

Appendix A: Brent Virtual School Annual Report Academic Years 2019-20 and 2020-2021

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to outline the activity of the Brent Virtual School (BVS) and the educational outcomes of Brent Council's Looked after children (LAC) for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21. The report covers the two academic years that have spanned the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects on the achievements of looked after children during this period and identifies areas in need of development that have arisen for this group of young people as a consequence of their experiences of education during the pandemic.
- 1.2 Data contained in this report is for looked after children who were in the care of Brent Council for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21, and includes outcomes for all children who have been in care for a year or more as at 31st March 2021, ("eligible cohort").
- 1.3 At the core of the work of the BVS is the aspiration to ensure that children and young people are provided with every opportunity to learn effectively and develop their skills, knowledge and understanding so they are able to make informed choices about their futures from a range of options. This range will be at its widest when children succeed in their schools and are provided with the ambition, resilience and opportunity to optimise their learning within and beyond the school.
- 1.4 ¹The Virtual School is the key statutory service for ensuring the best possible outcomes for the education of looked after children. The BVS leads on education to ensure that all professionals working collectively as a team around a child are working together in the best interests of the pupil or student. BVS provides support from the Early Years Foundation Stage to the end of KS5 and supports social workers, foster carers and placement providers to ensure an effective transition into leaving care services. BVS focuses on metacognition approaches, ensuring young people are ready to learn and employs a multi-disciplinary team, including teachers, educational psychologists, specialist mentors and family therapists. The team use trauma-informed practice to address the individual barriers to learning and develop individual learning plans for each student. The BVS strives to achieve the best possible educational outcomes by:
- monitoring the attainment, progression and attendance of children and young people who are looked-after and putting in place support where it is needed to help each individual achieve their potential
 - providing an enrichment curriculum to raise aspirations and increase participation

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-looked-after-children>

- working with young people, schools, colleges, social workers and foster carers and other placement providers to improve behaviour and attendance, promote improved outcomes and school stability and identify and address any barriers to learning
- supporting young people through school and into further or higher education, employment or training
- offering training on raising educational achievement and key aspects of legislative responsibilities, to professionals in schools, social care and placement support services
- promoting the educational achievement of children and young people who were previously looked-after through the provision of advice and information
- celebrating educational success of Brent's looked after children

2.0 Cohort characteristics

- 2.1 During this period LAC numbers remained consistent in terms of when looked after children came into care. As with previous years, LAC numbers remained higher in secondary aged children and the post-16 cohort. The age that children come into care has a significant impact on their outcomes as they may have already faced a number of issues with poorer educational outcomes such as persistent absenteeism and exclusion.
- 2.2 In July 2020, 178 (Nursery - Year 11) children were looked after, 62 were attending Brent schools and 96 attended schools outside the borough. Of the total cohort 122 were in schools in greater London, with the remainder placed outside London, some at a significant distance including the North East.
- 2.3 In July 2021 – 185 (Nursery – Year 11) children were looked after, 74 were attending Brent schools and 96 attended schools outside the borough. Of the total cohort 126 were in schools in greater London, with the remainder placed outside London, some at a significant distance.
- 2.4 The majority of Brent looked after children are in mainstream education; in 2019/20 this was just under 60% and in 2020/21 had increased to 66%. 18 attended Alternative Provision in 2019/20 and 12 in 2020/21. The number of children attending Residential schools or Special schools, where all pupils have an Education, Health and Care plan was 21 in 2019-20 and 23 in 2020-21
- 2.5 The number of Brent LAC with special educational needs is 47% of the cohort. Whilst this is high in comparison with the wider school population (15%), it is lower than the LAC national figure of 56% (based on SFR Cohort² Jan 2021). 24% of Brent LAC have an EHCP compared with 3% of the general Brent pupil population, although this is lower than the national figure of 28% (based on SFR Cohort Jan 2021).
- 2.6 The largest primary need for Brent LAC with an EHCP is consistent with the national LAC picture and is for Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH) 43%.

