



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

Exploring the unique role of the Virtual School Head Teacher or Care Experienced Team in relation to supporting children and families during COVID-19

Discussion findings from a facilitated workshop

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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.

It is important to begin to understand the roles and responsibilities that are being undertaken in local areas by VSHTs and CETs. This will support a developing awareness and understanding of how the roles can have the biggest positive impact on children and families outcomes and ensure that what children and families tell us is important to them, is at the heart of the relationships that are built. Understanding and clarifying the role will also help to ensure that the role is developed in response to the local context, but practice is aligned nationally. Children and families should receive the same high quality care and education regardless of which local authority they live in; national consistency in practice around these roles will be crucial in realising this for children and families.

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 was 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 each identified theme.

This is the first of two papers which discusses the findings and feedback related to the first key question about the unique role of the VSHT and CET during lockdown. A second paper discusses the findings and feedback related to the second key question about what, if any, impact, being part of the network has had on VSHTs, CETs and children and families.

Themes arising from Key Question 1: Why did having your specific role within your local authority make a difference to care experienced children and young people during lockdown?

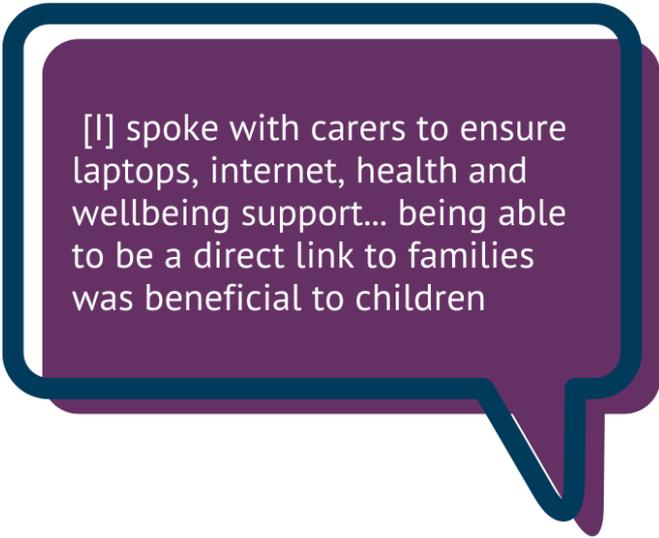
Individual support

Individual support was the most commonly recurring key theme across the VSHT and CET network. Members highlighted the crucial role that they played in being that one person who was able to focus specifically on care experienced children and who could champion their needs and rights. Many network members took on the responsibility for ensuring oversight of each care experienced child, whether they lived within or out with the Local Authority, and linked with their families, schools, placement providers, relevant professionals and third sector partners to ensure that they were getting the support they required. This support was individualised, personalised and took a number of forms.

Examples included 1-1 support, access to hubs, financial aid, digital access, enhanced transitions, resource provision and support for carers. Young people continued to be supported to achieve national qualifications.

“[We were able to get] resources out to families and young people. This included family activities and mental health support.... signposting for young people and adults”

“[I was] able to lead our team in creative responses. [We] had ongoing support in place for individual young people. [We did] lots of work around supporting children’s houses to access curriculum.”



[I] spoke with carers to ensure laptops, internet, health and wellbeing support... being able to be a direct link to families was beneficial to children

Arranging digital access

At the start of lockdown the VSHTs and CET recognised the important role access to digital technology would play in children and young people’s learning and their ability to stay connected with people who are important to them.

The impact of reduced or lack of digital access has subsequently been recognised via the Scottish Government’s [Connecting Scotland](#) programme. This issue has also been

highlighted through CELCIS's research '[Bridging the digital divide for care leavers. If not now, when?](#)'

VSHTs and CETs across Scotland were instrumental in identifying barriers to pupils accessing technology and problem solving to address this fundamental need. Laptops, digital hardware and internet access was sourced and provided to young people. A knowledge of individual children's plans and circumstances was required to understand different needs. Laptops, digital hardware and internet access were sourced and provided to young people, irrespective of their educational setting, the type of care they were receiving, or the location of their care placement. Young people living out with their local authority were afforded the same access to technology as those living within it.

