National Association of Virtual School Heads
Looking after learning

August 2018

Dear Sue, Allan and Matthew

VIRTUAL SCHOOL - CHILDREN'S SERVICES PEER CHALLENGE: Suffolk
10th and 11th July 2018

Thank you for taking part in the third National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) peer challenge. The focus of this and future NAVSH peer challenges was around the efficiency and effectiveness of the Virtual School. More specifically, you asked us to look at the following:

- How does the Suffolk Virtual School positively impact on the progress and attainment of children and young people in its care?

- How does the Virtual School, alongside partners promote inclusive practice?

- How well positioned is the Virtual School to meet the new duties relating to those previously in care?

- How effectively does the Virtual School meet its ambition to always adopt a child centred approach?

Your preparatory work for this Peer Challenge was extensive and immensely helpful in enabling the Peer Challenge team to focus its activity appropriately. The team received a good welcome and excellent co-operation and support throughout the process. It was evident to the team that all those we met were interested in learning and continued development.

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. A team of peers used their experience to reflect on the evidence you presented through documentation, conversation and observation. We hope the conclusions, captured in our final presentation to you and in this letter, will assist you in your on-going improvement.

1. **Background**

    The NAVSH Peer Challenge business process has been developed through extensive consultation with its members and builds on the peer review model developed by the Local Government Association (LGA). There are also strong links with the ADCS. NAVSH in partnership with the LGA developed a bespoke training programme for Virtual School Heads. All regions of England were represented at the initial training. We have learned from previous pilots in Nottinghamshire and Lewisham.

2. **Process**

    The Peer Challenge in Suffolk was provided by a team led by: Jo Kavanagh, Assistant Director, Children's Services, Lincolnshire County Council; Jane Pickthall, Virtual School Head in North Tyneside and Immediate Past Chair of NAVSH; and Jackie

Edwards, Head of Service and VSH in Central Bedfordshire. Jackie is also the Eastern Region NAVSH representative. Kieran Barnes VSH in Lincolnshire supported the team both as an observer and a contributor to the review. The challenge was managed and coordinated by Alan Clifton, former Virtual School Head, North Yorkshire and a former Chair of NAVSH.

The team spent a day and a half in the Local Authority collecting evidence with which to frame their findings and then drew together and presented their conclusions on the afternoon of day two of the Peer Challenge. This activity took place on Tuesday 10th and Wednesday 11th July 2018. Prior to the on-site activity, colleagues in Suffolk shared a wide range of information with the team to support its preparations.

As well as a desk–based analysis of documentation, the Peer Challenge process included a range of interviews and focus group activities, with over 40 participants. We met officers at various levels within children's services, and a number of learning provider representatives.

As a result of this activity we identified over 80 strengths and areas for consideration, which have been refined and matched against the four broad headings of your scope, plus a 'headline' strengths and areas for consideration section. These headings form the basis of this letter.

It is important to note that:

• We can only report on what we saw, heard and read – and this was inevitably limited to what it is possible to achieve in a two-day period.

• Much of what we have identified will be familiar to you – and this was confirmed when we made our presentation on 20th March 2018 to Christine Fogg, Matthew Cooke and the Virtual School team. As the Corporate Director and Service Director were unable to attend the feedback session on 11th July a copy of the power point presentation has been included along with this letter for information.

3.   **Detailed Findings**

3.1 **Headline Strengths and Areas for Development**

      Strengths

      •   **The Leadership and commitment of the Virtual School team to improving outcomes through a more strategic, school improvement, approach.** There has been a change of focus within the team during the last one to two years. The team has moved from an operational to strategic approach. The Virtual School acknowledged there will be occasions when direct support to the children and young people in the care of Suffolk is required, however, this support is more likely to be provided directly by schools or commissioned services. The Virtual School team demonstrated a confidence in being able to provide both support and challenge to senior leaders in school. This was also evidenced during an earlier review undertaken by a local headteacher as a part of Suffolk's wider programme of school to school partnership, challenge and support.

