

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET

27 January 2026

The Virtual School

Report of Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
 - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Headteacher of the Virtual School's annual Report for the academic year 2024-2025 for Children We Care For (CWCF).
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director, and Annette Perrington, Interim Deputy Director: Education, for attending to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

SUMMARY

5. The Interim Deputy Director presented a retrospective report on the virtual school, reviewing the 2024/25 academic year with a focus on the progress and attainment of children in care as well as care leavers. She advised the Committee that, whilst the virtual school's remit had expanded to include support for all children with social workers as well as those in kinship care, the report concentrated on its core statutory responsibilities. The main priorities identified for the Virtual School were ensuring suitable school placements, improving attendance and reducing absences, supporting educational progress, and encouraging participation in cultural activities.
6. The Committee was pleased to hear of a reduction in the time children spent out of school following placement moves and an increase in the number of care leavers progressing to higher education. It also established that attendance rates in both primary and secondary phases were either above or broadly in line with national averages. The Committee also noted that there had been a decrease in persistent absences and suspensions, with only one permanent exclusion recorded during the year.
7. In discussion with the Committee, the effectiveness of partnership working was explored, as were attendance, exclusions, and wellbeing and the Council's role as corporate parent.
8. The Committee resolved to make two recommendations. These are fundamentally the same as the ones moved by the Committee when it considered the 2023-2024 Annual Report. However, it considers them to remain pertinent. Whilst it could simply have requested an update on its previous recommendations, its moving of them afresh indicates the commitment of the current membership to the same ambitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. The importance of regular attendance was emphasised in discussion with the Committee and members were pleased to note that attendance rates for CWCF in the primary phase remained in line with national averages. Whilst secondary attendance was, at 84.25%, below the national average for CWCF of 91.4%, it was noted that this had risen from 82.97% the previous year.
10. The Committee was keen to support the Virtual School's ambition that school attendance rates for CWCF should continue to increase and that severe absence rates should reduce significantly. The Committee was pleased to note that there very low rates of unauthorised absence in the primary phase and that there were targeted interventions in place to support those who were persistently absent. Persistent absence for primary-aged CWCF was 7.87% which was significantly lower than the national rate of 13.5%. Rates for secondary-aged pupils were higher and the Committee recognised that there

is a greater challenge to improving attendance at secondary level rather than primary, given the greater autonomy of the older pupils.

11. The Virtual School's stated ambition is to continue to improve attendance across both phases and, in that ambition, it has the Committee's whole-hearted support. The Committee is of the view that the Virtual School should have the resource necessary in order to achieve that ambition. It, therefore, calls on Cabinet to do the same.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should continue to work on improving attendance of those who are part of the Virtual School.

12. Under section 10 of the Children Act 2004, local authorities are under a duty to make arrangements to promote cooperation between relevant partners with a view to improve the well-being of children in their area. This includes Governing Boards and governors, therefore, have a key responsibility for CWCF, including previously looked after children. Along with the Council, they are the 'corporate parent.'
13. In order for them to fulfil their responsibilities and for them to know the number of children in care of their schools and have an awareness of the need to monitor their progress, the Virtual School's work is vital with the support it can offer to governing boards being considerable.
14. The Committee was particularly pleased to hear of the warmth of relationships between social workers and CWCF and it is clear that social workers, too, should understand the interplay between the Virtual School and governing boards and the latter's role.
15. The Committee remains strongly of the view that improving and enhancing understanding of governors' responsibilities for CWCF is an essential task of the Council. Central to that task is promoting and highlighting the work of the Virtual School with both governing boards and social workers.

Recommendation 2: That the Council should continue to highlight the work of the Virtual School with governing boards and social workers to ensure they are well informed and engaged in supporting the education of children in care.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

16. The Committee does not anticipate considering the work of the Virtual School again during this municipal year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

17. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a

formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.

18. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley
Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

Contact Officer: Richard Doney
Scrutiny Officer
richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk

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