management Systems (often, but not always SEEMiS, for education; participants mentioned a range of systems in use in social work) were not linked, and often a manual process was required to request access to, share or update information, which was sometimes time-consuming.

> "…to have to hunt for [information] and take weeks and weeks to get that information in the first place is just a nonsense."
> (Participant 8)

This was also identified as challenging in relation to the frequency of change, for example in children's living arrangements, which were not always communicated quickly.

> "We know who all of our children are but maybe I didn't realise how often our children change d'you know that, meaning someone can be in and out of [care] you know, arrive very suddenly or move on."
> (Participant 14)

Robust and accurate data collection systems

Several evaluation participants highlighted that information accuracy on a day to day basis was related to the frequency with which it is updated. Some described a process of routinely asking for data updates on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis, for the information which they did not have direct access to. The availability of a 'shared' administrator or data analyst, as described above, was often an important facilitator for allowing this to happen smoothly and timeously.

A small number of participants described their progress in attempting to align social work information with that held by schools, or to quality assure information that had been provided to them for their role. They reported that on multiple occasions, pupils identified as looked after or care experienced in one database were missing from another.

One Participant emphasised the importance of administrative staff in ensuring that pupils' circumstances were understood and accurately recorded:

> "…actually the administrators […] they're often the first people that foster carers, adoptive parents and the young people meet, yeah, especially in primary schools. You know, they are the very first people, and I mean I've been lucky. I've worked with, every single one has been fantastic and they usually are. But you know, not always."
> (Participant 8)

This Participant alluded to the importance of administrators having a good understanding of 'care experience', in order to recognise when children and young people should be included in this category, and of how and where to record this in SEEMiS or on other systems.

Another Participant highlighted that social work records are only able to identify pupils who are currently looked after, and not all who are care experienced, which can present challenges in accessing information and support, and ensuring the accuracy of shared information.

> "…education are the only service that has an overview of all of the care experienced [children and young people] at one time, which seems like a massive responsibility."
> (Participant 9)

The participants who discussed this issue had a range of approaches to accessing and managing the information needed to support their work; most had created their own spreadsheets for the children within their remit, and processes for updating these regularly. Sources for these updates included:

- Information which the post-holder had direct access to, such as 'viewing rights' or the ability to run certain report types from the relevant software

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- Information to which someone else had direct access - including shared-role administrators or data analysts
- Information supplied by others on an agreed regular basis or on request

A small number of others described working with local authority IT professionals to identify solutions. This included creating a 'dual role' within SEEMiS for looked after pupils, meaning that they would appear on a 'school roll' as a single cohort while remaining visible on their own school's roll; and using other software to pull data from multiple sources and collate it in a single space for the post-holder to access. Some also described plans for the coming academic year to work more closely with schools to support their own routine data collection and quality assurance in relation to looked after and pupils with care experience.

National alignment and 'out of authority' education

Participants' discussion of the 'national alignment' of data largely related to children and young people whose education was taking place in another local authority, known as 'out of authority' education placements. Overall, access to information about these children was described as less robust and accurate than for others, for a number of reasons. Some participants described that there were very few children and young people in 'out of authority' education placements, as a result of policies in their local authority that children should remain within their home authority. Several participants did not have a specific remit for pupils being educated in other local authorities, who tended to be the

responsibility of Educational Psychologists instead. Others described a need to focus on getting systems in place for robust tracking and monitoring of pupils within the local authority, before others could be included.

> "…that's one area that we don't feel we're totally on top of yet and it is a bit ad hoc what we're doing with that out of authority [data]."
> (Participant 14)

In some instances, participants knew where pupils were being educated, but did not have the level of detail on their experience and progress that they would have liked. One explained, for example, that for children attending residential education provisions, reports did not always contain the depth of information required:

> "When we get reports from them, they are very much written as they would be to a parent. But we almost need that additional level, you know. So what strategies, which approaches, what's your impact, you know, all of these things."
> (Participant 12)

Another respondent described knowing 'who and where' the 'out of authority' educated pupils are, but not having access to data on, for example, their attendance and

exclusion. They described how this had improved following the introduction of the VSHT/CET model in some local authorities, which meant that it was easier to identify who to approach for this information.