² Please note this is provisional as the data is not usually published until January

- 2.7 A disproportionate number of Brent LAC are Black British, in comparison with LAC national figures. For BVS, this cohort makes up 30% of statutory school-age LAC. Nationally, considering the totality of virtual schools, the comparative figure is 8%, which is in line with the wider population. For the borough of Brent, which is one of the most diverse authorities in England, 18% of the general population are Black British. To address disproportionate educational outcomes for male pupils of Black Caribbean heritage in the general population the Council, with the support of local schools, ran a 2-year programme to raise achievement levels and to contribute to improving the life chances of this cohort of children and young people, The programme concluded in June 2020. Due to the national cancellation of tests and examinations and published performance tables, attainment data was not available to review whether further progress had been made from the significant closing of the gaps in 2018/19 in Brent schools between the attainment of British boys of Black Caribbean heritage and all pupils at the end of EYFS, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. The BVS also levers additional support through targeted activity such as mentoring and careers camps.
- 2.8 A consequence of young people entering care during their teenage years is that they very often have experienced a fractured education. In 2019/20 20 young people aged 12-16 entered care, in 2020/21 it was 32. The challenge to increase participation of this cohort is often aligned to broader contextual safeguarding issues. Additionally there is clear evidence that many, until they enter care, have unmet or unidentified SEND or mental health needs that impact directly on their educational outcomes and also in securing a post 16 destination. A focus for the BVS has been to utilise the multidisciplinary team of mental health therapists and educational psychologists to address these needs. However more needs to be done to ensure that the package of support is effectively delivered whether through an EHCP or SEN support or CAMHS plan.
- 2.9 30 unaccompanied minors (UASC) became LAC during 2019/20 and 2020/21. Just over a third (12) of these young people were aged 16-18 and became LAC during Key stage 5 and were enrolled onto ESOL programmes at either College of North West London (CNWL) or Harrow College. Both colleges offer rolling admission onto their ESOL courses so students can be admitted throughout the year. There were a number of other UASC who received tuition packages via BVS, whilst awaiting age assessments, but were then age assessed as adults, ending their LAC episodes. The remaining 18 UASCs were of statutory school aged, the majority of these (15) were in key stage 4 but 3 were key stage 3. Whilst the key stage 4 students were enrolled at one of three local schools who have an extended ESOL provision, the key stage 3 students went through the general admissions process based on the location of their placements. Given the extended time in the UK education system it is expected that they will go on to complete GCSEs at the expected age.
- 2.10 In 2019/21 94% of statutory aged LAC attending school were in Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding schools. Whilst every effort is made to ensure that all children attend a good or outstanding school 6% of LAC attended schools that were Ofsted rated RI (Requires Improvement). The primary reason for this was to ensure continuity and stability for the children when they moved into care. Additionally two young people were directed to attend secure training centres by the Court.

2.11 During 2019/20 a total of 10 pupils were not on roll at any one time, in 2020/21 this was 7. At any time, there are a few children or young people who are awaiting a mainstream school place, a special school place or an appropriate alternative provision. This will be for a number of reasons:

- newly arrived from abroad, as an unaccompanied minor (UASC) with no age assessment
- emergency entry to care, or change of care placement at short notice
- school placement has broken down and pupil is assigned a new provision, but not on roll yet

Between school placements, BVS arranges 1:1 tuition for English and maths, funded by the Pupil Premium Grant. This usually takes place in the home setting, although older pupils may be taught in other suitable settings. For some LAC, particularly those who have missed periods of schooling prior to care, mentoring is commissioned in order to prepare and support them back into education. BVS monitors LAC not on roll at fortnightly meetings, ensuring these pupils are receiving suitable education in the interim period. By far the majority of Brent LAC are placed within statutory time-scale (20 days).

3.0 Brent's Looked after Children's Attainment 2019/20 and 2020/21

3.1 The reports for this cohort are based on LAC who have been continuously looked after for at least a year on 31st March 2020 and 31st March 2021 – “the eligible cohort”.