'The Virtual School fights the fire - but we want to move to a 'colder approach'

- **The support and challenge provided by the Virtual School is understood and appreciated by schools.** The Virtual School has clear expectations with regard to the impact of Pupil Premium Plus. Personal Education Plans are internally scrutinised and the team's monitoring provides valued feedback to school designated teachers. The designated teachers the team spoke to supported the approach to eliminating permanent exclusion and the commissioned support the Virtual School provided to meet individual needs, through alternative provision, when considered appropriate.

- **The quality of the Virtual School tracking dashboard is good.** The Suffolk Virtual School demonstrated a good knowledge and understanding of the outcomes of their cohort. They also had systems in place to capture those children and young people in the care of other Local Authorities placed in Suffolk Schools. Performance data is available from early years through to Key Stage 4. This data is used to monitor individual children's progress and attainment. It is subsequently used to form the basis of the Virtual School Head's Annual Report and termly reports to the Virtual School Governing Body.

- **The Virtual School team's visits to schools are effectively recorded and take place against an agreed criterion that lead to improved outcomes for learners.** Sampling records of school visits made by the Virtual School team, specifically those made by the primary and secondary leads, provided evidence of the robust discussion that took place with senior leaders in schools. The Virtual School team's recent experience and expertise in school leadership, assessment and tracking has resulted in focused discussions on individual pupil progress. All schools are not provided with the same amount of time or contact from the Virtual School. There is a targeted approach to schools where progress is of most concern. The Peer Challenge team strongly agreed with this approach.

- **There is an innovative approach to the use of the Pupil Premium Plus Grant.** This can be evidenced through the impact of the commissioned work around alternative provision and the outreach work of the Raedwald Trust. Further examples were evident through the short-term funding provided to residential care homes, much appreciated by social care colleagues, the PATH model introduced by the Educational Psychology Service and bespoke packages for individual children.

Areas for consideration

- **Consider strengthening the formal and informal links between the VSH and the leadership of the social care field teams.** During the last two years the VSH and Virtual School team have developed strong working relationships with school leaders and with the Education and Learning teams within Suffolk County Council. However, the working relations and formal contact with children's social care field teams appears less strategic. The Peer Challenge team acknowledges that attendance of the VSH at weekly panel meetings chaired by the, Head of Corporate Parenting and at monthly corporate parenting management meetings is helpful. As is planned

attendance on the board of the Virtual School Governing Body. However, there appears little contact with Social Work Managers led by David Jacobs, Head of Social Care- field work. Meetings between the leadership of social care field teams and the VSH was described as '*rare and most likely on an individual child basis.*' This approach seems at odds with the Virtual School's ambitions to adopt a strategic approach.

- **Further strengthen performance data sharing between the Virtual School and social care.** The Peer Challenge team have already acknowledged that the Virtual School data dashboard is good. That said, it is currently not widely shared with partners. It would appear that other teams within the County Council, specifically social workers do not have access. There will be occasions, and not only when Personal Education Plans are being completed, that it will be beneficial for social workers and other colleagues to have up to date information on attendance, progress, fixed term exclusions and alternative provision relating to individual children. This is most likely to be a wider issue than one easily resolved by the Virtual School. It relates to the Management Information Systems used throughout Children and Young People's Services, who has access to these systems and the strategic approach to 'stand-alone' systems.

- **Continue developing the Virtual School dashboard** to include: information on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This may prove to be especially helpful when national research indicates a strong correlation between a high SDQ score and weaker progress and attainment. Another helpful addition would be the awareness of the number of school changes on a child's progress. This has been an area of focus for the Children's Commissioner for England recently. The next steps indicated in the report presented to the Peer Challenge team by the Deputy Head and Virtual School Office Manager are all worthy of consideration. Developing post 16 data was regarded by the team as a logical next step and in liaison with leaving care colleagues possibly those care leavers attending University. It is also worth considering how data might further shape the virtual school offer to address the issues the data highlights?