> "There's been a good few examples now of young people coming into our authority or going outwith, where I have just been able to pick up the phone into that Virtual Head and get things organised. The worth of that alone […] has been really great. You know what it's like, sometimes it's like going through wall to get through to the person that can help you. And vice versa"
> (Participant 11)

Where children's education was 'cross border' (such as a child from England being educated in Scotland), this presented additional challenges. While sharing information across local authority boundaries was hampered by IT systems which were not linked, the different legal and educational frameworks in different parts of the UK meant that terminology and procedures were not aligned. Participants who had experience of these challenges described having to work closely and flexibly with colleagues to find appropriate ways of recording and understanding information.

Indicators of achievement, attainment, and wellbeing show improvements and inform funding use

In response to these elements, evaluation participants tended to focus on the impact of the pandemic on the collection, and accuracy or reliability, of data. Attendance data, for example, while not explicitly referred to in the illustrative statements for this theme, was discussed by most participants as an important indicator and part of their routine monitoring processes. In relation to the pandemic, however, participants described that this has been recorded in a variety of ways in different local authorities, often depending on whether or not a young person was attending, for example, a Hub or other provision, or engaging with home learning, during periods of school building closures. Participants were not confident that attendance data would be robustly comparable with other time periods.

> "Everyone will have wonderful attendance figures with this year or improved attendance figures this year, but it won't actually be reflective of engagement and children being actively in school, which is going to be problematic"
> (Participant 14)

Concerns were also expressed about attainment data in the broad sense, and around positive destinations, since many opportunities such as work experience and alternative qualifications were not available.

> "COVID has been frustrating for me in the fact of getting those attainment, the data, have we had any real impact in improving education outcomes? I would say yes, but to prove it in data is going to be really hard and it's going to be a long

time, and COVID recovery is going to be a long time to prove anything." (Participant 11)

A small number of participants also felt that while there was good tracking and monitoring relating to pupils in the senior phase (S4-S6), this needed to be expanded to include the Broad General Education phase (Early years to S3) to ensure that children's needs could be identified and supported at the earliest opportunity.

> "So that we can, we can put support and intervention in earlier to children who, care experience children who need to have a bit more support will be pinpointed earlier through all this so that they're not getting to the senior phase and then wondering why they are not at the stage they should be at"
> (Participant 9)

In relation to the use of data to inform funding use and spending choices, the small number of participants who discussed this described using other forms of evidence as well as statistical reports to support requests for, or decisions around, financing. They often gathered and used broader information, including through conversations and feedback from schools and families, to create anonymised case studies, and used these to demonstrate their work and impact of the team. Some participants also described how they used data more broadly, to inform resource allocation decisions such as the placement of team members in particular schools, as well as directly in relation to spending decisions.

> Network members **gathered** and **used broader information** and **feedback**, as well as **routinely collected data**, to **demonstrate** their **work and impact**, and to **inform resource allocation** and **spending** decisions.

Participants also emphasised that while data for the whole cohort of pupils might not yet show notable improvements, they could already identify and evidence the impact of the Virtual School or Care Experience Team on individuals.

> "I think the impact that the virtual school has had has been more qualitative than quantitative. Which is why I am so passionate about all of my case studies and recording and tracking everything that we do."
> (Participant 11)

Several participants described the progress and achievements of small groups or individual pupils who had been supported recently by the Virtual School/CET. This

included gaining national qualifications[5] and undertaking alternative qualifications and achievements such as the John Muir Award[6].

> There is one lad who wasn't in school for two years and in the last year he hasn't gone to school, but he has done alternative timetable and he's got 7 qualifications. **He is my pride and joy**. So I have improved one child's attainment this year. Not just one, but that one really matters. That was **really deep work** and **hopefully transformative** in that lad's life.

Participant 3

These examples and anecdotes illustrate the support that may be available from VSHTs and CETs, but also demonstrate the ways in which post-holders do know some individual young people and their circumstances, in detail, and feel a sense of genuine satisfaction when support helps them to progress.

Children and young people report on their own experiences

The restrictions put in place in response to the pandemic had also impacted on post-holders' intentions to 'collect pupil voice' and provide opportunities for children and young people to express their views on their wellbeing and progress, needs, and the role of the VSHT or CET. While a small number of participants described the work that had already taken place with specific groups of children and young people with care experience, for example routine use of 'wellbeing scales', more commonly participants felt that there was still a lot to do in this respect, and shared their plans for engaging with children and young people more directly once public health guidance allowed this, for example by attending groups and meeting with children and young people in person. A small number also noted that direct engagement with children and young people to facilitate the sharing of their views was a role for individual schools, more than for the VSHT or CET itself.