"We also opened up our Attainment Fund again and made funding available for laptops for care experienced young people to engage in online learning"

Multi agency brokering

With the onset of lockdown, the VSHT and CET network members recognised their unique position within the local authority which allowed them to champion the needs and rights of children and young people across a range of setting and providers. Having an overview of all service providers ensured that any supports offered could be co-ordinated, holistic and allocated to meet the whole child and family's needs, aligned to the principles of GIRFEC. Some of these tasks included, but were not limited to:

- **Forging and strengthening multi-agency partnerships**
- **Coordinating support across a range of children's service partners**
- **Identifying and planning for needs beyond the curriculum**

Placements and supports were provided with a multi-agency perspective. Young people were matched with the most appropriate services to meet their needs as a result of increased awareness of what services were available across partner settings. Links were forged between different sectors, allowing for the most appropriate, specialised advice to be received.

"Support for families and lots of really good link up with other parts of our council and 3rd sector."



“[We put] Outdoor learning resources in place to support wellbeing and issued information to hubs, children’s houses, psychological services, kinship carers, GPs, etc.”

“We also linked in with the Champions Board and Active Schools and allocated sport packs to all the young people we work with, we facilitated some of the Champions Board virtual activities. Again, I feel that this strengthened our relationships with our partners.”

Non-academic resources (family support)

The VSHT and CET network recognised that lockdown had a further reaching impact than attainment and achievement, and that a holistic response to providing support must include non-academic resources as well. Partnerships have been developed with alternative care providers and outdoor resource centres; previous partnerships with sport facilitators have been revisited and strengthened and financial support has been provided for families to access food, return to school or summer fun activities, amongst others. Resources were also provided to families which included family activities and mental health supports.

Residential links

A key theme that emerged through network discussions was network members working with residential staff and young people both within and out with local authority settings. Members felt that overall, links and relationships with residential staff and houses were much stronger compared to pre lockdown. Through links with children’s houses, network members were able to arrange hub places, and provide updates and specific support in advance of young people’s return to school. In one area, mentors were re-deployed to provide support in Children’s Homes. Links with young people living out of authority were maintained and digital provision was supported where required.

“I was able to link with all 19 of our Children's Houses across the city during lockdown and arrange any specific requests for access to hub schools, outdoor resource centre support and EAL support. I also gave weekly updates to some of our schools to save them calling the Houses directly. Before schools went back I was able to ask all Houses to let me know if there were any young people

requiring support for their return in August and link in with the schools to set up support in advance.”

Support for schools in assessing vulnerability

The VSHT and CET role allowed network members to have an oversight of the support required for vulnerable children and maintain connections with children and families. Members were also well placed to identify and assess vulnerability as a result of their connections with multi-agency partners, providing a holistic view of children’s lives. As a result, they were ideally placed to support schools in the assessment of vulnerable young people and what supportive measures should be adopted in response. Examples include co-ordinating input between schools and social work where required, liaising directly with schools, supporting the return to school for vulnerable young people, supporting hubs in prioritising places, accessing and distributing supports and resources for vulnerable young people and encouraging schools to consider strengths as well as areas of need. This dual perspective allowed common themes to be identified which were used to inform funding and other decisions.



It proved to be an effective weekly meeting, with lots of early intervention taking place. I felt that it also alleviated a lot of the potential tensions between services, allowing open dialogue to take place.

“My role was more strategic: working with Service Leads of Social Work, Team Leaders in Health to weekly discuss the various concerns being raised from Head Teachers, Health Visitors and School Nurses. We set this group up at the very beginning of lockdown as a method of (hopefully) catching any young people who were missed. It proved to be an effective weekly meeting, with lots of early intervention taking place. I felt that it also alleviated a lot of the potential tensions between services, allowing open dialogue to take place. The discussions resulted in a Social Worker being allocated to every school, as a ‘go to’ for advice for education staff, this was hugely beneficial in reducing referrals to Initial Response Teams, where solutions could be

discussed prior to that point.



Arranging access to hubs

At the beginning of lockdown, there was some concern that the children may not be able to access hub support. Examples of how the VSHT and CET members addressed these concerns included VSHT and CET members advocating for specific children and young people to be allocated a space within a hub, supporting hubs directly in their provision of a service, assisting hubs to build their supports and resources and taking responsibility for liaising with school staff and carers to ensure all vulnerable young people within the local authority were allocated a place within a hub.

“[We were] in charge of placing all vulnerable young people into hubs around the authority through discussions with staff in school, carers, social work”

Third sector links

There have been numerous examples shared within the network over lockdown where members have been able to connect with third sector organisations to arrange access to services, provide additional supports and financial aid. This aspect of the role is emerging as a ‘business as usual’ task associated with being a VSHT or CET, however lockdown brought a sharp focus to these links.