3.2 **Key Stage 2 Statutory Attainment.** Whilst external assessments were not undertaken for Key Stage 2 pupils due to Covid 19, PEPs were maintained and progress checked accordingly. The schools progress measures identified that for the SRF group (6 qualifying out of 9 children in total with 3 not tested) in 2019/20 67% achieved the expected level of progress in Reading, Writing and Maths; 83% achieved expected progress for Reading; 67% for writing; and 85% for Maths. In 2020/21 50% achieved the expected level of progress in Reading, Writing and Maths; 67% achieved expected progress for Reading; 67% for writing; and 50% for Maths. Whilst there does appear to be a marked decrease in those children who achieved the expected level of progress, across all measures this equates to one fewer child than in the previous year. The number of children in the cohort is relatively small which can increase greater year on year volatility in the overall percentage reported.

3.3 The BVS also held booster classes throughout the pandemic prioritising Maths and Writing, using the Letterbox Club, Promoting the Achievement of Looked after Children (PALAC) tutoring to support literacy and numeracy and MathsWhizz (software subscription) and weekly group booster sessions.

3.4 All children who do not reach the expected standard at KS2 are eligible for Year 7 Catch-Up funding in their first year at secondary school. BVS has ensured that additional support was provided for Year 7 LAC who did not reach the expected

standards; support/interventions are documented in their autumn term personal education plans (PEPs). However, in order to ensure that children are achieving well, the BVS advisory team has identified the need to target more effectively children with additional needs and support schools, carers and social workers to retain a focus on children's education.

- 3.5 Key Stage 4 Statutory Attainment 2019/20 and 2020/21.** In 2019/20 pupils scheduled to sit GCSE exams were awarded either a centre assessed grade (based on what the school or college believed the student would most likely have achieved had exams gone ahead) or their calculated grade using a model developed by Ofqual - whichever was the higher of the two. In 2020/21 all pupils were awarded a teacher assessed grade.
- 3.6 The DfE states that the pupil level attainment statistics increased - more than would be expected in a typical year - between the 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years. This reflects the change to the way GCSE grades were awarded rather than improvements in pupil performance. As a result the 2019/20 and 2020/21 attainment data should not be directly compared to data from previous years for the purpose of measuring changes in student performance.
- 3.7 2020 and 2021 (reference table 1) saw a significant increase in the headline results for the looked after children SFR cohort. Whilst this is in part due to the method of assessment, centre assessed grades (CAG) which are more favourable to vulnerable children; there was also clear evidence of positive tracking for the students who achieved this measure. During 2019/20 all the students who achieved 5 passes at level 4-9 (incl Eng and Maths) attended both school based interventions and VS interventions including 1-1 tuition and group booster sessions. There was a similar picture with regards to intervention for 2020/21 with one student also receiving PALAC tuition. Although there was a slight decrease on this measure in July 2021 this equates to one student who received a grade 3 in one of their foundation subjects. The 5 passes at level 1-9 also saw a 12% and 7% increase respectively in 2020 and 2021, whilst this is not a high attainment measure it is equally important for all students as it allows for some Post 16 pathways, and has been relevant for the students who had high levels of persistent absenteeism due to their wider needs. One of the key foci for BVS will be to maintain this level of achievement even if Centre Assessed Grades are no longer used. Again as with children at Key stage 2 the BVS advisory team have identified the need to target more effectively children with additional needs and support schools, carers and social workers to retain a focus on children's education.