3.2 Support and interventions

Evaluation participants discussed the support and interventions that were available from within their own team, the local authority more broadly (such as social work and educational psychology), other services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and third sector organisations providing for example mentoring, sports activities, or outdoor programmes. Interventions were sometimes brought in as a broad-based support within the whole local authority, while others were targeted at

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[5] https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-in-scotland/assessment-and-achievement/qualifications/what-are-national-qualifications

[6] https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/john-muir-award

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specific schools or groups, and some were tailored to individual children, young people and families. Some participants noted that there was a focus on the senior phase (S3-S6), but that they hoped or intended to work more broadly in the future.

Participants' discussions around support and interventions tended to be related to discussions around finance and control of budgets. While some had control over expenditure, and could therefore make decisions about financing specific supports or interventions, others were not directly involved in decision-making but could make suggestions or requests around expenditure.

Interventions have increased capacity, and are robust and sustainable

In general, the participants who discussed this topic felt that there was an increase in capacity, but that this had largely been driven by 'recovery funding' in relation to the pandemic, and would not therefore be sustained in the longer term.

> "I've got COVID emergency funding, which I don't even know should be included [in this discussion] because technically if I didn't have that I would have no money."
> (Participant 2)

The impact of the pandemic on reducing capacity for in-person support was also noted. As described further in Section 4, online platforms are not felt to be appropriate or manageable for some children and young people, and for some sensitive discussions.

> "In one sense capacities absolutely increased because there's more funding into it. But in another sense, capacity is decreased because some of the face to face stuff just hasn't been hasn't been possible."
> (Participant 14)

There were mixed views on whether there had been an increase in the capacity of supports and interventions, in relation to their availability to meet individuals' needs.

Individualised and bespoke approaches

Evaluation participants described working closely with families, schools, and social workers to understand and respond to the individual needs of children and young people with care experience. Some participants noted that often, the preference of school leaders is to access additional staffing, such as an Additional Support Needs Assistant, but that this was not always the appropriate response for the child. There was a need for caution around introducing new adults to children who might already have a number of professionals in their lives, and consideration of what changes could be made within the resources and expertise of the school community to better support a young person.

"So it's not about reducing the cost, it's actually about thinking well, what is the best support for that child in terms of where they are just now in their life? You know, is it more appropriate to do some home tuition on Graph Comm or you know, you know something that they'd interested in, they want to do and it can make a difference to their exam result or their future, rather than somebody going with them as if they need policed."
(Participant 4)

A similar individual focus was described by one interview participant who noted the role of schools in showing support for young people who might be engaging with out-of-school alternative activities.

"if we've got them a [work experience] placement in a café, do you know what, go and turn up at the café. Go and turn up at the café and have a cup of tea and let that young person see, […] that's how they know you care"
(Participant 13)

Although few participants reflected on the individualised nature of support, most provided descriptions and anecdotes which demonstrated their approach to understanding needs on an individual level, and working with schools and others to find ways to meet those needs.

Services are more joined up, with supporting systems and processes

Participants described that services, particularly within local authorities, were increasingly working together. In general, this had come about as a result of the increased priority of collaborative working to meet people's needs during the pandemic.

"I think it kind of strengthened it, to be honest with you in terms of, because it I think, just because it was definitely that kind of feeling of 'all in this together' and mucking in to try and do the most that we could for the young people. So yeah, I think it probably strengthened it"
(Participant 5)

The co-ordinating and connecting role played by the post-holders, highlighted in Section 2 of this report, also played an important role in facilitating collaborative working.

A challenge sometimes associated with services increasingly communicating with each other and working together was around who might ultimately be responsible for providing or funding a specific support for a young person. In some local authority structures, a number of different teams could exist with a potential contribution to make; for example, Inclusion, Care Experience, Additional Support Needs. The VSHT and CET roles appeared well positioned to contribute to clarifying responsibilities and making decisions in these circumstances.

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Child's plans reflect a priority of educational engagement and achievement

The small number of participants who discussed this statement specifically felt that good progress was being made here. They reported that generally, education was a priority in Plans, but that there remains room for improvement in the level of detail and aspiration in each Plan.

> "I suppose it is just about making those maybe just a wee bit more realistic and making sure that education have an input into them. You know sometimes it'll just say something like 'attend school' or you know, 'achieve' whereas it would be good to see that being a little bit more specific and a wee bit more detailed for each of the young people involved."
> (Participant 14)

These participants described working directly with Reviewing Officers to ensure that education remains a priority in Children's Plans, and with teachers to help them understand the purpose of a Child's Plan and their role in contributing to it. Few of the evaluation participants spoke explicitly about the ways in which education is prioritised in Child's Plans, which may suggest that there had been little focus on this for some.