“[Having a] named contact in the authority for third sector partners; helping to coordinate education provision for children and young people returning from another authority. Organise outdoor learning summer holiday activity tasters with third sector providers”

Developing digital platforms

As the move to online learning was unprecedented, some areas did not have the digital platforms available for children, young people, families and professionals to access the information, resources and updates that they required during this period. VSHT and CET

members have shared examples of developing digital platforms to meet this need, offering a space to support and engage young people and the development of a digital school which prioritised care experienced young people and their families. In some areas, there had been resistance to developing certain digital platforms prior to the pandemic, however, with changing circumstances, these ideas and opportunities were revisited with reflection and recognition that the impact of the pandemic was long term.

Raising awareness of role

As a result of lockdown, the role of the VSHT and CET members became much more visible due to their unique position of oversight of all care experienced children and young people within the local authority. Members of the team provided direct support to children and families, carers, children's homes and within hubs. Creative planning allowed for some VSHT and CET network members to link with Champions Boards and active schools to allocate sport packs to young people. One member gave an example of facilitating some of the Champions Board's virtual activities, supporting a strengthening of relationships with partners.

Some teams made contact with all foster care networks ensuring access to both an education link and a social work link if there were any queries about the education provision put in place for their young people. Other members gave examples of liaising directly with an increased number of staff around families and children which allowed for greater identification of support needs and the ability to appropriately respond to changing and developing needs.

One network member discussed having the opportunity to deliver training for staff in children's houses, education leads and school leavers leads, a further example of raising awareness of the role.

There has been a sense within the network that, as more people and organisations are becoming aware of the role of the VSHT and CET, more opportunities are presenting themselves with the resulting benefit of helping to provide support in a more timely way.

Supervision for staff

During lockdown staff worked incredibly hard in an attempt to meet the needs of care experienced children and young people. In line with the aspirations of The Promise, Scotland must 'hold the hands of those holding the hands of the child'. VSHT and CET network members shared examples of how they supported staff during this challenging time which in turn, allowed staff to support young people. Some explained this as 'continuing the day-to-day work', that alongside reviewing and improving processes of provision for care experienced young people, there was also a need to maintain key day-to-day relationships, and that included relationships with staff members.

In one area, support was provided for staff through the development of a trauma informed schools online training program. Discussions with staff around a trauma informed approach were held frequently, alongside providing practical guidance. This led to being able to support teams to be creative in their approaches to ensuring children had access to the curriculum.

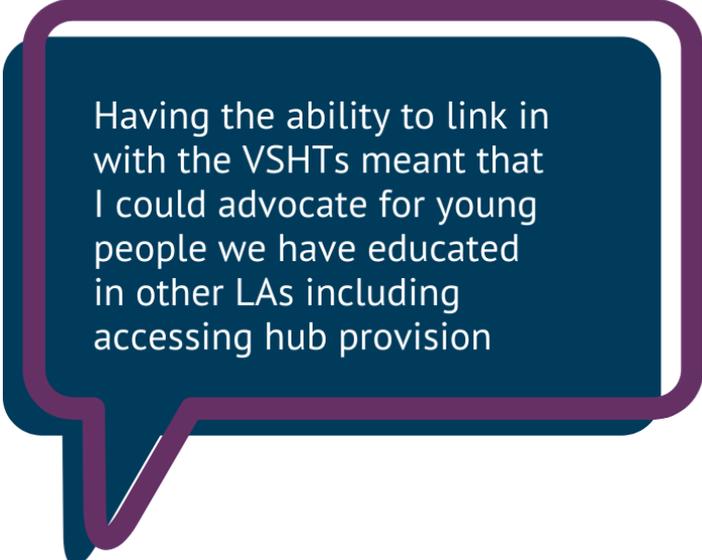
“I had weekly Skype Team Meetings with my Welfare Officers and tracked all work that was being completed, offered guidance, support and ideas for families.”

Supporting children looked after out with their home local authority

Not all care experienced children and young people live within the local authority that has a statutory duty to provide their care. Lockdown brought further challenges for care and education staff to maintain links and awareness of these young people. The VSHT and CET network members responded to this challenge in various ways including digital access provision, ensuring education plans were amended as appropriate and that the impact on learning was reduced. This was done through discussion and connection with children’s homes, residential schools, foster and kinship carers and colleagues in a range of local authority and third sector children’s services.

Members also made use of network links, communicating with VSHT and CET members from other local authorities where their young people were living. This reciprocal process proved to be an effective and efficient means of advocating for young people who were being educated in other local authorities, including ensuring access to hub provision and coordinating education provision for children and young people returning to their home authority following a period of care outwith.

