Virtual School Head Teacher and Care Experienced Teams' Phone Survey

Findings Summary Practice Paper

Leanne McIver and Linda O'Neill

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Context

A phone survey was carried out by the CELCIS Education Team in October 2020 with the members of the Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) and Care Experienced Team (CET) Network. The purpose of the survey was to gather information about the role, remit, and responsibilities of the network members in their developing roles. This survey was carried out as a continuation of work that was undertaken by network members in January 2020, which examined the roles and remits of individual members. The roles and remits work, and subsequent paper 'Exploring the roles and responsibilities of Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experienced Teams in Scotland, September 2020' identified that there were areas of the role that would benefit from a more in depth understanding, particularly around the similarities and differences in the development of the role across the areas involved.

The importance of understanding the role and function of Virtual School Head Teacher is highlighted by OFSTED (2012), who reported on the impact of Virtual Schools in England, and identified a number of features considered likely to influence this, including the position or level of seniority of the VSHT within the local authority, and the opportunities for multi-disciplinary working. The overall aims of the evaluation element of the network are to explore the developing role of VSHTs and CETs in Scotland, to begin to monitor and evidence their impact, and to understand the role of the network in supporting them.

Members of the CELCIS Education Team developed survey questions based on discussions with network members, analysis of the roles and responsibilities paper and the need to understand how, or if, the role had changed to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke to each network member individually, either via phone or video call. The responses to the questions were recorded using Qualtrics software which was then collated and reported on by a member of the CELCIS Research team.

Responses were recorded from 12 individuals (therefore 12 local authorities); Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, Dundee City, East Lothian, Fife, Glasgow City, Midlothian, North Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, and Stirling. The responses and narrative are contained within this paper alongside proposals for next steps in developing the understanding of this role further. These findings will contribute to the broader evaluation associated with the network, described below.

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1. Individuals' Roles

This section contained specific technical questions related to individual members' roles.

1.1   Job title

	Virtual Head or similar	**Principal Teacher (PT)**	**Other**
Responses	8	2	2

1.2 If your job title is not VSHT, is it often referred to as 'like' a VSHT or fulfilling the role of a VSHT?

- Of the four respondents whose job title is not given as VSHT, one (a Principal Teacher) indicated that the job is described as being like a VSHT. The three remaining respondents did not feel their role is referred to, or described, as being like a VSHT, but it did have a specific focus on improving educational experiences for care experienced children and young people.

1.3 How long has this post been in operation in your authority?

- Longest: since Dec 2015.
- Seven were appointed in the latter half of the 2018-19 school year (i.e. January to June 2019)
- Two were appointed early in the 2019-20 school year (Aug-Oct 2019)
- Two had no response recorded

Most network members had therefore been in post for between 12 and 20 months.

In response to this question, a small number of respondents also provided information about contract duration, indicating that their posts were funded for more than two years. Additionally, some members explained that their contract had been extended whilst they had been in post and their original contract had been shorter. See also 1.7 and 1.8 below.

1.4 Is your post 1.0 FTE (Full Time Equivalent)? If not, what is your FTE for this role?

	1.0 FTE	**0.4 FTE (equivalent to 2 days)**
Responses	11	1

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1.5 Do you have a job/remit description?

	Yes	No
Responses	10	2

Of the two members who did not have a job/remit description, one was a VSHT and one had an 'other' job title recorded.

A small number of respondents indicated that it was part of their role, either formally or informally, to develop the exact remit of the post, and/or to expand it as required.

1.6 Is your post funded by the care experienced children and young people fund?

	Yes	No
Responses	10	2

Of the two respondents' whose post is not funded through the care experienced children and young people fund, one is funded through the overall Attainment Challenge budget and one through the main education budget.

1.7 Is your post permanent or temporary?

	Temporary	Permanent	No response
Responses	9	2	1

1.8 If your post is temporary, do you have a date that your contract is due to end?

Of the nine who indicated that their contract is temporary:

	Yes	No response
Responses	8	1

Most who indicated a temporary contract specified that their current contract is due to end in early to mid-2021, although some had informal information that it may be extended, and some described contracts as 'rolling temporary'.