3.3 Visibility and accessibility

The illustrative statements associated with this theme in the interviews were:

- 'There is increased visibility of the Virtual School Head Teacher as a point of contact in relation to the education of looked after and children and young people with care experience.'
- 'There is increased awareness amongst all those with Corporate Parenting responsibilities, whether 'front line' or otherwise, of the needs of children and young people with care experience.'

As noted in the Interim report, the title 'Virtual School Head Teacher' was sometimes described as a barrier to others' understanding of the role, especially in the context of increased online learning during the pandemic.

> "I think just because of COVID, people think it's literally just remote learning, and that's what they think it's going to be. All these online lessons"
> (Participant 5)

Participants also reflected that such misunderstandings could offer an opportunity to explain the role and its purpose to others, and that increasing awareness and understanding of the role meant that changing the title at this stage could provoke further confusion.

Generally, evaluation participants felt that their visibility and accessibility to local authority colleagues had improved, in part due to their expanded roles in providing support during the early stages of the pandemic (described more fully in the interim

report), as well as more broadly through the development of websites, use of social media, and other proactive work to raise awareness of their role.

As outlined in 2.1, participants often began their description of their day-to-day work by identifying the range of meetings and groups in which they were involved as leaders, members, or 'the education person'. Often these were internal local authority groups, but a wide range of other external meetings was also described, including but not limited to statutory Corporate Parent organisations and groups with a specific focus on children and young people with care experience. This demonstrates the substantial number of connections being made by post-holders, which were reportedly improving the visibility of the role, as well as others' understanding of the needs of children and young people with care experience.

Participants tended to report that contact was mainly from within education, such as from teachers and schools, or from social workers, seeking advice and support in relation to individual pupils. There was some variation between local authorities around visibility to, and contact from, others. In some instances, foster families and residential carers were aware of, and able to make contact with, the post-holder because of having participated in training delivered by them. In relation to young people or families making contact directly, this was encouraged or supported in some local authorities, but less common elsewhere (where contact would happen instead via school or social work). This may have been influenced by a number of other factors, including the size of the local authority, the exact remit of the VSHT/CET, and how long the VSHT/CET post had been in place in the local authority. Participants noted the different ways in which the involvement of a VSHT/CET might be experienced by young people and families in particular, including those who would appreciate having the support of someone senior in education but not directly connected with their school, and others who already had a large number of professionals in their lives and whose needs would not be best met by adding another.

Participants also described a range of ways in which they might respond to contacts or enquiries from schools, social workers, and families. This generally reflected in the different balance of strategic and operational work, as described in 2.1.

The influence of the pandemic was again apparent in reflections on this theme. Some participants reported that planned opportunities to make their role more visible, for example by attending events and delivering training, had not been able to go ahead, and that where progress had been made, the momentum had stalled. Some also noted limits and restrictions at local authority level on their contact with schools, which were described as understandable in helping to manage the challenges faced by schools, but nevertheless frustrating.

> "…schools are on their knees and have been for a year and a half. And you can't add to their burden."
> (Participant 3)

3.4 Capacity building and legacy

There is increased capacity amongst the workforce and carers

The main focus of participants' discussions on this theme was around enabling schools to better understand their role in meeting the needs of individual pupils with care experience. As in earlier themes, a number of participants described instances where support from the VSHT or CET had made a difference for individual professionals, as well as for children. One, for example, explained:

> "The school were at a loss. [Our team member has] been in four days, and now we've got the head teacher crawling under tables to support [the child] because [the team member] said 'he just wants to feel close to somebody'. So the head teacher emailed straight away to say, you know, this worked. I got under the table and [the child] came out with me no problem."
> (Participant 9)

In some instances, direct work in schools in the early part of the 2021-22 school year had been impacted by guidance which limited the number of different schools that a team member could visit within a given time frame. Evaluation participants who discussed this nevertheless felt that this created the opportunity for a greater depth of support, albeit in fewer schools overall.

While wider opportunities for capacity building, training delivery, and upskilling of others had been curtailed in the 2020-21 academic year, participants shared a range of online delivery and plans for 2021-22. Several mentioned planned training, often 'live online' or via e-learning modules, for teachers, including compulsory in-service training; the inclusion of which was considered to reflect the priority being given to teachers' understanding of children and young people with care experience's experiences. A small number of participants described that a module relating to care experience or corporate parenting was an expected part of the induction programme for all new local authority staff, which some reported involvement in designing. Some also reported planned training sessions on education, for foster and adoptive families. One participant highlighted the need to ensure that any such training was not a 'tick-box' exercise, but a meaningful experience which allowed participants to use their knowledge in practice.