In addition, one network member shared experience of their role in an audit of 150 schools regarding the learning and experiences of children looked after away from their home local authority.



Having the ability to link in with the VSHTs meant that I could advocate for young people we have educated in other LAs including accessing hub provision

(Residential settings - Out of Authority) “Ensuring the education plan continued and so learning was interrupted as little as possible - this was in partnership with the Rights Service who were liaising with care settings”

Updating schools

Some VSHT and CET network members found themselves in a unique position during lockdown due to multi-agency and child and family links that gave them access to information regarding children and young people that the schools may not otherwise be aware of. Many network members shared that they acted as a 'go-between'; they were the link between social work and school, updating each on the other's situation and circumstances and providing specialist knowledge of children and families' circumstances and needs. Other network members provided signposting advice to make sure schools were aware of potential difficulties pupils may experience on their return to school and acted as a direct link between children's houses and schools, ensuring that pupils and their important adults knew there was someone they could turn to for help and that could liaise with individual schools to address needs.

Access to financial support

The financial impact of lockdown has been significant for many families. The VSHT and CET network has been instrumental in some Local Authority areas in addressing this. Examples have been shared of financial support being provided over holiday periods for returning to school or summer fun activities. The unique position of the VSHT and CET network members allowed for direct liaison with a greater number of professionals working with children, young people and their families to provide finance for food packages, local charities for supplies and local businesses for fun and learning resources. The increased connection and opportunities to meaningfully support and build relationships have had a positive impact post-lockdown, where a greater degree of openness and trust has been identified.



My team of Welfare officers continued to work through lockdown... This resulted in a far better, trusting relationship for the Welfare Officers and the families... Since returning from lockdown, the team feel that families are more relaxed with them, more open and honest about their own challenges and in general more trusting that our team are on their side

Enhanced transition

Transitions can be difficult; transitions for care experienced young people in the context of a global pandemic can be particularly challenging. The need for enhanced transitions for certain young people as lockdown was eased were recognised by members of the VSHT and CET network. Examples were shared that evidenced how those supporting young people were able to capitalise on the relationships forged between professionals,

allowing direct requests for support, enhanced knowledge of the individualised needs of young people, and direct connections between schools and parents or carers. Direct one-to-one support for care experienced young people in post school transitions and settings has been provided, In one area, new professional relationships have been forged between the VSHT and Positive Leavers Leads, with a focus on pupils in S3 and above that has resulted in a pattern of regularly set meetings being put in place, allowing for a significant exchange of information.

One Local Authority developed a training resource to assist staff in the thinking and planning for transitions through a trauma informed lens.



New service delivery (group face to face support)

In the midst of the upheaval and uncertainty brought by lockdown measures, the VSHT and CET network were able to share examples of creativity and innovation in response to the needs of care experienced children and young people. As noted above, new digital platforms were developed, relationships and connections were forged between partner agencies, and in one Local Authority, a new service was developed in recognition that the existing children's hub provision was not suitable for all young people. A collective of departments and third sector providers came together with responsibility for allocating young people to one of 14 face-to-face groups which were being provided, based on areas of interest. This service was incredibly successful with involvement averaging around 70%. This is a further example of measures introduced that have continued post-lockdown, as well as an opportunity to re-frame structures and approaches around youth work.

"I was asked to lead the Youth Hub for vulnerable young people who were at risk of placement/home breakdown, mental health deterioration or risky behaviour.



We created a collective of council depts. [sic] and third sector agencies, who were willing to offer face to face support to young people through lockdown. We offered 70 young people weekly sessions as a group or individual, linked to their interests

“We had 70% engagement and have continued into the new session with some of the activities but more importantly with a change to how we structure youth work and support to young people”

Strategic planning (corporate parenting)