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1.9 What was your post/role/job title prior to this post?

- Three Head Teachers (two Primary, one Additional Support Needs)
- Seven Depute Head Teachers (five secondary, two not given)
- One teacher (Secondary and Additional Support for Learning)
- One other

1.10 Further information

Various aspects of the role were described in the survey conversations. These highlighted:

- Some variations between local authorities around:
  - how the role was created and funded (including some roles within teams being funded from different funding streams)
  - how and by whom the purpose/remit of the role was defined. Some respondents were given explicit guidance to develop the role as they saw fit from the outset, while others felt that the development of the role had been more recent and incremental; some had clear job descriptions, while others based their work around 'aims' or 'improvement plans'.
  - whether this role was stand-alone, or part of a wider remit/mixing of roles, e.g. with wellbeing, inclusion, vulnerable children more generally.
- A range of sources of information have been used by members to help understand, develop, and implement the role (including the Aberdeen City VSHT Toolkit, CELCIS information including Looked After and Learning, information on the English VSHT model)
- Some posts initially had a specific focus on, for example, transitions, or children facing exclusion. Often members described that the role had broadened as time has gone on.
- The name 'Virtual School' or 'Virtual School Head' doesn't always clearly communicate to others what the role actually is; the title of the post may be causing some confusion, particularly the conflation of the terms 'virtual' and 'online'.

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2. Virtual School/Care Experienced Team, and working with others

Respondents were asked to consider their own team (if any), and others with whom they work in partnership as part of their role.

2.1 Do you have a virtual school team?

	Yes	**No**
Responses	8	4

Subsequent questions for those responding YES asked about team membership and management (e.g. number in teams, number of full time equivalent (FTE) posts, job titles, line management of team members, and specialism of team members). Respondents gave detailed descriptions of their teams, which varied widely between local authorities and did not therefore lend themselves to a simple comparative summary. Nevertheless, the following points emerged:

- Teams were described by respondents as ranging from two to more than 20 (FTE) members
- A wide variety of job titles were described, including teachers (DHTs, PTs, Teachers), educational psychologists, welfare officers, youth workers, child development officers, education support officers, learning assistants, social work assistants and administrators.
- Five members indicated having line management responsibility for their team members, three members did not.
- Six described their team as multi-agency, and two described their team as single-agency; the single agency teams were based in education.
- One respondent in particular noted the changes in team structure which had resulted from the local authority's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Informal information from network members indicates that many individuals associated with VSHTs/CETs were required to adapt their work in that context, and there is an implication that in some (although not all) instances this shifted the focus of the work away from looked after and care experienced children to 'vulnerable' populations more generally.

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Those respondents who indicated they did not have a team were asked 'Do you have colleagues that you regard as part of an 'informal' or 'hidden' team that you seek/provide support to, or who you meet with regularly to discuss service provision with?'

- All four indicated that they did, to at least some extent.
- Responses included descriptions of efforts to establish or build on relationships with others within the local authority (including in education and social work, at varying levels of seniority), and in health, as well as relationships which have developed organically.
- The impact of COVID-19 was also mentioned in relation to this.

2.2 Do you link with your local area's Education Scotland Attainment Advisor?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	10	1	1

2.3 Do you have access to (information management system) SEEMIS? If so, do you (or your team) complete pastoral notes?

	Access to SEEMIS	No access to SEEMIS
Responses	11	1

Out of the 11 respondents who reported having access to SEEMIS:

	Complete pastoral notes	Do not complete pastoral notes
Responses	1	10

2.4 Do you have responsibility for organising training and development of staff that aren't in your direct team?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	9	2	1

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2.5 Do you receive supervision, either formal or informal?

	Yes	**No**	**No response**
Responses	5	6	1

Out of the five respondents who said 'yes', two specified that this was formal.