Although the capacity-building work which participants had hoped to undertake had not always been possible in the ways they had intended, most described some activity in relation to this, often conducted online. The examples given by the participants, such as that above, illustrate the ways in which VSHTs and CETs sought to help school staff to understand the needs of the children, and ways of responding, thereby building capacity at an individual and school level.

4. Findings – Further reflections on the impact of the pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic remained a significant issue for evaluation participants. The laws and guidance put in place in response to the pandemic, as well as the direct effects of COVID-19 on illness and bereavement within families, impacted not only on the support children and families needed, but also on how this support could be given. The interim evaluation report describes how the roles of VSHTs/CETs changed and expanded as part of the initial pandemic response. The participants in the June/July 2021 interviews reflected in more detail on how the pandemic and related changes impacted on their daily working lives, and the lives of those they work with.

- Participants identified co-existing advantages and disadvantages of home working and remote learning, for themselves and their teams, the children and young people, and the families supporting their children at home
- The increasing challenge to the mental health of the young people and school staff was a concern for many participants
- Some participants also reflected on the impact on their own mental health, especially of working remotely, but also of working with stressed and distressed children, families, and school staff.

4.1 Home learning and remote working

Many of the participants noted the advantages of the switch to virtual meetings, which meant that they could 'meet' with more people in a day or at one time that would have been realistic if these meetings had been face-to-face. This also meant that travel time between meetings, especially for those in areas with a larger geographical spread, was reduced or eliminated, and that meetings could easily take place which would not previously have been usual.

> "But one good thing about this new virtual world we're able to get you know, teachers from their previous school to be part of a transition planning meeting, which, you couldn't have done before because they can never travel, so that's huge benefit. Huge. […] so much easier with that [information sharing] for transition planning. Definitely much easier, so it's a bonus."
> (Participant 12)

While many participants highlighted these features as a positive of COVID-responsive working, they also reflected on the disadvantages of the intensity of closely sequenced meetings, with no 'thinking time' in between.

> "[Previously] you'd have a day's travel to get to somewhere. I can have back to back to back [meetings] and you can get through so much, but you actually get burnt out by the end."
> (Participant 9)

Working remotely, away from colleagues, also had disadvantages, around the ability to build relationships, make connections, and seek support. Evaluation participants described that there was less opportunity for informal or casual discussions than in the past; remote working meant they were unable to go and talk something through with a colleague or manager, as was possible when they were located in the same building. Such conversations now needed to be planned and scheduled in advance. One participant also highlighted the challenges of having difficult or sensitive conversations with others via online platforms rather than face-to-face.

Evaluation participants and their colleagues had continued to use a range of creative approaches to maintaining connections and engagement with young people while remaining within the public health guidance. The use of remote learning was described as working well for some, and not at all for others.

> "Quite a lot of the young people who we work with, they didn't have attendance officers at the door, you know trying to get them into school. So actually the pressure was off quite a bit"
> (Participant 5)

> "…there's a lot of our children actually preferred to [learn online], they'd struggled to go in to school with anxiety and actually learning online was a bonus for them"
> (Participant 13)

> "We do still see the pupils virtually, that will see us. And that has worked really well for a couple of pupils who have got their National 4 English via, with us, on Teams, it's been tremendous, but then there's other pupils that won't go near it. And they just can't cope with it"
> (Participant 7)

A number of participants described their plans and hopes for the new academic year (2021-22), anticipating that many of the restrictions and mitigations which had impacted previously would not be in place to the same extent, and that there would be more opportunity to visit schools and young people in person. One however highlighted the ongoing challenges of changes to the public health guidance, and the guidance relating to different professional groups, particularly around movement of staff between schools within a day or week. This was described as dependent on the guidance from the Unions representing different groups of workers such as teachers and support staff, which while understood and accepted, added further complexity to operational planning and decision-making.

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4.2 Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Evaluation participants referred to the impact of the pandemic on mental health primarily on the experiences of children and young people, and also on the workforce, particularly teachers and school staff. They made fewer references to their own mental health, but it cannot be overlooked that the position of post-holders in supporting young people and the workforce, as well as the impacts of the pandemic on their own personal and family lives, is also likely to have had an impact.