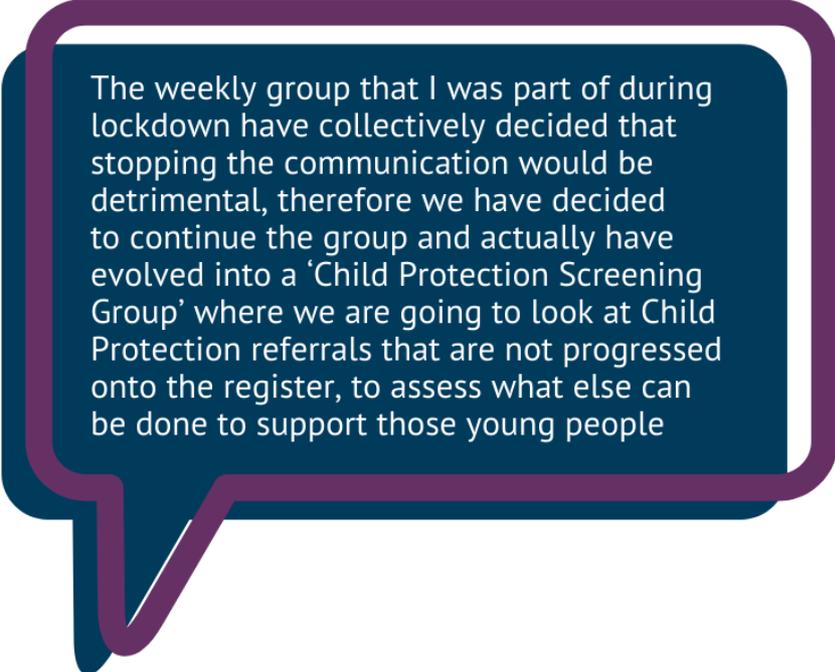
Within one Local Authority, a VSHT and CET network member noted a shift from operational to strategic tasks within their role. There was a greater emphasis on corporate parenting responsibilities and the need for effective communication between services, and as a result they were responsible for drafting the Local Authority Corporate Parent Action Plan, a document that has long-term and ongoing impact post-lockdown.

“My role shifted, became more strategic... My attention moved more to corporate parents and joining up services more. I wrote the corporate parent action plan and continued with day to day support for individuals”

Child protection

An ongoing area of concern across Scotland during lockdown was that with reduced interactions between children and young people and social care or education staff, child protection concerns may be missed or not responded to appropriately, leaving vulnerable children further isolated. VSHT and CET members responded to these concerns in a variety of innovative ways with examples of direct communication channels between key members of partner agencies, regular, frequent meetings between key agencies and joint problem solving and response plans.

This strategic positioning of the role, allowed communication with representatives in senior positions within Social Work and Health and in one Local Authority resulted in the allocation of a Social Worker to every school as a ‘go to’ for education staff to approach for advice. Benefits reported by network members include increased early interventions, a reduction in tensions between services, increasingly open dialogue, increased understanding of the role and provision of partner services and the opportunity to support vulnerable young people who otherwise may have been overlooked.



The weekly group that I was part of during lockdown have collectively decided that stopping the communication would be detrimental, therefore we have decided to continue the group and actually have evolved into a 'Child Protection Screening Group' where we are going to look at Child Protection referrals that are not progressed onto the register, to assess what else can be done to support those young people

"... if not placed on CP Register. This will be hugely beneficial once again in ensuring that children don't slip through. It will also be really beneficial for me, as a personal development perspective, to be involved in deeper dialogue about decision making and challenge some decisions being made."

Conclusion

The role of the VSHT and CET during lockdown has been varied and diverse. The themes discussed in this paper have demonstrated the ability of those fulfilling this role to be responsive, proactive and adaptive in both the planning and provision of support to care experienced children, young people and their families during the pandemic.

There are strong messages from members about the value of having a key person who is able to have a specific focus, and expert knowledge, around the needs and rights of this group of children and young people. This has ensured that direct support is available to children, young people and families in a way that works for them, when they need it. Those fulfilling this role have also been able to strengthen multi-agency links with both statutory and voluntary agencies and services; advocating for children and young people's rights, providing leadership to multi-disciplinary teams and sourcing and providing practical support and expertise to staff members.

There are several examples of where this focus by VSHTs and CETs has ensured that relationships, and learning, have been maintained during lockdown.

It is also significant that staff in these roles have adapted their ways of working to meet the needs of children and young people, whilst they were in the early stages of developing a new role themselves, whilst in the middle of a pandemic. This ability to adapt, and support others to do so, holds key learning for fulfilling The Promise. VSHTs and CETs were able to change their ways of working to respond to children, young people and families' needs while also building new systems, processes and relationships that enhanced and empowered this way of working. Learning can be taken from examples that describe a helpful level of autonomy which allowed practitioners to respond quickly and appropriately to the needs of children and families. This, alongside fewer bureaucratic processes in favour of responsive, informed and child centred decision making combined to shape a helpful context in which to deliver services and support. There are many examples of the influence of the VSHT and CET on supporting systems change to respond to need rather than asking children and families to fit the current system.

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