- **Look at how to strengthen the interface between PEP documents and PEP meetings to ensure pupil voice is more explicit and actions for the young person, school, Social Worker and carer are shared and understood.** At this snapshot in time there appeared a disparity between PEP compliance in the submission of PEP documents and PEP meeting records and on which system they are recorded. PEP documents are completed termly by the Designated Teacher, while PEP meetings are held before each statutory review, lead by Social Workers. The completed sections of both need to be saved to one system with agreed access. Significant work has been undertaken by the Virtual School team on PEP documents. The focus being to improve learning objectives and ensure that educational outcomes and attainment are central to all objectives set. The Virtual School shared redacted PEP documents with the Peer Review team. Where PEPs were good, they were thorough and indicated: expected outcomes; safeguarding; progress and future plans; new and previous learning objectives; educational support and achievement; use of pupil premium grant and a summary of discussion. Termly progress reports were included and the Pupil Passport that includes the child's views on how they could be best supported. The Virtual School's own recording on PEP compliance was high on PEP documents at around 95% but significantly less

so when records of the PEP meeting were included. This appeared primarily due to the delay in PEP meeting records being forwarded to the Virtual School team. In the partnership meeting with social care colleagues, senior social workers and managers described confidently how PEP meeting records were completed, the focus on young person's voice and all the statutory requirements. PEP meeting records should be completed at least every 6 months, in line with statutory guidance, with the legal responsibility of the PEP sitting with the social worker. The issue to be addressed relates to process and not to one of quality.

3.2 How does the Suffolk Virtual School positively impact on the progress and attainment of children and young people in its care?

A number of headline strengths around progress and attainment are set out on pages 2 and 3 of this letter. The Peer Challenge team's focus has not been on longitudinal trends due in part to the changes in curriculum and methods of assessment. We did, however, compare performance at each key stage to the previous years and the comparison with national and statistical neighbour's data. We note the overall Suffolk focus on improving outcomes in mathematics.

Strengths

- A good use of data analysis and dashboard. The team understand their roles and responsibilities and are committed to making a difference strategically. There is an effective use of Fisher Family Trust (FFT) data to provide additional challenge to schools. The use of RAG ratings is helpful especially when applied to attendance monitoring. The Statistical First Release in 2017 showed strong performance at Key Stage 2 in Reading, Writing and Mathematics compared to both national children in care results and statistical neighbours. Results at Key Stage 4 showed Suffolk to have slightly better progress scores than National and Statistical neighbours but lower attainment measures.

- The VS team visits are effectively recorded and take place against an agreed criterion with the aim to improve outcomes for learners.

- Termly compliance of PEP documents is strong at 95%. PEP analysis indicates a change in practice for year 11 PEPs after evaluation in the summer 2017. This approach and next steps are set out in the Secondary PEP self-evaluation document and approach to PEP improvement 2017-2018. An earlier deadline was set for PEPs in the summer term to improve transition planning.

- The leadership of the VSH has led to a clear vision to improve the educational outcomes for children in care within the Virtual School team and Education and Learning Services. There is very much a school improvement model with clear measurable outcomes. This is evidenced by the 2016 and 2017 VSH annual reports and the termly reports to the governing body, as well as the dashboard and the reports that can be generated from the dashboard.

- The VSH annual reports are clear and indicate performance across early years and key stages. The reports provide a useful benchmark against national performance and those children in the care of statistical neighbors, all of which assist in setting targets. Further developments for the VSH

annual report may be: to include children and young people case vignettes; the voice of the child including action arising from this and how the success of children and young people has been celebrated by the Virtual School and partners.

- Effective data analysis nationally has identified a link between SDQ scores and outcomes. This work is just starting to be developed in Suffolk and is worthy of further focus which could link with the work of the psychological services the Virtual School commission.

- The number of young people achieving no qualifications at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2017 was 25.7% which is in line with 26% nationally who do not gain any qualification. However, all of these young people in Suffolk's coort have been monitored and supported since. NEET figures from this cohort are low with less than 25% of those who achieved no formal qualifications in 2017 being NEET in 2018. The work of the Virtual School Post 16 lead and the NEET lead in the leaving care team is contributing to the low NEET figures overall. The developing work with Suffolk New College being a good example of the approach being taken to reduce NEET figures and develop good practice in FE provision.

