

What is the Virtual School?

The Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint at least one person for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty **to promote the educational achievement** of its Children in Care (CIC). The Virtual School Head (VSH) - must be an officer employed by the local authority or, where local authorities agree to collaborate or share the role, another local authority in England. This officer in Gloucestershire is Jane Featherstone.

The VSH is the lead responsible officer for ensuring that arrangements are in place to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the authority's Children in Care, including those placed outside the home authority's boundaries.

Previously Looked After Children (PLAC) Education Advisor

In 2018, the Virtual School duties were extended to support children who are adopted, who are subject to a Special Guardianship Orders or a Child Arrangement Order with education matters. In Gloucestershire, a specific post was created to meet this duty. Currently holding this post is Nicola Hopper:
Nicola.Hopper@gloucestershire.gov.uk • 07766 992025

Previously looked after children (previously-LAC)



These are children who are no longer in the care of a local authority in England and Wales because they became subject to: an adoption order; a special guardianship order (SGO); or a child arrangements

order (CAO). For children adopted outside England and Wales, the child must have been looked after by a public authority, a religious organisation, or other provider of care whose sole purpose is to benefit society.

PLAC training

This came through my Inbox – I cannot recommend as I have never met the colleague or seen any training, but looked useful.

<https://educationandadoption.wordpress.com>

PLAC PEP:

Having now been in post for a year and a half, I realise the importance of a system of regular 'checking in' with previously looked after children. Unlike looked after children, there are not supporting professionals around unless the guardian has requested it. There is no legal duty to keep a Personal Educational Plan (PEP). Therefore, a PLAC may be in your school with only their guardian and yourselves to support them. And with the past year's experience, we know that life is very unpredictable.

Maybe the time is right for a discussion about keeping some sort of record in order to support our PLAC cohort. Just because they have found more stability within a 'forever home' does not mean that they are no longer susceptible to the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that they would have been exposed to before gaining their PLAC status. A number of PLAC will be on GCC graduated pathway and by default, will be having at least annual meetings reviewing how they are performing within the school environment. But what about those who are not on the pathway? How do we know, how they are managing? Yes, we have educational statistics, but do we know whether the child/young person is meeting their capabilities? What are their aspirations? What about their Social, Emotional and Mental Health?

As a qualified teacher myself, I recognise the pressures of paperwork upon the teaching population, so I don't wish to encourage more without considering it's merits first. I would welcome comment on this with suggestions on how we could move forward on this matter. Please email at Nicola.Hopper@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Sharing of Practice

From a primary school:

Here at The Catholic School of St Gregory the Great, we have welcomed a larger than average number of adopted children in recent years, including those of our headteacher and her husband. Having attended a designated teacher conference, held by GCC Virtual School, and subsequent reviews with parents, it seemed that there were common themes in the struggles adoptive parents had. **An action plan, specifically for PLAC children and their families, was written.**

At the heart of the plan was the motivation to support these families who have needs that are specific to them despite many other parents and staff feeling that certain needs are 'common to all children of that age'. We believe strongly that in supporting the family to build resilience, we are strengthening relationships between home and school and inevitably have better outcomes for those children.

Given the number of PLAC children in our school community, there seemed to be an opportunity for adoptive parents to share their experiences and help each other to feel less alone with any issues they were facing. We felt that a safe, relaxed space to talk about their children might benefit each of them. Being fortunate enough to have adoptive parents at the heart of our school community, they were consulted for their opinion as to whether they felt that a coffee morning would be well received. With a few reservations (such as parents perhaps feeling they were singled out or that they wanted to remain anonymous to other parents), a coffee morning invitation was sent out to each of the families.

The first get together was a great success. It had begun with six parents and the designated teacher making polite conversation, but as trust began to build and a few carefully worded questions posed, people began to open up and share their anxieties. It was quickly established that most of the parents believed that non-adoptive families had no idea of the additional challenges that they experienced as well as having very few support groups such as those that are common for birth families (like NCT groups). A few confessions of spontaneous reactions that would have been better not occurring, suggestions as to what may have helped and many funny anecdotes were shared. A safe environment had been established, where the parents did not feel judged, left them feeling as if they were doing a better job at parenting than they believed they were doing. They left, asking when the next one would be.

Although we have had a couple more coffee mornings since, the current pandemic has put them on hold. A Zoom meeting for the interim is being arranged, however we are aware that this does not allow for the same level of camaraderie and intimacy that a sit around a table with a cup of coffee and a biscuit has.

We believe that our PLAC parents feel supported and are able to come and talk to us at times when they feel that they are failing in some way, knowing that they will not be judged. This allows us to help put appropriate, individual support in place for the family as a whole, not just the child. Working together is incredibly important in creating the secure, safe, accepting and loving environment that children, who have had some of the most challenging starts to life, so desperately need.

St Gregory's has a strong Catholic ethos and this is the firm foundation on which we build our supportive relationship-focused community. To many, we are an extended family, not just a school.

From a secondary school - Barnwood Park:

Over the past year, PLAC has been a specific focus for me in my role as the Designated Teacher for Children in Care & Previously Looked After Children.

With the increased research and awareness about the long term impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on children, and the evidence that having access to an Emotionally Available Adult can improve outcomes, I was compelled to look critically at our whole school process to establish whether we were a PLAC friendly school. Whilst I found there were good induction processes to identify PLAC and that we had an ongoing awareness of the children because they are included on our Vulnerable register and reviewed regularly, I didn't consider this was enough for class teachers to fully understand the potential needs of previously looked after children or enable them to support them effectively in the classroom or pastorally. I also concluded that we did little proactively to support and understand the specific needs and were reliant on services later as we reacted to emerging concerns.

