Educational achievement of looked after children in Waltham Forest

A report of the Education Scrutiny Committee

February 2016
As the Corporate Parent for our looked after children, the Council and all councillors have a responsibility to ensure they are supported to reach their potential and go on to have successful adult lives in whatever path they choose. We recognise the challenges that looked after children and young people can face in their lives and ensuring that they are fully supported to maximise their educational opportunities is key to achieving this.

However, the Ofsted inspection of children’s services in November 2014 highlighted a number of areas where the Council needs to improve, including providing support to improve the educational attainment of looked after children. In its review of this issue, the Education Scrutiny Committee considered the range of support for looked after children currently on offer, improvements put in place since the Ofsted inspection and areas where improvements are still required. The results of this review are contained in this report and will form part of a wider review of the Ofsted improvement programme by the Social Care Scrutiny Committee.

Clear leadership from the Council’s officers and politicians means that service improvement is becoming embedded in the work of teams across children’s social care. We hope that the recommendations in this report will add value to the existing improvement programme by focussing on the further changes required to improve educational and wider outcomes for our looked after children.
Education Scrutiny Committee Members

Chair: Councillor Louise Mitchell
Vice-Chair: Councillor Tony Bell
Councillors: Councillor Aktar Beg
Councillor Marion Fitzgerald
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Dermot O'Neill
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Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The November 2014 Ofsted inspection of Waltham Forest’s services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers rated the services as Requires Improvement. Following this inspection, the Council has put in place a range of measures to deliver improvements in key areas.

1.1.2 The Education Scrutiny Committee has spent the 2015/16 municipal year conducting a review into the educational outcomes of children, as part of the Social Care Scrutiny Committee’s wider year-long review into the impact of improvements following the Ofsted inspection. The review considered the range of support with education for looked after children currently on offer by collecting evidence from a range of sources, including meeting with foster carers and looked after children, hearing from officers and analysing and interpreting data.

1.1.3 The Council has a statutory responsibility to promote the education of looked after children, particularly educational attainment, and this duty is to be discharged by a Virtual School Head. The Ofsted inspection found that attainment, particularly at secondary level, was poor, that personal education plans were not of a consistently high standard and that the data analysis taking place on children’s arrival in care was not sufficiently detailed to provide adequate education support.

1.1.4 Provisional results for the academic year 2014/15 show that the educational achievement of looked after children is still significantly below the levels expected for other children. The Committee has made recommendations in three key areas, outlined below.

1.2 Virtual School

1.2.1 The Virtual School’s key responsibilities are ensuring that looked after children have access to education placements, along with monitoring progress, attendance and use of the pupil premium. The Committee found that Virtual School staff are committed to the work they do, but the lack of a clear strategic direction and multiple changes in the Virtual School leadership in recent years mean that the Virtual School’s resources are not always focussed on the most effective approaches to improving the educational outcomes of looked after children. This is compounded by a lack of appropriate data systems to enable effective planning and timely and accurate analysis of attainment and progress.
1.2.2 The Council has recognised the challenges faced by the Virtual School and so has commissioned a review into its efficacy and options for future development. The Committee hopes that the recommendations in this report will complement the results of this review.

1.2.3 At present, the Virtual School’s remit covers those aged five to 16, but the Committee heard evidence of the need to extend this to cover the early years and post-16 and so ensuring a holistic approach. In addition, the educational experience of LAC can be significantly affected by disruption in their lives, for example placement breakdown, and there is scope to further develop the support on offer in these circumstances.

1.2.4 Given these findings, the Committee has made recommendations concerning the implementation of a clear strategic plan and data strategy for the Virtual School, as well as clear plans for dealing with events that can impact negatively on educational outcomes. The Committee also recommends that the remit of the Virtual School be extended from early years to 18, and in some cases 24.

1.3 Schools

1.3.1 The Committee heard that the support offered by schools for looked after children is mixed and depends on the individuals involved at each school. This leads to differing expectations and experiences amongst looked after children and carers.

1.3.2 In light of this, the Committee thinks that the role of schools in promoting the education of looked after children should be clearly defined in the Virtual School’s strategic plan, to include clear escalation processes if these expectations are not met. In addition, the Virtual School should work with schools to identify and promote examples of best practice around supporting looked after children in schools.