Areas for Consideration

- Strengthen the understanding and recognition from schools to the links between improving social and emotional well-being and educational outcomes. This can then be further linked to effective use of the Pupil Premium Grant. It may be helpful for the Virtual School to think of positive impact in terms of progress, attainment and social and emotional well- being. There is an opportunity to work with schools to increase their knowledge and understanding of not only SDQs but other ways of assessing and supporting social and emotional health.

- Consider closer monitoring of care leavers at University, in partnership with the leaving care team. This should include pathways to higher education. It is worth reviewing partnerships with universities, the opportunity for children and young people to visit university and significantly the positive impact some of the 14 care leavers from Suffolk currently in higher education may have on younger children and young people in care.

- Whilst acknowledging there has been some very good work with those of post Key Stage 4 age in 2017 there were a significant number of pupils that achieved no qualifications. Continue to work closely with schools, the Raedwald Trust outreach provision and other partners to ensure all children in your care achieve some external accreditation at the end of Key Stage 4.

- Implement the dashboard next steps as set out on page 3 and through your own self-evaluation.

- Consider reviewing the terms of reference and membership of the Virtual School Governing Body. The minutes of termly meetings show senior leaders have membership but are not always able to attend. Could a colleague deputise to ensure the governing body is always able to support the work and influence the strategic direction of the Virtual School? It is worth thinking further about how the children in care council may be better

represented at Governing Body meetings. How might the membership and regular attendance of the chair of the foster carer's association improve foster carer's contribution to the group and how can the social care field work managers/teams affect both operational and strategic work?

- We saw examples of good practice in relation to key stage 5 monitoring both through links with Suffolk New College and the UASC team. However, the quality of support and oversight of children in care in further education is negatively impacted by the high numbers in certain colleges. This has resulted in PEP meetings taking place in FE colleges without a member of the college staff in attendance. Consider how the non-statutory role of designated teacher in FE colleges might be developed. This will be a challenge with no specific post 16 funding. As a minimum, the strategic relationship between FE providers and the local authority may need strengthening.

3.3 How does the Virtual School, alongside partners, promote inclusive practice?

Strengths

- The Pupil Premium Grant retained by the Virtual School is used to commission some innovative practice with partners. This is especially so for those identified as having complex needs. The Outreach project with Raedwald Trust has expanded considerably since September 2017. There are plans in place to develop a hub for the Lowestoft area in September 2018 to complement the work currently being undertaken in the south and west of the county. There are strong partnerships with schools with termly progress that includes the application of 'thrive' strategies for emotional and social development needs.

   'Heads understand we're in the school improvement game together'

- Further examples of the innovative use of PPG with partners include a partnership with a large Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) to pool PPG from Suffolk Virtual School across all their schools. This was then utilised by the MAT to develop Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) and provide training for staff. Significant funding was also provided for local authority residential managers to employ short term learning providers in the best interests of the child. Residential managers and social workers greatly appreciated this short-term funding support.

- Acknowledging the Virtual School have adopted a strong outcomes-based approach to targeting their work, evidence from Designated Teachers indicated there was also a focus on children being happy in the school, college, or setting they were attending.

- The PEP document and processes around this is liked by schools specifically because there is a greater emphasis on learning. Schools generally supported the scrutiny and feedback provided by the Virtual School.

- Recent developments include the use of 'Twitter' and 'Facebook Live' to better engage carers and provide additional advice and support.

- There is a well-established Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) lead within the team and most recently (April 2018) a SEND consultant has been supporting the work of the Virtual School on a part time basis. The VSH articulated that this additional staffing resource was to further strengthen inclusive practice. At this time, it was not possible to ascertain strategic impact due to the short timescale since the changes were introduced.

- The VSH and the Virtual School team appear to have strong partnership links across the eastern region. The VSH is an integral part of the regional VSH network and has attended national NAVSH conferences to share good practice. Recently the Virtual School team attended an eastern region conference organised by the Suffolk Deputy VSH in collaboration with three other Virtual School practitioners to support the continuing professional development of colleagues within Virtual School teams.

- Partnership work within Education and Learning appears to support a corporate commitment to supporting children in care achieve better outcomes. This includes the work of admissions and Family Services within Inclusion. There is a clear strategy across services including a strong commitment from children's social care that no child in care will be permanently excluded. The focus has now moved to reducing fixed term exclusions.

