

## Vulnerable Learners Hub

Ward(s): ALL

Portfolios: Education and Skills Councillor Statham

### 1.0 Aim

- 1.1 This report will provide an overview of the work carried out by the Vulnerable Learners Hub since September 2022

### 2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 For the committee to note the impact of the work carried out by the VLH

### 3.0 Report detail – know

- 3.1 Walsall's Virtual School is responsible for liaising and working in partnership with agencies to support the education of looked after / vulnerable children. Following a national review which identified that 3 children in every classroom needed a social worker, Walsall Council developed its offer launching a Vulnerable Learners Hub to improve educational outcomes of children with a social worker.
- 3.2 The Department of Education (DfE) announced that from September 2021, the role of the Virtual School Head would be extended to promote the education of all children aged 0-18 with a social worker and those who have had a social worker within the last 6 years (every 6), meaning there will be a local champion for children with a social worker in every local authority in England. This was to ensure more focus is placed on targeting support earlier on in these young people's lives and helping improve how they engage with education. In June 2022 funding for the additional duties was extended for a further 12 months
- 3.3 To enable us to deliver our new duties we developed the **Vulnerable Learners Hub** to work alongside the Virtual School and seconded three members of staff to work with social workers, schools and LA officers to help make visible the disadvantages children with a social worker can experience and promote practice that supports their engagement in education.
- 3.4 The team continue to be proactive in raising awareness - they have attended social care managers meetings and delivered training to designated safeguarding leads to explain the role of the team and encourage social workers to refer young people who were not engaged in education through the hub, the team also devised a training package for school staff which highlighted the poor educational outcomes for children with a social worker.

- 3.5 We have seen an increase in referrals this term compared to the same time last year. The team received 189 referrals from social workers, schools and other professionals from September to December, where as last year 100 referrals were received. The team also used the Vulnerability Matrix to identify children who were more at risk of underachievement. The chart below provides a breakdown of the referrals and reasons for referral

Referrals	Total
Number of YP referred to the VLH	189
Number of YP referred to the VLH with an EHCP	36

Reason for referral	Total
Attendance issues	82
Children missing education	18
Advised of permanent exclusion	20
Risk of exclusion/suspension	36
School moves	5
Special educational needs	17
Other i.e. post 16, transport	11

- 3.6 Through hard work, determination, support and challenge, the Vulnerable Learners Hub team were able to work creatively with 13 schools, alternative provision providers, social care staff, and other local authority teams from September to December to avoid the permanent exclusion of 18 vulnerable children, of which 2 had an EHCP. They did this by:

- Signposting, advice and guidance to schools and education providers on strategies to help avoid exclusion
- Liaising with other schools, education providers and local authority teams to help identify alternatives to exclusion
- Offering advice and guidance, both statutory and non-statutory, on the use of exclusion and the processes to be followed
- Attending governing body exclusion disciplinary hearings and independent appeal hearings on behalf of the child/young persons for permanently excluded pupils who attend Walsall maintained schools
- Signposting to bespoke training packages for individual and clusters of schools on request or where issues have been identified.

Of the 20 young people who the team were informed by schools that they were at serious risk of exclusion, the team were able to avoid the exclusion of 18 as only 2 went on to be permanently excluded. 1 with an EHCP and 1 on a child protection plan.

- 3.7 In 2019/20- 47 children were excluded from a Walsall school of which 13 had an EHCP. In 2021/22, following covid closures, 64 children were excluded from Walsall schools of which only 4 had an EHCP. And in this academic year 16 young people have been excluded from school 1 of which had an EHCP. This shows the impact of the VLH in relation to reducing exclusions of children with an EHCP
- 3.8 The team have also implemented and led a regional working group with staff from other authorities carrying out the role of supporting children with a social worker. We presented and shared our Vulnerability Matrix with 4 other authorities including Sandwell, Solihull, Telford and Staffordshire.
- 3.9 In July 2022 we joined up with Challenging Education to develop a training programme for schools to help improve the educational outcomes of all children with a social worker. The programme is running from January 2023 and will consist of 4 sessions with 40 schools already registered.