2.6 Further information

A number of additional points emerged from the survey conversations:

- Variations between local authorities around seniority, involvement in different groups and meetings, the extent to which the role had influence and credibility, and the extent to which post holders could ask questions and challenge practice of schools.
- There can be a lack of clarity around where this role 'sits' amongst other roles and structures within a local authority; there can exist a wide range of individuals who have a remit which relates in some way to care experienced children and young people
- Team members can be drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, including teaching, educational psychology, social work, residential care, employability, classroom assistant, counselling and foster carers.
- In some cases, multi-agency working is formalised, but when this is not the case, there is important informal networking to promote interagency working.

3. Children, young people, and families

This section sought to understand the specific focus of VSHTs and CETs areas of work and the nature of support provided to children, young people and families.

3.1 Do you have any specific 'target group(s)' that are the main focus of your work?

- The overall focus for the majority of members was on improving educational experience and outcomes for looked after and care experienced children and young people
- Some members had a more specific focus e.g. secondary school pupils identified as having 'poor attendance and engagement', young people at risk of exclusion, transitions.
- Children and young people living in specific settings were also identified by some members (e.g. looked after at home, kinship, residential). These areas of focus were identified either due to local authority priorities, or using data to identify evidence of need.

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3.2 Do you have a specific age group that you work with or have responsibility for? E.g. primary, secondary, eight-12 year olds

	School Age (Primary/ Secondary)	Age 2- 26	No specific age group
Responses	6	1	5

3.3 Do you work with or have responsibility for children in Early Years?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	3	8	1

3.4 Do you work with or have responsibility for young people in further or higher education?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	5	6	1

3.5 Do you have any responsibility for young people in post-school destinations who aren't in further or higher education?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	5	6	1

3.6 Do you work directly with children and young people?

	Yes	No
Responses	7	5

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3.7 Additional Information included:

- Some respondents had a focus on particular groups (e.g. looked after at home or in kinship care, specific age groups) but linked in some way with others with complementary remits (e.g. fostering, further and higher education, Throughcare and Aftercare) or were in a position to signpost to other professionals as required.
  - o Sometimes the focus on a particular group was considered too narrow, but there was also the recognition that a wider focus would require more capacity than was available.
- Some members had direct responsibility for the allocation of funding; this could be requested by individual nurseries/schools. This was not part of the role for some.
- Some held routine meetings for Designated Managers

4. Strategic elements

The questions within this section aimed to understand the system that the VSHT or CET was part of, and their role within it, in their local authority.

4.1 Would you describe your role as more strategic or operational?

	Strategic	Strategic and operational
Responses	4	8

There were variations in how members felt this worked in practice. Some felt that their role was intended to have more emphasis on one area (either strategic or operational), but that it was common for members to feel 'pulled' in other directions and for these areas to overlap; some reported that the balance of strategic and operational work had fluctuated or developed over time, and that the balance wasn't always in favour of where they felt they could impact the greatest change.

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4.2 Do you have clearly defined and agreed strategic objectives?

	Yes	No
Responses	10	2

Some respondents referenced that these were defined in local authorities Corporate Parenting plans. Sometimes these were shared across different plans relating to looked after and care experienced young people, including broader Children's Services Plans.

Objectives and outcomes described in survey conversations tended to focus on:

- Attendance, attainment, exclusions, positive destinations
- Data
  o Tracking and monitoring; developing or improving systems for tracking and monitoring; audits
- Voice, involvement, participation, working with Champions Boards
- Capacity building/ awareness raising and training
  o Corporate parenting broadly
  o developing the Designated Manager role
- Planning and policy development; alignment with The Promise;
- Support, Wellbeing and Mental Health

4.3 Do you have a strategic plan or improvement plan that is specific to the virtual school/your or your team's role?

	Yes	No
Responses	9	3

4.4 Is your role or your team's role included in the strategic or improvement plan for your wider service?

	Yes	Don't know
Responses	11	1

4.5 Do you have responsibility for managing budgets?

	Yes	No
Responses	9	3

Most respondents who had budget management responsibilities indicated that this was the Scottish Government care experienced attainment funding.