Table 1: Key Stage 4 Statutory Attainment

Key Stage 4					
New grade levels	Previously known as:	2020/21**		2019/20**	
		LAC	%	LAC	%
5 passes at level 4-9 incl Eng and Maths	5 A*-C (including English and Maths)	6/34	18%	8/29	28%
4 passes at level 4-9 incl Eng and Maths	4 A*-C (including English and Maths)	8/34	24%	8/29	28%
5 passes at level 1-9	5 A-G	17/34	50%	18/29	62%
4 passes at Level 1-9	4 A-G	19/34	56%	18/29	62%
1 pass Level 1-9	1 A-G	25/34	74%	21/29	72%
Achieving 4-9 pass in English and Maths	Eng & Mat A*-C pass	9/34	26%	9/29	31%

Key Stage 4- SFR COHORT					
New grade levels	Previously known as:	2020/21***		2019/20**	
		LAC	%	LAC	%
5 passes at level 4-9 incl Eng and Maths	5 A*-C (including English and Maths)	5/21	24%	6/21	29%
4 passes at level 4-9 incl Eng and Maths	4 A*-C (including English and Maths)	6/21	29%	6/21	29%
5 passes at level 1-9	5 A-G	12/21	57%	13/21	62%
4 passes at Level 1-9	4 A-G	13/21	62%	13/21	62%
1 pass Level 1-9	1 A-G	16/21	76%	15/21	71%
Achieving 4-9 pass in English and Maths	Eng & Mat A*-C pass	6/21	29%	6/21	29%

3.8 Destinations at Key stage 5

By July 2020, 97% (34 out of a total of 35) of the year 11 LAC cohort had a September Guarantee of which 32 took up their place. In 2020/21 96% (42 out of a total of 44) of the year 11 cohort had a September Guarantee for 21/22 of which 39 took up their place. In each year there are a small number of students who do not take up their post-16 destination place, in some cases this is due to them not receiving the results needed, whilst for others it is due to summer placement moves or more serious barriers to learning such as persistent absenteeism, risk of exploitation or serious

youth violence. In these cases BVS life coach and Post 16 advisor continue to work closely with these pupils to ensure that suitable provision is identified and enrolment takes place within the first few weeks of the academic year.

3.9 Post 16 EET/NEET:

In July 2020 six Year 13s successfully achieved A level grades and three progressed to university. In July 2021, four year 13s were undertaking level 3 courses, three students who successfully achieved A level grades have all progressed to university, and one with a BTEC National Diploma in Sports has moved into employment.

- 3.10 In 2020/21 the NEET figures for the whole cohort increased by 5% based on the previous academic year. The overall figures for EET were 76%. The Covid 19 pandemic undoubtedly contributed to the increase in NEETs as those young people who are in the workforce tend to work in the hospitality and retail sectors. In 2020/21 the NEET cohort represented 28% of young people.
- 3.11 Targeted engagement is coordinated by the Post 16 Life Coach for young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. This includes the use of careers camps, engaging young people with Brent Works for employability programmes and pathways into work, as well as the use of commissioned young people's careers interventions.

4.0 Personal education plans

- 4.1 The Virtual School maintains contact with LAC wherever they are placed, for example PEPs were completed during 2019-2020 at Secure Units and Young Offender Institutions within, and beyond Greater London.
- 4.2 PEP completion rates remained at 99% throughout the academic year 2019-2020 and also for 2020-21 for the statutory cohort. In the main PEPs were delivered online throughout this period.
- 4.3 The BVS has undertaken 6 quality assurance audits over the two academic years, covering KS1-KS5 and additional PEPs covering the UASC cohort. 36 PEPs have been reviewed in total of which 28 PEPs have been graded as good, 6 PEPs as Requires Improvement and 2 Inadequate. A key factor emerging from the quality assurance process was the increased multidisciplinary attendance at the PEP and the sharp focus on quality and impact in the discussions particular at KS5, and in relation to what adjustments had been made in schools to respond to the pandemic.
- 4.4 The undertaking and completion of PEPs falls under the remit of the BVS. However, the role of the BVS is to champion, advocate, support and challenge and quality assure the PEPs as being aspirational and stretching for LAC. During the Covid-19 period the engagement of social workers and schools in PEPs and improving the quality of PEPs has not been as high as would be expected and improving this issue will be a focus for the BVS in 2021/22.