### 3.10 Feedback

The work of the vulnerable learners Hub was recognised in both the Inspection of Walsall's Children's Services (ILACs) inspection and in the 2022 Local area SEND Inspection. Ofsted inspectors said:

***"There is significant investment in and value placed on children's education. Senior leaders have ensured that there is robust oversight of vulnerable children as a result of strong partnership working with schools through new policies and positive relationships with families. Councillors and senior leaders have made a clear commitment to provide the resources needed for the virtual school to fulfil its new statutory duty to support all vulnerable children"***

***The development of Walsall's Vulnerable Learners Hub to support children and young people at risk of permanent exclusion is a positive step forward. The hub provides support, challenge and strategies to help children, young people and schools.***

The team also receive regular positive feedback from schools and social workers, examples

***"Thank you for your support with co-ordination and ensuring the right support is offered. As you are aware, I have shared many times we cannot achieve positive outcomes on our own."*** Primary school HT

***"Just here to say how grateful I am for the support.... From preventing a child being excluded and identifying alternative provision, from getting a child in school who had been out of education since July 2021 and also giving me information where a school can support with breakfast club so the 6-year-old can get to school albeit her mom has sadly had a stroke."***- Social worker

### 3.10 Case study

Child A is an 8-year-old child subject to a Child Protection Plan (CP) in January 2021 under the category of risk of significant harm. He had previously been on a Child in Need (CIN) plan. Child A's needs are complex, and he has experienced trauma in his life. Child A has been excluded on fixed term exclusion and at the point of referral was on a 2-day exclusion having also received a one-day exclusion in the previous week. He struggles at school both academically, socially, and emotionally.

As part of an integrated and joined up approach the Vulnerable Learners Hub worked closely with the social worker to understand and address Child A's needs and barriers, liaised with Pastoral Leads and school SENCO, gathered updates regarding CAMHS involvement and challenged the school around the need for an EHCP. Nurture provision was arranged, and Child A responds well. The home environment becomes more stable, and Child A appears less tired at school.

Supporting Child A in school has had a positive impact on his attitude to learning and engagement and most importantly he has continued to access education with no further fixed term exclusions and no permanent exclusion as a result of the Hub's involvement. School, social worker and carers are continuing to work together to make small adjustments in the best interests of Child A. The EHCP is progressing, and Child A is now on a CIN plan which has de-escalated from CP.

- 3.11 In 2022 the Vulnerable Learners Hub was nominated and won the Council's **Proud to be one team Award** and due to its success and demonstrable impact an additional Education Liaison Officer has been seconded into the team to provide additional capacity to help improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children.
- 3.12 The Vulnerable Learners Hub is being extended to promote more vulnerable groups. Promoting the education of children & young people under Youth Justice is moving under the remit of the VLH to enable us to have a better oversight of the educational challenges faced by children in the criminal justice system and more recently and more recently the team are working alongside Early Help to track and monitor the attendance of our young carers to ensure they are not missing education.

## 4.0 Financial information

- 4.1 The posts within the team are funded through the DfE VSH additional duties grants. Local authorities were given additional funds based on the number of schools. Walsall received £100k for academic years 2021/23 and 2022/23. We are currently waiting to hear whether the funding will continue.
- 4.2 If the DfE funding is no longer available, to ensure we continue to deliver this successful service to our most vulnerable young people we will request investment as part of the STP and budget setting work

## **5.0 Reducing Inequalities**

- 5.1 While there is no single cause for the poor educational outcomes for children with a social worker, experiences of adversity can create barriers to good outcomes. The work carried out by the VLH ensures that with the right support, the aspirations of these children can be raised to enable them to achieve their best and ensure there is equal access to education opportunities.

## **6.0 Decide**

- 6.1 The committee may decide to request further information on the education outcomes of children with a social worker.

## **7.0 Respond**

- 7.1 Any recommendations made by the committee will be responded to by the appropriate service area

## **8.0 Review**

- 8.1 The actions and outcomes within this report are monitored by Access & Inclusion SMT and Children's Services DMT and through a monthly performance board

## **Author**

Lorraine Thompson  
Virtual School & Vulnerable Groups Lead  
☎ 01922 652837  
✉ [Lorraine.thompson@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:Lorraine.thompson@walsall.gov.uk)