To address this, I first enabled teachers to easily identify PLAC using their Mark sheets in our school information management system (SIMS). This meant that the progress of these children could be monitored more easily and their Pupil Premium funding could be targeted at either specific academic interventions or classroom support on their individual education plan.

Secondly, as part of the regular **whole school CPD programme**, I raised the profile of previously looked after children by making sure all staff were aware of which children are in this group, the possible experiences they may have had prior to being adopted or being cared for under a special guardianship or child arrangement order. We used some of their pupil premium funding to educate all staff about becoming emotionally available and refreshed their understanding about attachment & trauma and the benefits of emotion coaching.

Finally as part of their Year 6 to Year 7 Induction, we introduced all Previously Looked after children to our **learning mentors and Pastoral Team** and provided them with a regular mentoring slot. This was so that every previously looked after child had an emotionally available adult assigned to them, to get to know them and build relationships early with the children and their parents or carers as soon as they knew they would attend our school.

By reviewing the academic progress for previously looked after children in a similar way to the Personal Education Plan for Children in Care, we believe we will see an improvement in the personal development and welfare of previously looked after children as well as improved educational outcomes.

From a student at a GCC PRU:

'I like being at my (new school). It has been really good. I like working in a smaller group. At (my new school) I work in a group of 4 students. I benefit from this because, when I ask for help with my work, I receive the help that I need almost instantly. I actually find it easier to learn. For example in English, I can have more attention and things can be explained to me in more detail as there are fewer students that are clamouring for attention and more time for the teachers to explain things. Compared to (my previous) mainstream school, when there were between 20 and 30 pupils in my class, there was always a pupil who is trying to be the class clown and would disrupt lessons by making comments. I didn't like the usual hustle and bustle and general noise that goes on in mainstream schools. At (my new school) there is nothing like that, the environment is settled and calm. Whenever I need help members of staff are available. The staff are friendly and kind.

At (my new school) it seems that we are all in a similar situation; we all have been excluded from school, so we have something in common. None of the other pupils go out of their way to upset me. All the staff at behave in a respectful way. They listen to me and treat me like

an individual. I feel like I have greater independence. I feel trusted to be who I am and not don't feel judged or expected to behave in a bad way. At mainstream school I had a bad reputation which meant that teachers saw me as a disruptive influence. At my new school the staff have greater understanding of me and my behaviour. I feel under less pressure to behave in a certain way. Staff understand that sometimes I am going to make mistakes with my behaviour and that I can't always get things right. There is more time and space to help me understand what I need to do and therefore to behave in a good way.

The lessons are peaceful. I get treated well. I like the routine and predictability of how my day in school works. I know what to expect. At mainstream school, inevitably things would change. For example a member of staff might be away. This would cause some changes and disruption to my usual routines. Routines stay the same at my new school, even when staff are away. Members of staff seem to understand me and give me space. Both mainstream school and (my new school) have the same expectations about behaviour, but at (my new school) it feels more relaxed, easier going and there is more time and staff. As a consequence of this I feel less stressed and less weight on my shoulders to behave in certain ways.

At mainstream school I had a history of bad behaviour. My reputation went before me. There was a lot of peer pressure to behave in a way that I knew was wrong. I got 'dared' to do things that would get me into trouble. I behaved in a confrontational way. I had a lot of fights with other pupils. Staff at my mainstream school were a bit scared of me. Looking back I did behave in a threatening way. At my new school there have only been two incidents and these were not violent acts. I feel much more relaxed now. I can talk to staff about what is going on for me and I know that I can just have more time to try and sort things out and no one will put pressure on me. The other students are not too annoying.

I like going to school.'

For thought...

KS1-4 lessons on loss and bereavement from Winston's Wish. <https://www.winstonswish.org/pshe-lessons/>

These lesson plans provide the opportunity to take a sensitive approach to learning about bereavement in the classroom. They will support children and young people to develop the skills and understanding they need to deal with this particular life event. To be delivered face-to-face, the resource comprises of two lessons for each key stage. These resources are designed to help pupils and students explore bereavement and grief in developmentally appropriate ways.

The link has been added to the 'Whole School Approaches' site, which is Gloucestershire's Healthy Living and Learning website

<https://the-arc.org.uk/in-care-in-school>

A project to empower young people in care, and care leavers to tell schools and other students how they felt, and the barriers which they faced. Whilst not PLAC, some of the feelings and experiences would be experienced by PLAC. There are lesson plans for primary and secondary schools to use to help explore specific issues.

https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=welcome&utm_content=homepage

A site so that everyone working in schools and further education settings can find resources they need to promote mental health, including:

- Lesson plans, assembly plans and other useful resources
- Advice on how to encourage children to speak openly about mental health
- Top tips on understanding and responding to mental health issues
- Information and tools for developing a whole-school approach to mental health, including supporting staff wellbeing
- Guidance about engaging with the wider community, parents/carers and services

BBC Gloucestershire are starting a nine-month campaign focussing on children's mental health:

This will include signposting listeners to appropriate support and calls to action around volunteering and fundraising.

Just for a bit more context, here's four key targets:

- To raise at least £250,000 for a BBC Children in Need fund to support child mental health
- To signpost at least 1,000 listeners across England to volunteer roles in child mental health in partnership with child mental health charities
- To deliver regular mental health content across the local BBC radio
- To deliver training to BBC staff in England around dealing with mental health related callers

If anyone would like to share what they are doing around children and young people's mental health with a wider audience please contact chris.sandys@bbc.co.uk