5.0 Attendance

- 5.1 Attendance monitoring is a key priority for the Virtual School. During 2019/20 and 2020/21 a regular report was presented to the Children and Young People Department Strategic Leadership Team meeting so that a clear line of sight could be maintained on the education of looked after children. This increased focus will continue through into 2021/22 academic year.
- 5.2 Although attendance remains a challenge, particularly at KS4, it is of note that the decrease in attendance for the reporting period (84% as compared to 88% in 2018/19 and 86% in 2017/18) was primarily due to the impact of Covid 19 and the initial lockdown that took place in March 2020. Until this point there had been a further 2% increase in attendance and the year to date figure just before lockdown 1 was 90%. This followed the trend of the previous year, which also saw an overall 2% increase in attendance. Attendance at Key stage 1 and 2 is usually consistent at around 97-98%. Key stage 3 attendance tends to remain between 94-96%, with key stage 4 attendance in the 80-90% range. As with previous years, the overall attendance figure is affected by the lower level of key stage 4 attendance. This lower percentage and the fact that the key stage 4 cohort is larger than the other three statutory age cohorts has meant that attendance has not been at the target level. In 2020/21 the overall attendance for the academic year was 90%.
- 5.3 Persistent absence data is discussed in a monthly meeting with the Head of LAC and Permanency. Where attendance is an issue, BVS works with social care colleagues to address underlying issues and if required, uses Pupil Premium funding for targeted educational mentoring.

6.0 Exclusions

- 6.1 There were no permanent exclusions for Brent LAC in 2019/20 and 2020/21, this continued the trend of previous years. The total number of days lost to fixed term exclusions decreased significantly compared to 2018/19. The number of days lost due to FTEs was less than a third of the figure for the previous year. Even taking into account the disruption in schools during 2019/20 and 2020/21 there has been clear reduction in days lost due to fixed term exclusions. In 2019/20 this was 26 days, while in 2020/21 this was 41 days.
- 6.2 Increased targeted support from BVS and also training within schools has meant that there is a renewed focus from schools on LAC and the management of complex needs.

7.0 Training and Development

- 7.1 BVS is committed to ensuring that professionals working with children in care have the right knowledge, information and skills to enable them to fulfil their role in contributing to improving the educational outcomes for our children. The Virtual School continues to deliver its multi-agency central training programme to Headteachers, Designated Teachers, school governors, Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Foster

Carers and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Regular training throughout the year included focus on the use of Pupil Premium, links between research and improving educational attainment, the importance of high quality PEPs; transition, Dyslexia and Dyscalculia; and training in partnership with key sector leaders including trauma informed practice with one commissioned provider and domestic abuse awareness and its impact on children and young people - offered in partnership with the charity Tender. Evaluations from the training are routinely used to plan and target future training. The number of professionals accessing training for the two year period was over 100 each year.

- 7.2 The Designated Teachers Forum for Looked after Children Forum meets termly, with representation from local primary, secondary and special schools. It has been running for a number of years, with the aim of sharing good practice, improving quality and impact of education on children's outcomes and highlighting new legislation or policy developments. In July 2021, 70 schools were represented at the forum.

8.0 Celebration Event

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the annual celebration event for looked after children was postponed. Plans are currently underway for a celebration event celebrating the achievements of the past two academic years to be held in January 2022. The event will be co-produced with young people.

9.0 Covid 19 and the work of the BVS during the pandemic

- 9.1 As the spring term 2019/ 2020 ended the UK was hit by Covid 19 and through the first lockdown it was clear that the pandemic raised concerns about increased exposure to 'hidden harms' as well as lost learning and the impact of social distancing on children and young people's development and on their mental and emotional health and wellbeing. As a result the BVS rethought how services would be delivered to looked after children as well as how communication with carers, schools and social workers would maintain a focus on their attendance and achievement. Whilst children of statutory age were enabled to stay in school, those post 16 young people had a much greater challenge as further education provision closed. Even those who continued to attend school in person have had a far from normal experience that also would affect their achievement and development.
- 9.2 During the summer term 2020 the BVS held two live webinars with carers to support with remote learning. A total of 20 carers attended including kinship carers, carers from independent fostering agencies and Brent carers. An 'Educational Resources Pack' was emailed to carers during the first week to provide additional learning to that implemented by the schools. This included extensive resources that children and foster carers could access. A printable resource pack was created so that Social Workers could print and take hard copies of worksheets to any foster carers requesting

them when they visited. A further 'Educational Resources Pack' and "Covid Support Pack" was sent out in the week prior to the Easter break 2020.

