Exploring feedback around membership of the Virtual School Head Teacher and Care Experienced Team Network

Discussion findings from a facilitated workshop

Sarah Deeley and Linda O'Neill

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Context

This paper has been produced following a meeting of the Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) and Care Experienced Team (CET) network. The meeting had representation from eight local authority areas, and in addition to this, two further areas submitted feedback and reflections on the theme prior to the meeting. Representatives from the Scottish Government Learning Directorate were also in attendance. The session was convened and facilitated by CELCIS on 6 October 2020 and held via Microsoft Teams.

The information contained in this document is drawn from a focused workshop which aimed to explore the unique role of VSHTs and CETs in relation to supporting children and families during COVID-19 and what impact, if any, members felt there had been for themselves, children and families, by being part of the VSHT and CET network.

Network members were sent two key questions for consideration prior to the meeting:

1 Why did having your specific role within your local authority make a difference to care experienced children and young people during lockdown?
2 Did the VSHT/CET network have an impact on supporting you in your role during lockdown? What, if any, impact did being part of the network have for the children and young people that you have responsibility for?

Method

Network members provided feedback to the group using post-its on a 'Jamboard'. There was significant discussion between members during the meeting and notes were taken of this to deepen and broaden understanding of the areas being highlighted by members.

Feedback from the group and the notes from the discussion were collated and coded by members of the CELCIS Education team to identify key themes. These themes are discussed in more detail below and include some specific examples of the Jamboard notes to illustrate identified themes.

This is the second of two papers which discusses the findings and feedback relating to the second key question about what impact, if any, being part of the network has had on practitioners and children and families with care experience. A separate paper has been produced which discusses the findings from key question one.

Themes arising from key question 2: Did the Virtual School Head Teachers/CET network have an impact in supporting you in your role during lockdown? What, if any, impact did being part of the network have for the children and young people that you have responsibility for?

Supportive role

The frequency of VSHT and CET Network meetings was increased during lockdown, with regular, shorter virtual sessions allowing members the opportunity to come together. An agenda with suggested discussion points was always shared prior to meetings, with a note of discussions following after. Mailing lists were shared and members were encouraged to communicate openly between meetings. A Slack (instant messaging platform) channel offers additional way of supporting communication and dialogue. Members describe the network as being a 'key place to come for support'.

> **"I love the fact you can ask a question that you know someone will be able to help you with and totally understands why you are asking it."**

> I found the Virtual Network hugely supportive and beneficial during lockdown. As it was new to us all, along with our jobs being relatively new, it was really interesting to learn what all authorities were doing

Sharing practice

Network members have highlighted the benefits of hearing first-hand how other local authorities of different sizes and demographics were responding to lockdown. There is no one, consistent approach to implementing the role of VSHT or CET across Scotland at present. This is an area of strategic focus for the network, and work is underway to identify the common, shared roles and responsibilities that define these posts. During lockdown, some areas developed new and innovative approaches to supporting care experienced children and families which have been disseminated via network members to other sectors within their local authority. Despite the varying approaches to VSHT and CET implementation currently underway, the underlying and guiding principles and values of improving educational experiences and outcomes for all care experienced children is shared by all members. The dissemination and sharing of information helped

to ensure that all members could access a range of new and helpful information and resources which could support children and families. This also saved precious time and capacity as documents and resources could be amended to suit local contexts rather than each local area having to start from scratch.

"Hearing what colleagues in other authorities were doing. Different LAs of different sizes used VHTs/CETs in very different ways. Sharing resources for schools and Children's Services was useful. I shared certain docs with Residential Managers, some with Education Managers"

I think just knowing that everyone was in the same boat was helpful. Some days felt really isolated and lost, then when we had our calls it all made sense and suddenly realised everyone was in the same boat.

The network impacted by allowing me to implement anything new that the group would discuss, approaches that were shared that were positive and also reassurance about our role and what we are doing collectively is making a difference.