1.4 Foster carers

1.4.1 The final section of the report addresses the role of foster carers in the educational achievement of looked after children. The Committee found that while many foster carers provided excellent support to looked after children with regards to education, this support can be mixed. Many foster carers have not made use of the support and training on offer from the Virtual School and this support and training could be further developed and better publicised.

1.4.2 The Committee considers that the Virtual School’s strategic plan should make clear reference to the roles of foster carers and expectations around how they support looked after children with their education as part of a renewal of the Virtual School’s support package for foster carers.
Summary of recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Virtual School should develop a strategic vision and plan focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for LAC, to include a sharp focus on challenging all stakeholders responsible for educational outcomes and establishing more ambitious attainment targets.

**Recommendation 2:** The Virtual School should be supported by an effective data strategy to ensure that all relevant data is available in the correct form to inform the most effective approaches to ensuring LAC achieve their full educational potential.

**Recommendation 3:** The Virtual School, in consultation with schools and social workers, should develop clear packages of support to deal with common occurrences that have negative impacts on educational achievement including placement breakdown.

**Recommendation 4:** The Virtual School’s remit should be extended so that it reaches from early years to 18 (and to 24 in some cases), a strong package of career advice and support should be developed and provision for those outside of the formal education system should be enhanced.

**Recommendation 5:** The Virtual School’s strategic plan should clearly identify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of schools (and how they relate to those of the Virtual School and foster carers) for ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for LAC, supported by research into best practice in the borough in terms of schools’ support for LAC.

**Recommendation 6:** Foster carers’ roles with regards to promoting the education of looked after children should be clarified and publicised as part of a renewal of the support and training package from the Virtual School.
Introduction

2.1 Background

2.1.1 In November 2014 Ofsted inspected Waltham Forest’s services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. The inspection report rated the services as Requires Improvement, and the Council has put a range of measures in place to deliver improvements in the key areas identified by Ofsted.

2.1.2 As part of the goal to embed sustained improvement in services, during the municipal year 2015/16 the Social Care Scrutiny Committee is conducting a year-long review into the impact of the improvements. The review is looking at five themes which were of particular importance to the Council following the findings of the Ofsted report and which members and officers agreed that if improvement could be maintained would have the most impact on outcomes for children and young people. The purpose of the review is to add value to the existing improvement programme by examining changes and developing further recommendations.

2.1.3 One of the five themes of the review looks at the educational outcomes of looked after children and this part of the review has been led by the Education Scrutiny Committee. Investigations into this theme were guided by the question: “Are children in care being supported enough to reach their potential and maximise their life chances through support with their education?” This report outlines the Committee’s findings on this theme and will form one of the chapters of the final report to be agreed by the Social Care Scrutiny Committee in April 2016.

2.1.4 This review considered the range of education support education currently available for children in care, alongside lived experience of this support, in order to establish which areas need to be addressed and improved where appropriate. The Education Scrutiny Committee collected evidence in a number of ways, including meeting with foster carers and looked after children, attending internal meetings such as the Virtual School Improvement Group, and analysing and interpreting data provided by officers from across the Council. A list of the evidence gathering sessions that took place as part of this review can be found at Appendix 1.

2.1.5 The Committee has been supported in this process by the Policy and Public Affairs Team and officers from Children’s Social Care and Education Teams.
2.2 The role of local authorities in the education of looked after children

2.2.1 As the Corporate Parent for our looked after children, the Council has a responsibility to ensure they are supported to reach their potential and go on to have successful adult lives in whatever path they choose. Ensuring our children and young people are fully supported to maximise their educational opportunities is key to achieving this.

2.2.2 Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a statutory role in promoting the education of looked after children (LAC) in the form of a particular duty to promote their educational attainment (whether or not they live or are educated within the local authority boundary) 1.

2.2.3 An amendment to the 1989 Act in the Children and Families Act 2014 requires local authorities in England to appoint a Virtual School Head to discharge the local authority’s duty to promote the educational achievement of its LAC. All LAC should have a personal education plan (PEP) as part of their care plan.

2.2.4 The duty extends to looked after young people preparing to leave care at 16 or 17 (referred to as ‘eligible children’) and this duty involves ensuring that the PEP is kept updated and feeds into the pathway plan, including looking at the young person’s options for engaging in training, education or employment in the future.

