National Association of
Virtual School Heads
Looking after learning

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
SPEECH & LANGUAGE
THERAPISTS

Speech and language therapists supporting Virtual School Heads

There is a high prevalence of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) among children in care. These needs are often previously unidentified and unsupported for a variety of reasons.[1] Left unidentified and unsupported, communication needs can prevent children and young people from being able to access and engage with education. SLCN can also impair a young person's ability to learn how to manage their emotions, behave well and access behavioural or mental health interventions. Given their unique clinical expertise in speech, language and communication, speech and language therapists can support Virtual School Heads to deliver their central responsibility of promoting the educational attainment of looked-after children and previously looked-after children.

Communication needs of looked-after children

Many children and young people in care have previously unidentified and/or unmet communication needs.

- There are high levels of communication impairment among children and young people in residential care. Much of it is severe and pervasive, and largely previously unidentified.[2]
- An Office of National Statistics review of the health needs of looked-after children found that despite evidence of serious underreporting speech, language and communication needs were the second most frequently reported difficulty for looked-after children.[3]
- 58% of those seen by 'No Wrong Door', North Yorkshire County Council's model around 'rethinking care for adolescents', were identified as having SLCN.[4]
- Looked-after children with a range of needs, including communication needs, are overrepresented in the care and criminal justice system.[5]

Left unidentified and unsupported, communication needs put looked-after and previously looked-after children at risk of a range of negative outcomes in relation to: behaviour; mental health and wellbeing; the formation of positive relationships and friendships; educational attainment; future employment and life chances; and potential involvement in the criminal justice system.

Role of Virtual School Heads

Local authorities have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child looked after by them, including their education.

Virtual School Heads (VSHs) are responsible for leading on their local authority's statutory duty to promote the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children who have achieved permanence through adoption, a special guardianship order or child arrangements orders.

VSHs can:
- provide advice and information to schools, parents / guardians and others to support looked after and previously looked after children;
- provide direct academic support from the staff in their virtual school teams to individual children and young people in schools;
- support with school admissions and transfers;
- advise schools about strategies to manage behaviour including on avoiding exclusions and provide training;
- provide training for designated teachers, social workers, foster carers, Independent Reviewing Officers, residential staff, school governors and other professionals;
- ensure timely assessments for special educational needs and disability (SEND);
- act as an advocate around educational matters for individual children and young people; and
- allocate pupil premium plus to schools. Some may top slice a proportion to enhance the virtual school offer or provide crisis support.

Role of speech and language therapists

With their unique clinical expertise in speech, language and communication, speech and language therapists have a crucial role to play in helping Virtual School Heads fulfil their responsibilities to those children and young people who have SLCN.

Speech and language therapists can:
- identify SLCN;
- provide direct training to educational, health and social care practitioners and foster carers and residential staff:
  - on the development of attachment and importance of key relationships though communication;
  - to recognise SLCN;
  - to understand the impact of those needs, including on education; and
  - to respond appropriately, including through differentiating their communication style, materials and teaching environments.

- 👉 provide advice and develop strategies on how to remove barriers to accessing and engaging with education for those children and young people with SLCN; and
- 👉 give direct speech and language therapy to those children and young people who need it.

Virtual School Heads working with speech and language therapists

Examples across England of speech and language therapists supporting their local VSHs can be found in Stoke-on-Trent, Salford, East Sussex and Hackney.

Stoke-on-Trent

In Stoke-on-Trent, the children's speech and language therapy services have worked with their VSH to highlight SLCN on the local electronic Personal Education Plan (ePEP). A locally produced speech, language and communication information sheet has been added to the ePEP site, along with factsheets on the communication needs of looked-after children and safeguarding. The site also includes examples of stage-appropriate SMART targets for speech, language and communication.

East Sussex

East Sussex Virtual School ensures that all children new to care are screened for SLCN, using an established tool developed by speech and language therapists, to gather baseline information. The outcomes are discussed at the Personal Education Plan meeting and appropriate support is put in place or a referral is made to a specialist speech and language therapist. The Virtual School has developed a 'Champion' within East Sussex services and schools (Education, Health & Social Care) to consult, and Pupil Premium can be used to access a speedy referral to the specialist speech and language therapist. East Sussex Virtual School's 2017 conference focused on understanding and using excellent language and communication with young people and developing an attachment-friendly school environment. The specialist speech and language therapist has also developed links with CAMHS and LACAMHS to further support the work of East Sussex Virtual School and frequently supports additional services through the Team Around the Child approach.

Salford

In Salford, the VSH has funded a speech and language therapist post. The speech and language therapist has undertaken a scoping study on the number of 11 to 14-year-old pupils with SLCN. They have had children ranging from 5 to 17 years referred to them from Virtual School caseworkers, social workers, youth offending services, educational psychologists, schools and paediatricians. They have also undertaken assessments and some intervention, contributed to Education, Health and Care Plans, attended looked-after child reviews, made school visits, and attended designated teachers meetings, including training sessions. The speech and language therapist has undertaken SLCN awareness training in the Virtual Schools Team and will be doing some training with looked-after children social workers over the coming year.

Hackney

In Hackney, the VSH funds a dedicated speech and language therapy post for three days a week. There are currently two speech and language therapists working as part of the team. The speech and language therapists sit within the Virtual School (along with teachers, learning mentors, social pedagogues, an occupational therapist, educational psychologists and administrative staff). They have developed an SLCN screen. The aim is to screen all children entering care to pick up any unidentified SLCN, as well as screening specific year groups of children who are already in care. They have trained all staff in the Virtual School in awareness of communication needs and use of the screen, and provide varying levels of direct and indirect therapy. Care leavers are able to access speech and language therapy services if they fit the remit for the Virtual School service, which is up to 21 or up to 25 if they continue in education. The speech and language therapists provide training for social workers and educational providers on identifying and supporting speech and language difficulties. The speech and language therapists also train foster carers on how they can support their child's speech and language development.

Speech and language therapists work closely with their colleagues in the Virtual School to provide multidisciplinary services including: a monthly drop-in service for social workers with the speech and language therapists, occupational therapist and educational psychologists; joint training for foster carers on topics identified by the foster carers; and advising on and creating a range of resources to support children and young people using the Contact Centre in Hackney.

Department for Education statutory guidance

Recent Department for Education statutory guidance highlighted that VSHs should ensure that arrangements are in place to meet the training needs of those responsible for promoting the educational achievement of looked-after and previously looked-after children. The training should include information about a range of issues, including speech, language and communication needs.[6]

Webinar on Giving Voice to Looked-after Children

For more on the communication needs of looked-after children, and the roles of Virtual School Heads and speech and language therapists, see the webinar the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists hosted with the National Association of Virtual School Heads and a speech and language therapist from the Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City. The webinar can be viewed via **www.rcslt.org/news/webinars/gvlac**

▶ For more information email: **info@rcslt.org**

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REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

[1] For more on the communication needs of looked after children see RCSLT factsheet.http://bit.ly/2lpjDnK

[2] McCool S and Stevens IC. Identifying speech, language and communication needs among children and young people in residential care. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders 2011; 46(6): 665-74.

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[4] Evaluation of the No Wrong Door Innovation Programme Research Report, Department for Education, 2017. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625366/Evaluation_of_the_No_Wrong_Door_Innovation_Programme.pdf

[5] The Prison Reform Trust (2016). In Care Out of Trouble. Available at: www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/care%20review%20full%20 report.pdf

[6] Department for Education (2018), Promoting the education of looked-after and previously looked-after children. http://bit.ly/2GMPyFQ