- Good collaboration with the University of Suffolk was seen through the development of a master's module: developing the role of the Designated Teacher in schools.

Areas for Consideration

- The internal moderation of PEPs by the Virtual School team is robust. However, no-one external to the Virtual School team plays any part in the moderation of the PEP document. We would ask the Virtual School team to widen the level of scrutiny perhaps not on a termly basis but possibly on an annual basis. This work may appeal to a small number of designated teachers and social workers for their own professional development. Names can be redacted to allow this process. Other opportunities would include colleagues within the Education and Learning business unit or colleagues in other Virtual Schools where there might be a reciprocal arrangement.

- Linked to the last area for consideration, there would appear to be a greater role for leaders and managers within social care to further develop their role in relation to improving timeliness and completion rates and quality assuring PEP meetings in line with statutory guidance.

- Whilst PEP documents are saved to the social care field team's shared folders which all social workers have access to, they are not stored on a social care case recording system and social workers have no access to the Virtual School dashboard. The Peer Challenge team are of the view that access should be considered in the short term and in the longer term a review of what data is held on each MIS will potentially have a significantly positive impact on partnership working.

- Attendance at training led by the Virtual School was shared with the Peer Challenge team. This indicated events for new to role DTs, established DTs and post 16 DTs attracted 146 attendees from 105 schools, settings and colleges. There was less evidence of impact from this training than from school visits and PEP scrutiny. It is unclear whether the Virtual School team attend and contribute to training led by social care colleagues. There may be an opportunity to develop cross service/directorate training to further empower all staff to understand each other's responsibilities. Some obvious opportunities emerge through this approach namely: care planning legislation, development on social worker's role at PEP meetings and in education planning in general, SDQ completion and triangulation, the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer to name but some of the professional teams.

3.4 How well positioned is the Virtual School to meet the new duties relating to those who have previously been in care?

Strengths

- The Virtual School has updated their website setting out the new statutory responsibilities they have around providing advice and guidance for those previously in care.

- An internal audit has been undertaken within the local authority to determine whether there was currently sufficient capacity to meet the new duties. This internal audit concluded there was sufficient capacity.

- There has been regular communication with head teachers and designated teachers through network meetings, newsletters and e-mails. From the verbal evidence provided by the DTs and other school staff we met during the review the responsibilities for those previously in care children is firmly on their 'radar' already.

- A new position is being created within the team supported by additional funding. This new role will involve developing a Virtual School team response to previously looked after children. It will further involve developing focus groups, publishing a frequently asked questions guide and setting up Facebook live events. It is pleasing to be able to acknowledge the close working relationship with Suffolk Carers and Parent Network who the position is being created in partnership with.

- All requests for advice and guidance relating to those previously in care is being logged by the Virtual School team. This will allow a review, over time, to show where requests have been dealt with by the VSH or the team and those instances where callers have been signposted to other services within Suffolk. This work is important to judge whether the initial internal audit around capacity was accurate.

Areas for Consideration

- It is important to recognise that the funding received by schools for this cohort is dependent upon those with legal responsibility (for those previously in care) informing schools, so they in turn can claim the pupil premium plus on the January school census. Part of the new role being created will need to consider how they might support schools to encourage more parents and

guardians to inform school of their child's legal status. Partnership work with adoptive parents and guardians' groups locally may assist in this process, as well joint planning with social care colleagues.

- In line with the information provided from the internal audit, meeting statutory guidance in September needs to be a high priority for the Virtual School and partners.

  It is important across service approach is planned and implemented to raise awareness but also to set out realistic expectations.

3.5 How effectively does the Virtual School meet its ambition to always adopt a child-centred approach?

Strengths

- The PATH model in place provides evidence of support on an individual basis to children and young people. The anecdotal feedback and recording of a young person's feedback evidenced the value the young people felt for the process and finished plan.

  PATH is enhancing the likelihood and engagement in achieving goals

- There is a good example of commissioned educational psychology service involvement with PEP meetings to ensure a child centred approach. Although we sampled very few PEP meeting records, a child centred approach was evident. This approach was further supported by social workers during the partnership working focus group.