In relation to children and young people, participants highlighted their evolving needs and those of their families and carers at different stages of the pandemic. This included support during periods of 'school closures', for example with home learning and accessing lunch vouchers or similar, as well as those for whom being at home had worked well, and who then needed support with the return to school.

> "Schools found it difficult in August to get all of their kids back. I think as it had such a long time off and there was an awful lot of anxiety. A lot of kids very, very distressed about coming back and it was all because, it was just a difficult time and I think we were just, you know, almost settling and then we were off again"
> (Participant 14)

> "…families who have managed to keep a lid on things and managed to enjoy the time in lockdown […] where actually there wasn't that pressure to get them up and get them to school and get them out the house, so things were really nice 'cause there was no challenge. And then what we've noticed is when schools reopened, and young people weren't wanting to go back to school, there was a lot of breakdowns [in fostering] families because of that challenge."
> (Participant 6)

The likelihood of further challenges, and more support needs being identified as the new school year got underway was also highlighted. One participant described this in terms of staff absences, and the impact on individual children of short-notice staffing changes or if their 'safe person' is not at work.

Evaluation participants were aware of increasing numbers of children and young people having difficulties with their mental health, and increased reports from schools of young people wanting to end their life. While not all of these young people were care experienced, participants recognised the emotional impact on teachers and other school staff, of supporting young people experiencing high levels of distress. One described having to support colleagues to remember that there is a limit to what they as an individual, or any one service can do, and that education is part of a wider team supporting young people's mental health.

> "You [in schools] are supporting the mental health from the guidance of CAMHS and other people, ed psychs, whatever. But at the end of the day, you are a school. It's like sometimes we forget and I feel really passionate about that. That

yes, we should be trauma informed and responsive. But we're not [solely responsible]. We are part of, part of the whole big jigsaw I think".
(Participant 8)

A small number of participants also overtly discussed their own mental health, and in particular the impact of remote working. While this had been identified as having a number of advantages, the loss of travel time and 'thinking time' between meetings was challenging.

"I understand that people get stressed. I get really stressed. This is a stressful job and it's a stressful job sometimes I suppose working with traumatised families and families."
(Participant 13)

"…actually there's an expectation that you're going to be available all the time, and I don't think that's healthy."
(Participant 2)

"I'm in so many more meetings they're getting so much more out of my work because I'm able to just be here every day, constantly going from meeting to meeting. But for me, for my own health and wellbeing, I find it really difficult actually, because I'm going from one extreme case to another."
(Participant 7)

Some participants were also able to reflect on the positive emotional impact that exists alongside the challenges.

"…positives is the relationships and the qualitative stuff. There's been some days [team members] will phone me and tell me about their day and you actually feel quite emotional because that's changed that wee person's life."
(Participant 11)

The evaluation participants, without exception, spoke about their work in ways which showed their passion for their work, and their commitment to the children and young people in their remit. Many spoke positively about the improvements in relationships, or the different they and their teams had made to for individual young people. Their reflections also highlighted however the mental health impacts on children and families, and on those supporting them.

The evaluation participants, **without exception**, spoke about their work in ways which **showed their passion** for their work, and their **commitment to** the **children** and **young people** in their remit.

5. Findings – The VSHT and CET Network

The VSHT and CET Network continued to meet during early 2021 using digital platforms, and welcomed new members, taking the total number of member local authorities to 16. This represents half of Scotland's 32 local authority areas, but as described in the Introduction, the size and distribution of these means that around two-thirds of looked after children and young people in Scotland can be considered to belong to a Virtual School or Care Experience Team.

- Membership of the Network was considered beneficial because it gave access to peer support, along with ideas and guidance on the development of the role.
- The flexibility and responsiveness of the Network was appreciated by members.
- Evaluation participants were keen to return to at least occasional in-person meetings, which would help to promote relationships within the Network.
- Suggestions for future areas of focus included supporting data sharing across local authorities, and greater recognition of the breadth of the remit.

5.1 The benefits of membership

Evaluation participants' views on the benefits of Network membership largely paralleled those identified in the interim evaluation report. In particular, they valued having access to support from others in similar roles, in what was sometimes described as a unique and isolated role.