2.3 Ofsted’s findings

2.3.1 The Ofsted report on the November 2014 inspection of Waltham Forest’s children’s social care services was published in January 2015 2. The report highlighted a number of key issues relating to the education of LAC:

- Persistent absence by a small number of children pulled down attendance rates from to 95 per cent in 2013-14 to 93 per cent at the time of the inspection
- Attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 is above the national average for LAC and the gap between LAC and all Waltham Forest children is narrower than the national gap

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2 The report is available to download here: http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/waltham_forest/054_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children%27s%20services%20and%20the%20LSCB%20as%20pdf.pdf
• Attainment and progress of LAC in secondary schools is poor, with the proportion of pupils achieving five GCSEs at A* to C including maths and English falling from 25 per cent in 2013 to 17 per cent in 2014.
• There is not sufficiently detailed analysis to provide targeted support to children coming into care at age 12 and older.
• PEPs require improvement, as they are often missing key educational information or are not of a high enough quality.
• All LAC access their full entitlement to education, with action taken to find school places for all and to ensure that none are missing from education, including high quality pupil referral units and tuition organised by the Virtual School for those who cannot attend school full time.
• The number of fixed term exclusions has been effectively reduced by the Virtual School.

2.3.2 Following the Ofsted report, the local authority developed an improvement action plan, as required by the Ofsted Inspection Framework. The plan contains actions to tackle 20 key areas addressed by the report. The actions related to the education of looked after children were allocated to the Head of Children in Care services and the Virtual School Head and are outlined, along with a brief overview of progress made so far, in Appendix 2. The actions that have contributed towards this progressed are also referenced in the main body of the report.

2.4 The educational achievement of looked after children

The educational achievement of looked after children in England

2.4.1 The latest national data from the Department for Education (DfE) shows that in the academic year 2013/14 LAC in England continued to improve in their attainment at KS1 and KS2. While direct comparison at KS4 is not possible due to a change in assessment systems, only 12 per cent of LAC in England achieved five or more GCSEs at A* to C including English and maths in 2014. The attainment gaps between LAC and all children in 2014 are broadly similar or have closed slightly across all key stages, but the gap at GCSE remains striking at 40 percentage points. Permanent exclusions for LAC are nearly twice as high as for all children, but these are decreasing at a higher rate.

2.4.2 Not only do children in care have some of the poorest educational outcomes, but these outcomes then impact on longer-term issues in the lives of care leavers.

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(those aged between 16 and 18), such as poorer employment prospects and health outcomes. Care leavers are disproportionately represented amongst the prison population and those who are homeless.

**The educational achievement of looked after children in Waltham Forest**

2.4.3 In January 2016 there were 161 looked after children of school age (Reception to Year 11), four in the early years cohort and 87 young people in Years 12 and 13.

2.4.4 Not all of Waltham Forest’s LAC are educated in the borough and there is no significant difference in attainment between those children who are schooled in Waltham Forest and those schooled outside.

2.4.5 The graphs below illustrate the attainment levels of Waltham Forest LAC at KS1, KS2 and KS4 and provide a range of comparators. The percentages represent the proportion achieving expected levels at the different key stages, which means at least Level 2 at KS1, at least Level 4 at KS2 and at KS4 at least 5 GCSEs at A* to C including maths and English.

![Figure 1: Attainment of LAC for 2013/14](image)

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5 At the time of writing, national figures for the achievement of LAC were only available up until the academic year 2013/14. In addition, results for 2014/15 are provisional until their final publication by the DfE in early 2016. At the time of writing, these final results were not available and so all 2014/15 results should be treated as provisional.
**Attainment headlines for LAC in Waltham Forest**

2.4.6 **KS1 and KS2**: Over the last few years in Waltham Forest, looked after children’s attainment at KS1 has been above national levels for similar areas in Reading and Maths. For pupils at KS2, those achieving at least a level 4 in Reading, Writing, and Maths was below similar areas in 2013/14 (Figure 1).

2.4.7 Provisional results for 2014/15 show that Waltham Forest LAC did worse than other Waltham Forest children on all of these KS1 and KS2 indicators and this gap has widened on all indicators except KS2 writing since 2013/14 (Figure 3). While
Waltham Forest LAC do better than national LAC in the majority of these subjects, their achievement is considerably worse in KS2 maths (Figure 1).

2.4.8 **KS4**: In 2012/13, 25 per cent of pupils achieved five good GCSEs (including English and maths), which was above the proportion of similar pupils nationally and the gap with other children in Waltham Forest narrowed slightly. In 2013/14 this reduced to 17 per cent (a level which the Ofsted report highlighted as cause for concern) and provisional results in 2014/15 show that only 16 per cent of looked after children achieved this level.