- From the small sample of PEP documents the strongest had good examples of the student passport and included sections on 'Things I would like you to know' and 'How best to support me'

- From the case studies provided, the video, 'Mark's Story', provided a good example of how best to capture a young person's voice to change practice at a strategic level. We are confident that the continued engagement of local authority managers and business partners in providing opportunities for care leavers will continue through the use of the video.

- During the Peer Challenge team's visit to a local school, the young people the team met were very positive about their school experience and felt both supported and, most significantly, wanted by their school. The impact of the support the Raedwald Trust were providing was highlighted during the discussions with the pupils.

  'We feel wanted' - student

- Although the evidence of pupil voice provided through reports to governors or directly through the minutes of the 'Young Person's Council' (YPC) is limited, one excellent example of the Virtual School implementing a request from the YPC is the request for greater support for those aged post 16. A post 16 lead is now in place – Michelle Bird joined the Virtual School with this responsibility in April 2018. There has also been a change of approach to make the post 16 PEP more fit for purpose.

- With recent staffing appointments in the Virtual School there has been a care experienced young person involved in the recruitment and selection process. This approach is applauded by the Peer Challenge team.

- Until recently the local authority approach to participation had been outsourced and provided by Catch 22. The responsibility and approach to participation has now returned to the local authority. This potentially provides a greater opportunity for cross service work and a wider input from all sections of the local authority as the Corporate Parent.

Areas for Consideration

- We believe that there is a commitment to celebrating the achievements of children and young people in the care of Suffolk County Council. However, with the exception of progress and attainment we read a limited amount that celebrated the wider achievement of children in care and care leavers in the VSH annual report, report to governors or from planned larger celebratory events. It may be that consultation with children and young people indicated that they did not want to attend a larger celebratory event but this is worth exploring further. There may also be an opportunity to show the progress and success of some of the 75 Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children through the support of a number of Suffolk staff.

- Pupil voice appears to be ad-hoc as opposed to there being a planned authority wide approach. Within the Secondary PEP self-evaluation document 2017-2018 the section on Young Person's voice judged good was low at 16.7%. In the August 2017 Primary PEP evaluation 21.68% were judged good or outstanding in relation to Pupil Voice. Although the May 2018 update report indicates progress is being made performance is well below the Virtual School's own Summer 2018 target.

- As the Virtual School's own self-evaluation identified, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the 'you said we did 'approach to children and young people and specifically the Suffolk Children and Young People's Council. This work has been started and should be continued.

- We would encourage you to review the consistency of a person-centred approach to PEP meetings and whether it is being effectively used by all social workers for the most vulnerable. Hopefully, as Signs of Safety becomes more embedded in practice, people will feel more confident using this approach in PEP meetings.

- The outcomes from the application of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire's (SDQ) to children and young people is known and well reported by the Virtual School. We would encourage greater triangulation between schools, carers and social workers. This would allow further analysis of emotional well-being in specific settings and environments capturing a more rounded view of each young person. It may also assist in the targeting of support, thus providing emotional support where it is most needed. Pupil Premium Grant may support the administrative costs of a school administering SDQs as the cost was identified as a barrier by a couple of DTs.

- From the documentation provided and from our time on site we were unsure if children and young people had assisted in shaping training for schools,

social workers and carers. Perhaps not only shaping training but participating in workshops and other approaches. If this is not in place it is worthy of consideration.

4. Next Steps

You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you incorporate the team's findings into your improvement plans. We hope that you find our reflections helpful.

It is important that this letter describes accurately what we have observed and analysed and that it provides you with an appropriate summary to facilitate change. If this letter contains any factual inaccuracies, or if you have any concerns or comments about the analysis or recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact Alan Clifton in the first instance and he will liaise with myself and the team to make amendments as appropriate. Once again, thank you for agreeing to receive a Peer Challenge and to everyone involved for their participation.

Yours sincerely
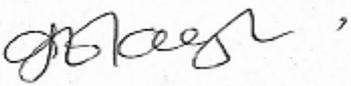
Jo Kavanagh
Lead for the Peer Challenge in Suffolk

Alan Clifton
Diagnostic Manager