"…making you feel as if you're kind of not on your own and being able to pick up the phone and speak to somebody about, about something that actually no one else in [this local authority] would really probably get, because no one else is doing this role."
(Participant 5)

"Everyone's so lovely and the peer support is really, really nice […] it is still a relatively new focus and a new thing to do… [it's] quite a unique role to have […] so it's nice that the peer support you get, listening to people with the same challenge, it's extremely important and I've found it really invaluable."
(Participant 6)

Many of the post-holders have worked in schools immediately prior to taking up their role in the Virtual School or Care Experience Team. One participant contrasted the role with their previous experience of being school-based:

"You come from [a role in] a massive school community, to you're completely on your own. You are creating your own work and you've nobody really to talk it over with, I really felt that strongly. […] I think the Network was really a lifeline at the beginning."
(Participant 3)

Participants also highlighted the role of the Network in helping them make connections with others in similar roles in other local authorities. Having these relationships allowed post-holders to have an identified contact for sharing information, for example about children moving between local authorities.

> "…even having that, the list of contact details has been great because it's been, it's been fantastic to just pick up the phone or to email and find out about young person that's coming into [this local authority]. Or with someone that we've got in that other local authority, so that's been great […] so relaxed and so easy, whereas if you were going on and cold calling, it just wouldn't have been the same."
> (Participant 5)

> "It's been useful that on occasion, where I've had to contact another Council, there's been a person that I can [identify], that for me has been the most valuable thing if I'm honest. 'Cause other times I would just not know where to go."
> (Participant 13)

More broadly, participants found the direct links with Scottish Government and Education Scotland through the Network valuable.

> "The other thing that's really helpful is having Education Scotland, Scottish Government there, you have the latest information, you know what's happening from a national perspective. So that's hugely beneficial."
> (Participant 12)

The culture within the Network, and the expectations of members, were also valued by a number of evaluation participants. In particular, participants appreciated the collaborative and supportive atmosphere, and the flexibility and responsiveness of the meeting agendas.

> "You don't have like a three year plan and then a whole plan for that year that's all sewn up, so that there's nothing, we can't be reactive to what's going on. I think it's very collaborative and we get a say in in what the sessions are like and what the support needs to be."
> (Participant 6)

While some members described feeling that the Network is a safe space for discussion, this was not always the case for members who had joined the Network after the start of the pandemic, when meetings moved online, many of whom had never met other members in person or had an opportunity to develop relationships with them. This meant that some members felt less able to participate in discussions or ask questions than they might have at an in-person meeting or with the context of an existing relationship.

5.2 The future of the Network

Overwhelmingly, the return to face-to-face meetings was the main way in which Network members felt their experience of membership could be improved. Although they appreciated that the Network meetings had been able to continue online, the opportunities for getting to know one another through informal conversations over lunch breaks or with others around the same table were considered important.

> "I think it's so important that informal conversations which, I love Teams, it's dead efficient, dead effective, but it would be quite nice to actually meet up and actually, you know, and have a chat with people."
> (Participant 5)

Alongside the desire to return to in-person meetings, once this could be done safely and in line with public health and employers' guidance, was a recognition that it would not be possible for some members to attend as frequently in person as they had online, due to travel time. Overall, most participants felt that a balance of face-to-face and online meeting format would be preferred.

Other suggestions for the future of the Network included:

- Further opportunities to share experiences and good practice
- Work on facilitating cross-boundary and cross-border information sharing (such as a protocol or template)
- A terminology guide for teachers, or for those new to VSHT/CET posts
- Focus on different groups within the remit of members; recognising the breadth and 'sub groups' included within a remit for children and young people with care experience aged 0-26

6. Conclusions

The Network members who took part in evaluation interviews described the progress in their local authority towards the goals identified in the May 2019 Network meeting. Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, most members reported progress in relation to the four focus themes: data, support and interventions, visibility and accessibility, and capacity building; there was little which had been entirely paused or deprioritised in response to the pandemic, although the work has not always taken place in the ways or to the extent that had been planned or intended.

Describing Virtual Schools in Scotland in their advice to adoptive parents, Parkinson and Fursland (2021) note that 'since there is no statutory framework, they are all quite different in how they operate' (p.9). The findings from the Network members emphasise these differences, but suggest that it is not only the absence of such a framework which causes these variations, but differences in contextual factors in each of the member local authorities, such as size and structure, the longevity of the post, and the ways in which the roles and teams are financed. Nevertheless, evaluation participants consistently described the importance of developing relationships and making connections in supporting the education of children and young people with care experience. This was a key approach and function of the role for all, and aligns with the intentions of *Change Programme One* (The Promise Scotland, 2021a) to 'join the dots' and encourage consistency and collaborative working in support of Scotland's children and young people with care experience.