2.4.9 In comparison to the rest of the children in Waltham Forest, LAC do significantly worse at GCSEs, with the proportion achieving the expected standards 39 percentage points lower (Figure 3). Given the lower levels of attainment at GCSE for all children in Waltham Forest compared to national and regional results, this is particularly concerning considering the impact on long term outcomes for LAC.

2.4.10 **Post-16**: As at January 2015, there were 87 looked after young people in years 12 and 13, with seven of these young people classified as NEET and five remanded in secure accommodation. At present the attainment levels of those in years 12 and 13 at school and college are not tracked by the Virtual School.

2.4.11 There have been some improvements in the proportion of Waltham Forest care leavers in suitable education, employment or training, but as of September 2015, almost of all these indicators remain below England averages and those in equivalent areas.

2.4.12 The attendance rate for LAC in Waltham Forest was 91 per cent in 2014/15 and as in previous years persistent absence continued to fall to 5.3 per cent.
Key findings

3.1 Overview

3.1.1 The Committee’s findings are divided into three sections: the work of the Virtual School, the role of schools, and the role of foster carers.

3.1.2 As identified by Ofsted, there are significant concerns around the attainment of LAC, in particular for children of secondary school age. These concerns remain in light of the provisional results for 2014/15. Some work has been done towards the actions identified as part of the Ofsted improvement action plan and the Committee welcomes this work. During the course of the review, the Committee identified areas where Waltham Forest LAC are being well supported, but also where further work needs to be done.

3.1.3 The recommendations made in each of the sections outline the changes that the Committee believe would be the most effective at improving educational outcomes for LAC in Waltham Forest. However, the Committee is acutely aware of the financial pressures faced by the Council and as such the costs associated with implementing any recommendations would need to be accommodated within existing budgets. As outlined below, these recommendations are designed to complement the Council’s review of the Virtual School which has been taking place at the same time as the Committee have been carrying out their review. As such, the implementation of this report’s recommendations (if approved by Cabinet) would be part of any realignment of budgeting priorities and targeting of resources associated with the Virtual School review.

3.2 The Virtual School

Structure

3.2.1 The Waltham Forest Virtual School Team contains 3.8 FTE staff, including a Deputy Headteacher, SEN Lead, Advisory Teacher, Data and Scrutiny Officer and Education Welfare Officer. The current temporary structure has been in place for over 18 months. The role of Virtual School Head is undertaken by the Interim Director of School Effectiveness. Over the last few years the structure and the headship of the Virtual School has changed a number of times. At present the day-to-day work of the team is managed by the Deputy Headteacher.

3.2.2 The Virtual School’s responsibilities are as follows:
- ensuring access to high quality education placements
- monitoring attendance and achievement of LAC
- keeping track of the use of the pupil premium
- training for social workers, foster carers and designated teachers
- admissions
- special educational needs
- personal education planning

3.2.3 The Virtual School Improvement Group (VSIG) was established in 2015 in order to lead on developing the strategic direction for the Virtual School as part of the improvement plan following the Ofsted inspection, and this group reports to Corporate Parenting Board. The VSIG is chaired by the Executive Headteacher of the Hawkswood Group (the borough’s pupil referral unit provider) and has representation from the Virtual School, primary, secondary and special providers, along with a designated teacher and officers from the Children in Care and Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) services. The Committee welcomes the establishment of VSIG and the Chair of Education Scrutiny has recently joined the group.

3.2.4 The remit of the Virtual School is for those aged between 5 and 16, although additional work does take place with looked after children in the early years and post-16 cohorts. Support for the cohorts that that fall outside of the Virtual School’s remit is explored in more detail later in this report.

3.2.5 The Council has recognised that the Virtual School arrangements need to be reviewed to ensure that it can focus its resources on delivering the best possible outcomes for LAC. This recognition was acted upon through the commissioning of a review into the efficacy of the Virtual School and options for future provision in this area. The Committee welcomes this review, as it shows progress towards the actions identified in the action plan and an improved Virtual School offer will hopefully tackle many of the issues identified by the Ofsted inspection report. The results of this review will be published in early 2016 and the Committee hopes that the recommendations outlined in this report below will complement those arising from the review.

3.2.6 Alongside the review, the London Borough of Newham’s Virtual School Head has been employed in Waltham Forest for one day per week since November 2015. This is an advisory role to support improvement and development in the Waltham Forest Virtual School.
3.2.7 When meeting with representatives from the Virtual School Team, it was clear to the Committee that the staff are dedicated and committed and have developed good relationships with a number of the children they work with.