- 9.3 All carers and young people were contacted to ascertain their access to IT. As a result of the information collated, within the first three weeks of general school closures in spring 2020 over 50 items of IT were ordered and directly delivered to young people as part of the wider DfE support programme for vulnerable pupils. BVS offered online training sessions to schools, carers, social care colleagues and other Brent staff as well as training for carers and foster carers and designated teachers (DTs) on Trauma Informed practice. BVS also engaged with another provider to deliver three workshops on trauma informed practice and recovery. These sessions were attended by schools, Brent Council employees from a number of service areas including the wider CYP workforce with the focus on supporting LAC in education during the pandemic. The focus on attachment was critical due to the pandemic and the additional trauma that was felt by LAC, some of who lost family members to the pandemic.
- 9.4 Looked after Children were eligible to attend school as part of the 'vulnerable children' cohort and the BVS worked with the professional team around the child to promote attendance where this was achievable, based on individual home circumstances.
- 9.5 The BVS enrichment programme became a key tool to keep children and young people motivated across 2019-20 and 2020-21. During 2019/2020 online clubs such as Philosophy Group and Book Club were set up for young people with many of the established enrichment activities moved to online platforms and, where possible, residential or face to face activities were undertaken to maintain motivation, achievement and resilience. These included:
- Strength with horses
 - Jamie's farm local visit
 - Philosophy group
 - Book club
 - Debate mate
 - We Belong - visits to theatre, museum and Houses of Parliament
 - Outdoor pursuits

Over the two academic years 73 pupils engaged in the enrichment programme, with a further 29 attending booster classes, which are to support students in key assessment years to help raise their attainment. Two young people were successful in being published in a national poetry book; one young person won the sub-regional debate mate competition and one young person has been selected to represent Jamie's Farm on the national stage.

10.0 Strategic Priorities for 2021/22

- 10.1 The key themes that have emerged when reviewing BVS activity during these two academic years include:

- a) The value of delivering Personal Education Plans online, maximising multidisciplinary participation and the focus on quality and impact. To enhance these arrangements there is a need to strengthen the lead role of the social worker and school in the delivery of PEPs.
- b) The success in delivering a wide range of online booster classes and enrichment provision, combined with targeted onsite residential or therapeutic interventions to support the raising of aspirations and participation. With this it is clear that successful outcomes are more likely to be achieved by focusing on young people's interests to maintain positive engagement and learning outcomes.
- c) The multidisciplinary focus on persistent absenteeism and the holistic systemic planning for children.
- d) The number of young people entering care in adolescence with unmet or unidentified SEND needs has identified the extent to which there continues to be a significant minority of pupils whose full learning needs are not identified at an early enough point.

10.2 The BVS has reflected on the activity, progress and areas for continued development during the 19/20 and 20/21 academic years and will focus on the following priorities in 2021/22:

- a) To ensure there is mandatory PEP training for social workers. This is especially important with the introduction of a new PEP electronic system. To deliver online surgeries for designated teachers on improving the quality of PEPs and the use of the PPP to raise aspirations, targeting schools and settings where additional support has been identified.
- b) Continued provision of an enrichment curriculum both on line and onsite, drawing in expertise as required and rooting this in the interests of individual children.
- c) Review multidisciplinary support to ensure effective earlier identification of SEND needs in tandem with the new guidance for Virtual Schools in supporting the educational outcomes for all children with a social worker. This also links to the introduction of a graduated approach within Brent schools to help identify and meet pupils' additional needs at the earliest possible point.
- d) Additional direct work by the advisory teachers and life coaches in school and colleges where young people are experiencing particular challenges to remain positively engaged.