Information and document sharing

In line with the supportive nature of the VSHT and CET network, there has been open and willing sharing of information and documents. This has ranged from key legislation and policy updates, good practice guidance, training resources and materials and relevant reading. As the role is relatively new in many local authorities, a number of policies and procedures have yet to be developed. Network members have supported each other in the development of such.

"I found the network beneficial with colleagues sharing best practice and how this may be implemented into the daily job role. Also sharing resources via email has been useful for colleagues within different local authorities to benefit from"
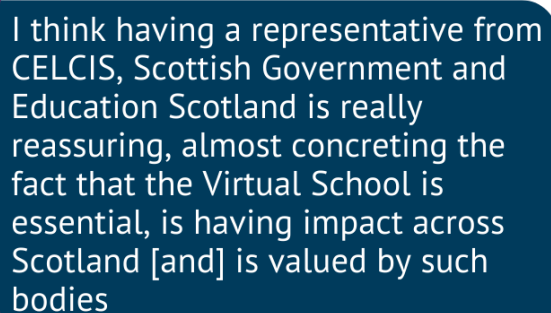
> It was good to be able to share new policies and procedures that had been developed so that other areas didn't need to start from scratch

Networking and connections

The network has allowed members to forge connections that have been beneficial when discussing individual children and young people across authorities. It also allowed communication between members regarding specific issues or questions. While meetings had to be held virtually as a result of lockdown, benefits have been noted in terms of reduced travel time and increased accessibility, particularly for members located in more remote regions.

"It helped to have named links in other authorities to contact, regarding children and young people. Also for help with specific questions/issues"

"Meeting virtually has been more effective as a 'virtual' network and saved travel time"

> I think having a representative from CELCIS, Scottish Government and Education Scotland is really reassuring, almost concreting the fact that the Virtual School is essential, is having impact across Scotland [and] is valued by such bodies

Improved outcomes for young people

The VSHT and CET network works alongside and champions the needs of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Scotland. There is a strong sense of values and commitment to improving outcomes at every network meeting.

"Knowing what was happening in other local authorities for care experienced children meant that I was able to link in to access support for children/young people from my local authority who were educated in other areas"

It was the one group that I was part of that facilitated honest and open discussion around the real issues for these children

Care Experienced Fund and reports

Many of the VSHT and CET network members complete the care experienced funding reports for the Scottish Government themselves. They have appreciated the support of having representatives from Scottish Government as members of the network providing clarity and guidance of content requirements, as well as the opportunity to think and share with other network members going through the same process for their respective settings.

"Catching up with CELCIS to ask that the meeting discussed reporting when a return to a Scottish Government was due - was really good to have another person actually interested as much as I am in our care experienced young people"

It was and is always a key place to come for help with Scottish Government reporting back and asking for clarity. Scottish Government have been a great help

Conclusion

Network members have found being part of the network very valuable, particularly during lockdown. There is a strong sense of peer support being available, and offered, by the network alongside a collegiate approach to problem solving and information sharing.

This open, sharing approach will have ensured that valuable time is saved on tasks such as producing documents from scratch, gathering information on different approaches and finding evidence of what works. By using this approach, Network members will have been able to free up other time to focus on other priority tasks which impact on children and families.

There is also a strong sense that having national bodies such as Scottish Government, Education Scotland and CELCIS as equal participants in the network contributes to a robust feedback loop between policy and practice. This is important to ensure a shared understanding for both the bridges and barriers to improvement.

Acknowledging the willingness, curiosity and passion of network members in this work is important. There is a strong theme around the robust and trusting relationships which have been built as the network has developed and this is only possible due to the individual contributions from each member which, collectively, allow the principles and values which underpin the work to be experienced by members, and by the children and families with whom they work.

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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Visit: www.celcis.org   **Email:** celcis@strath.ac.uk   **Tel:** 0141 444 8500