3.2.8 However it was also clear that without a dedicated Virtual School Head or sufficient capacity within the staff team, the Virtual School lacks a clear strategic direction and this has an impact on how the resources of the Virtual School are focused and how its role is expressed to and understood by internal and external stakeholders. This lack of strategic focus means that Virtual School resources are not always focused on delivering the activities and interventions that will enable the best possible outcomes for the child.

**Personal education plans**

3.2.9 As stated in the statutory guidance, “[Virtual School Heads] should have a quality assurance role in relation to PEPs”\(^6\) and as such, the Virtual School needs to have a clear and effective escalation process for when PEPs are not of a high enough standard (rather than the team correcting and completing the work themselves, which is sometimes the case) to ensure that Ofsted’s concerns around the quality of PEPs can continue to be addressed.

3.2.10 The Virtual School has recently updated the PEP template to make it more straightforward to complete and early feedback from teachers suggests that the new template is proving helpful. In addition, the low level of PEP completion rates as referenced in the Ofsted report has also been partially rectified through identifying an error in the way in which the data was being collected on the central Council database, which meant that it was not picking up data on all the completed PEPs. However, there is still work to be done to improve the quality of PEPs and the completion rates, in particular by working with schools, so the strategic focus on the role of the Virtual School in this area is crucial.

**Collection and use of data**

3.2.11 The challenges with the availability of up to date and comprehensive data exist not only in relation to PEPs. As identified by the Ofsted inspectors and witnessed by the Committee, much of the data which would enable the Virtual School to plan more strategically and to assess the attainment of individual students more effectively is not readily available in a form which enables easy analysis and understanding. This is due to a lack of adequate systems and the capacity and resource within the Virtual School Team to develop these systems. For example, current data systems do not allow for an analysis of how pupil premium is being

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\(^6\) p.15 *Promoting the education of looked after children: Statutory guidance for local authorities*. Department for Education (July 2014).
spent by each school and with what effect. Having this data to hand, aided by the systematic monitoring of PEPs, would enable the Virtual School to issue a proper challenge to schools to demonstrate how they are using the pupil premium to improve outcomes. In addition, data systems do not currently allow the Virtual School to demonstrate its own effectiveness in improving outcomes and this is a source of frustration for the Virtual School Team as well as other stakeholders.

**Target setting and expectations**

3.2.12 At present, the Virtual School sets targets (based on data provided by the Fisher Family Trust) for the attainment of LAC at KS1, as illustrated in Figure 2. These targets are regularly exceeded by a significant margin, so the Committee feel that this brings into question the extent to which they are useful in driving up attainment. The gaps between the attainment of LAC and all children in the borough at this level are significant (as they are on a national level) and if this gap is to be closed, the Council needs to be clear about its ambition for the attainment of LAC.

3.2.13 The level of ambition that the Council and all stakeholders have for LAC was an issue that came up frequently during the evidence gathering process. For example, one foster carer suggested that there should be “no allowances” for LAC, but in her experience some schools do not have the same expectations for LAC as other children. Schools should ensure that they have exactly the same expectations as for all other children in terms of attainment, attendance and behaviour. Evidence gathered through the Council’s LAC Insight project suggests that some LAC find it easy to ‘coast’ with regards to their education, as expectations are low. In light of this, the Committee would be interested in seeing what work could be done on looking at more bespoke methods of target setting and assessment for LAC by the Virtual School.

3.2.14 When examining the latest attainment figures, the Committee heard that often those children whose attainment is significantly below that which is expected have experienced a significant disruption in their lives. For example, in 2014/15 a student’s GCSE results were significantly lower than predicted following the disruption caused by placement breakdown in the weeks before they were due to sit their exams. While there are some occurrences that cannot be effectively prepared for or predicted, the frequency with which these issues affect the outcomes of LAC strongly suggest that the Virtual School should further develop its procedures to manage these circumstances. At present, the Virtual School Team meets weekly with the Access to Resources team to review cases where there will be a likely placement move. This work should be further developed to identify those children who might be most at risk of this kind of disruption as soon as possible and take

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7 In 2015, the Council’s Service Design Team conducted a LAC Insight project which was an ethnographic study looking exploring what impacts LAC outcomes and involved in-depth discussions with LAC and foster carers.
proactive measures to mitigate the risks which are monitored by the Independent Reviewing Service.

