

Divisions Affected – All

CABINET 17 June 2025

– The Virtual School Report of the Education and Young People Overview and 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 and 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 Place 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. At its meeting on 28 March 2025, the Committee considered a report providing an evaluative account of the work of the Virtual School from September 2023 to August 2025, being the statutory annual report of the Virtual School. The report also provided the Committee with an update to the Committee on the extended responsibilities laid on the Virtual School as well as ones that were anticipated to come into force under new legislation.

4. The Committee was grateful to the then Cabinet member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services, then Cllr John Howson, and to Lisa Lyons, Director of Children's Services, Kate Reynolds, Deputy Director for Education and Inclusion, and Clare Pike, Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School, for attending to present the report.

SUMMARY

5. The Cabinet Member for Children, Education, and Young People's Services introduced the virtual school report and shared positive feedback from the February 2024 Ofsted inspection, praising the school's ambition and vision. Concerns about challenges faced by children in care were raised, particularly with in-year school admissions. The Cabinet Member voiced his support for the bill proposing local authorities handle in-year admissions.
6. The Acting Headteacher of Oxfordshire Virtual School presented the report, outlining work done between September 2023 and August 2024. She described the core duty of promoting education for children in care and care leavers, and extended duties for previously cared-for children, children with a social worker, and children in kinship care. Achievements included reducing school move times, improving educational outcomes, and increasing university attendance and graduation rates among care leavers.
7. Members raised questions about co-production in personal education plans for children in care and the awareness of school governors; suspension statistics; the relational schools programme; EHCP transitions; reintegration; the Department for Education's changes being implemented around in-year admissions.
8. The Committee makes two recommendations – one about increasing awareness and support and the other about exclusions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. The Committee is aware that local authorities are under a duty under s.10 of the Children Act 2004 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. Governors, therefore, have a key responsibility for looked-after children as well as previously looked-after children. With the Council, they are the 'Corporate Parent' of the children we care for.
10. The Committee commended the efforts made to encourage and ensure that governors knew the number of children in care in their schools and that there was an awareness of the need to monitor their educational progress. The work of the Virtual School is vital in that and the support the Virtual School can provide to governing boards is considerable.

11. Similarly, social workers need to understand the interplay between the Virtual School and Governing Boards and the roles of the latter.
12. The Committee heard that training for governors was being reviewed that they were encouraged to attend relevant sessions with governance leads addressing non-attendance.
13. The Committee is strongly of the view that improving and enhancing understanding of governors' responsibilities for looked after children is an essential task of the Council as it works with them. An essential part of that is promoting and highlighting the work of the Virtual School with both governing boards and social workers.

Recommendation 1: 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.

14. The second recommendation relates to the level of detail in the report. In discussion in Committee, members interrogated the suspension statistics, noting that some school might favour internal exclusions or 'rest days' for children instead of formal, recorded exclusions. The Acting Headteacher agreed that the suspension statistics were not as detailed as they might be. The Committee explored this with the Acting and Headteacher and established that further enquiries into how some schools might be 'masking' exclusions.
15. Given the importance to children in care of stability, and the detrimental impact on them of not being in school, the Committee considers that attention should be paid to this concern and that, in order to be able to monitor and scrutinise this issue, the Council should ensure that, in future annual reports, there should be more granular data regarding exclusions.

Recommendation 2: That the Council, in subsequent annual reports of the Virtual School, should report in more detail on exclusions including informal internal processes.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

16. It will be for the 2025/2026 Committee members to decide whether or not to consider next year's report.

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.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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