4.6 Do you have responsibility for commissioning services or projects?

	Yes	No
Responses	7	5

4.7 Do you have responsibility for collecting/collating/reporting data?

	Yes	No
Responses	11	1

Respondents who answered YES were then asked to outline what data they collect/collate/report.

- Most commonly identified was data around attendance, exclusions, and attainment.
    - Some specified attainment data for Curriculum for Excellence as well as SQA (i.e. broad general education phase, as well as senior phase qualifications); others were involved with SQA data only
- Wellbeing, Additional Support Needs, and positive destinations were also frequently mentioned.
- Other data collection included information about 'outwith authority placements', training data, information aligned with improvement or action plans, information about impact, information relating to mentoring programmes, information on approved flexible packages, financial/spending data
- Some respondents indicated changes or additions they had made to data collection, including piloting collection of wellbeing data, changes to frequency of collection, developing more granular indicators, additional details such as IT access (during lockdown)
- Respondents described a variety of ways in which their work was reported on, including plans, charters, financial reporting, annual reporting

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- Some members mentioned working closely with others in the local authority who were involved in data collection, analysis, and reporting

Overall there appeared to be wide variations in the data collected, and associated analysis/reporting. Some members noted that they were engaged in a process of expanding, improving, or refining the data collection in their local authority. Some had support from colleagues with a specific remit for data, while others did not.

4.8. Do you have responsibility for writing your local authority funding return on the care experienced funding for Scottish Government? If you have this responsibility, do you write it in full or in part?

	Yes	No
Responses	10	2

Out of the 10 responses who responded 'yes':

	In full	In part
Responses	6	4

5. Visibility

Questions in this area were designed to understand how visible the role was publically, and how children, young people, families and practitioners could access or find out more about the service.

5.1 Does your service have a website explaining your role/role of the team?

	Yes (launched or in development)	No	No response
Responses	5	6	1

5.2 Does your service have social media?

	Yes	No	No response
Responses	5	6	1

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These responses did not entirely overlap.

	Both website and social media	Neither
Responses	3	4

Most common were Twitter and Facebook.

Sometimes website/social media were shared or linked with other related local authority teams or services.

One respondent noted reluctance to build an online presence when the future of the post/team is unclear.

5.3 Can children or families contact you directly to request support or information?

	Yes	No
Responses	6	6

Respondents were then asked, if yes, where could they find the information to contact you?

- Contact details may be available on council or school websites, which may be promoted via social media or found via search engine. In some instances, these pages may be blocked from within the council.
- Personal contact via social workers, adoption and fostering agencies, school staff etc. can also be a source of information for children and families
- Contact is nevertheless mainly via professionals rather than directly from children/families.

And if no, what routes do children and families use to request support and information?

- Contact is usually through school, social work, other support services
- May be through awareness-raising by attending carers' groups and other meetings

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6. Conclusions

The information given by the Network members as part of this survey shows that although there are many parallels and commonalities in their roles and remits, there are also differences in the establishment and development of the work. These responses inform our increasing understanding of the role, and of the ways in which the network can best support its members. The findings from this survey, as well as further information-gathering activity in the remainder of the school year, will contribute to the evaluation work which is ongoing alongside the development of the network. The evaluation work seeks to monitor and understand the developing VSHT/CET role in Scotland, and the function of the network in supporting this development.

The evidence from England suggests that the role of VSHT, or a Care Experienced Team, can have a significant and positive impact on care experienced pupils' experiences and attainment at school and on all levels of the system (e.g. Berridge et al., 2009; OFSTED, 2012; Drew & Banerjee, 2018; Rivers, 2018; Sebba & Berridge, 2019). There are key elements that have been identified in the English model that contribute towards this, including placing the role in a senior position within the local authority, with the associated autonomy, seniority and the power and voice to influence decisions; having clear duties and responsibilities which are discharged consistently and impactfully in relation to children and families; and the use of evidence and participation to develop, design and shape services.

Work going forward with this network will continue to seek to understand the similarities and differences between the developing Scottish model, international developments, and the statutory English model, ensuring that there is specific, intentional work and conversation around the embedding of practice, principles and evidence of what has been shown to work most effectively for children and families.

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