**Recommendation 1:** The Virtual School should develop a strategic vision and plan focussed on achieving the best possible outcomes for LAC, to include a sharp focus on challenging all stakeholders responsible for educational outcomes and establishing more ambitious attainment targets.

**Recommendation 2:** The Virtual School should be supported by an effective data strategy to ensure that all relevant data is available in the correct form to inform the most effective approaches to ensuring LAC achieve their full educational potential.

**Recommendation 3:** The Virtual School, in consultation with schools and social workers, should develop clear packages of support to deal with common occurrences that have negative impacts on educational achievement including placement breakdown.

**Support for children and young people outside the Virtual School remit**

3.2.15 As stated above, the remit of the Virtual School in Waltham Forest covers those of statutory school age (5 to 16 years), however the Council does have responsibility for the education of all children (including those under five), as well as for those aged 16 or 17 and preparing to leave care. Despite the fact that they fall outside the Virtual School’s remit, work is already taking place with these children and young people in Waltham Forest.

3.2.16 The Virtual School Team has recently begun work with LAC in the early years period to ensure the pupil premium is being accessed by early years providers. In addition, the Virtual School has started to work to continue the PEP process beyond 16 and give advice regarding education, working together with personal advisors on the pathway planning process. The Committee welcomes all of this work.

3.2.17 However, there is a lack of specialist career advice and support available for all LAC, particularly post-16, and this gap has been highlighted by the Virtual School Team, and through feedback to the Committee from foster carers and other stakeholders. This corresponds with feedback from foster carers that the post-16 experience for LAC can involve a significant and sudden reduction in the support available. Some other local authorities continue Virtual School provision beyond 16 (for example, up until 25 in the London Borough of Newham), and the Committee believes that the borough’s LAC and care leavers would benefit from an extension of the Virtual School remit, thus providing a comprehensive service from early years to age 18. This would also ensure that PEPs are in place for all those aged up to 18 to ensure adequate tracking of educational achievement.

3.2.18 This should be accompanied by a plan to evolve and reflect the statutory responsibilities to care leavers up to age 24 in some circumstances. This service
should include access to a targeted careers advice service, access to employability and an improved local offer of education, training and employment opportunities from across the Council.

3.2.19 In addition to those who fall outside the remit of the Virtual School due to age, there is also a small group of children and young people who are not accessing their education due to other circumstances, such as pregnancy, being on remand and losing a school place due to a high number of placement moves. As at June 2015, these circumstances accounted for six young people out of the Virtual School’s cohort of 178, representing 3 per cent.

3.2.20 The Fair Access Panel is responsible for ensuring all children aged 16 and under, including those in these circumstances, are able to access education and this are of work was praised by the Ofsted report. However, for those who are over 16, the educational support on offer is patchy and it would be beneficial to have clearer guidelines on how the Virtual School maintains PEPs and continues to focus on their educational outcomes.

**Recommendation 4:** The Virtual School’s remit should be extended so that it reaches from early years to 18 (and to 24 in some cases), a strong package of career advice and support should be developed and provision for those outside of the formal education system should be enhanced

### 3.3 Schools

3.3.1 From April 2014 to March 2015, Waltham Forest’s looked after children attended 117 schools, 86 per cent of which were graded good or better. It is Council policy that LAC should only be placed in schools that are rated as good or outstanding. However consideration must always be given to the personal circumstances of a child and whether the disruption incurred as a result of moving schools, for example because the rating of a school has dropped below good, will it have a less detrimental impact on the child’s attainment compared to staying in the school.

3.3.2 Schools are central to determining the extent to which a looked after child can achieve their educational potential and they have a statutory duty to promote the education of looked after children through the position of designated teacher.\(^8\)

3.3.3 However, the Committee heard on a number of occasions, including from foster carers, LAC and the Virtual School Team, that the support children receive from

schools is mixed and its effectiveness can depend on the individual teachers concerned.

3.3.4 The Committee enquired as to whether there are any particular schools that have developed expertise in supporting LAC, but the responses received suggest that the numbers of LAC at any one school are so low that this expertise is difficult to develop. However, the Committee believes that there would be value in understanding more about best practice if possible and the Virtual School would be best placed to conduct further research and collect information on this to be used as a method for increasing skills and expertise across all schools in the borough.