The findings of this evaluation further demonstrate the importance of making and building on these connections as a means of driving improvements for children and young people with care experience. Examples include:

- Improvements in data collection and use, through building relationships with key individuals and teams (including VSHT and CETs in other local authorities) to access relevant data and develop data management approaches.
- Individualised support, and also capacity-building within schools, through developing relationships with children, young people, and families, as well as with teachers and school leaders.
- Making the role more visible and accessible, to local authority colleagues as well as sometimes to families, by making connections through use of social media, delivery of training, etc.

In *Plan 21-24*, the Promise Scotland (2021b, p.23) highlights the importance of ensuring that, 'schools will know and cherish their care experienced pupils'. Network members' experiences demonstrate that pupils with care experience are not always 'known' within their own school, or within the VSHT/CET; often due to inconsistencies in data recording and sharing. Network members described the ways in which they had sought to ensure that data were accurate and up-to-date, including through developing their own databases, and working with administrative staff in schools and their local authority.

Participants reflected that the relationships between themselves and the young people did not parallel those of a head teacher in a 'bricks and mortar' school, in that they did not know the young people as individuals. This seemed to be largely aligned with the local authority context, such as the number of young people and the strategic/ operational balance of the role; some participants felt that it would not be possible to know the young people individually in this way, while others shared their plans to start developing these relationships once public health guidance would allow.

Other areas in which evaluation participants felt there had been less progress, largely due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, were in relation to children and young people having opportunities to self-report on their experiences; and on capacity-building work, which although delivered online in some instances, had been curtailed in most local authorities in recognition of the workload changes resulting from remote working and learning. Participants described the approaches they had taken in relation to these in the pandemic context, including more informal gathering of information about young people's wellbeing, and the development of online training opportunities for staff.

Working and learning remotely had offered advantages for relationship development for some, including being able to attend meetings and engage with young people, but challenges for others. Network members noted the potential impact on mental health of having multiple consecutive meetings. Furthermore, the availability of the Network as a 'safe space' for members takes on additional significance in relation to their role in supporting school staff, in the context of increasing mental health difficulties facing young people (e.g. NHS Confederation, 2021) and the capacity of school staff to respond to these (OECD, 2021).

Network members shared a range of intentions for the future, with a variety of plans for making further progress towards their goals. While recognising that the impact of VSHT/CETs was not yet strongly reflected in routine data, many gave examples of improvements being made for individual young people, and capacity-building with individual or small groups of staff. Some members were gathering information, feedback, and data on these impacts more widely and routinely than others at present. Descriptions of future plans signalled members' intentions to 'scale up' their work, and to build on their existing relationships and data monitoring to enable the collection of further evidence for their work.

The role of the Network in supporting members with this scaling up, with improving data alignment and use both within and across local authorities, and in providing a forum for making connections and sharing good practice, has been identified by those who took part in evaluation interviews. In addition, the discussions with evaluation participants highlights the important role that VSHTs and CETs play, not only in engaging in collaborative working, but also in promoting this culture by actively making and managing connections.

Network members have been able to drive and develop relationships with a range of others, despite the pandemic, and have harnessed these relationships to make improvements for children and young people with care experience. The Network

continues to support its members to maintain and develop this key function, in this current phase of the pandemic and beyond.

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Appendix 1: Illustrative statements for the four focus themes

Data	Support and interventions
VSHTs know who all 'their' children are There are robust and accurate data collection systems (tracking/monitoring), which are locally and nationally aligned, and which allow a clear overview of where children and young people with care experience are, and how they are getting on. These systems facilitate the sharing of information across local authority boundaries where necessary, to enable smoother transitions for children educated 'out of authority'. The data can be used to inform a deeper understanding of effective funding use. The data collected include indicators of achievement, attainment, and wellbeing, including self-report or self-assessment by the children and young people themselves. It shows improvements for children and young people with care experience, and a reduced gap in comparison to all children and young people.	Support and interventions for children and young people have increased capacity; they are robust and sustainable; and are undertaken in individualised and bespoke ways. Services are more joined up, with systems and processes in place to support this Child's plans reflect a priority of educational engagement and achievement
Visibility and accessibility	**Capacity building and legacy**
There is increased visibility of the Virtual School Head Teacher as a point of contact in relation to the education of looked after and children and young people with care experience. There is increased awareness amongst all those with Corporate Parenting responsibilities, whether 'front line' or otherwise, of the needs of children and young people with care experience.	There is increased capacity amongst the workforce and carers– materials to upskill staff and foster parents/families/residential staff/kinship carers

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About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

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