3.3.5 Given that the Council’s ability to influence the working practices of the schools attended by LAC is limited (particularly in those schools outside the borough), the most useful change in this area would be for schools’ role in the education of LAC to be more clearly defined in relation to the role of the Virtual School and foster carers. These roles should be clearly set out in the Virtual School’s strategic plan.

**Recommendation 5:** The Virtual School’s strategic plan should clearly identify and communicate the roles and responsibilities of schools (and how they relate to those of the Virtual School and foster carers) for ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for LAC, supported by research into best practice in the borough in terms of schools’ support for LAC.

### 3.4 Foster carers

3.4.1 Foster carers are, along with Council services and school provision, a third key source of support for LAC. From the evidence gathered, it is clear to the Committee that there are many excellent foster carers providing support to LAC in the borough. However, as with the varying levels of quality of school, there is a degree of variation in the level of involvement foster carers have in promoting the education of the children in their care.

3.4.2 Just as the Committee is keen to ensure the roles of the Virtual School and the schools themselves are more firmly defined, so too should the Council make clearer the expectations and role of a foster carer with regard to education. The Committee believes that foster carers should (as many already are) be as ‘pushy’ for their foster child as they would be for their birth children. This would include active attendance at parents’ evenings, involvement in the development and monitoring of PEPs, and developing relationships and meeting regularly with the designated teachers at the school to ensure that progress is being effectively managed at home and at school.
3.4.3 The survey of foster carers conducted as part of this review\(^9\) showed that around half are aware of the support on offer from the Virtual School for foster carers and LAC, but the training available for foster carers has only been accessed by just over a third of these carers. In light of this, a renewal of the provision and promotion of training for foster carers by the Virtual School would provide a focus on this support, as well as providing an opportunity to communicate the defined expectations around the role of foster carers in this area and development opportunities to foster carers to meet these expectations.

3.4.4 The importance of being in a stable placement for the best educational outcomes is borne out not only by the evidence heard by the Committee, but also in the latest national research on the educational achievement of LAC, which highlights the importance of supporting “[f]oster carers…to withstand the pressures of caring for vulnerable young people with challenging behaviour so that placement stability increases, which should benefit young people’s educational progress”\(^10\). Alongside the work that the Virtual School and social workers can do to monitor placements and ensure that any negative impacts of placement failure are mitigated as far as possible, the Committee welcomes the Council’s work in supporting foster carers, which was highlighted as a strength in the Ofsted report (paragraph 26) and this should be built upon.

**Recommendation 6:** Foster carers’ roles with regards to promoting the education of looked after children should be clarified and publicised as part of a renewal of the support and training package from the Virtual School

\(^9\) In September and October 2015, an online survey was sent to all foster carers in the borough in order to gather their views on how services have changed since the Ofsted inspection in 2014. The survey was completed by 16 foster carers.

\(^10\) P. 7, *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data* (Rees Centre/University of Bristol, November 2015).
Conclusion

4.1 Improving educational outcomes for looked after children is a priority for Waltham Forest. The Ofsted inspection in November 2014 highlighted areas where work needed to be done to improve these outcomes and this review provided an opportunity for the Education Scrutiny Committee to examine this issue in more depth and illustrates the Council’s commitment to sustained improvement across all services.

4.2 In the process of trying to answer the question that has guided this review, “Are children in care being supported enough to reach their potential and maximise their life chances through support with their education?”, the Committee has seen evidence of good practice and committed staff throughout the review process. It is clear that a number of improvements have been made since the Ofsted inspection, in particular the commissioning of the Virtual School review.

4.3 However, there is still a significant way to go to ensure that Waltham Forest’s looked after children enjoy the same outcomes as other children in the borough through being supported to reach their full potential and maximise their life chances. A key part of this journey is defining the roles and expectations of all stakeholders in working towards these improved outcomes and the recommendations in this report seek to address this.

4.4 The Committee hopes that the recommendations contained in this paper, based on the evidence heard by the Committee throughout the review, will add value to the existing improvement programme and support the Council to drive further improvements for looked after children, as well as across children’s social care more widely as part of the overarching report by the Social Care Scrutiny Committee.
Appendix 1: List of evidence-gathering sessions and attendees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 October</td>
<td>Informal evidence session before committee meeting</td>
<td>Shirley Forbes, Deputy Head Virtual School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 October</td>
<td>Virtual School Improvement Group</td>
<td>Education Scrutiny Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 October</td>
<td>Children in Care Council (CiCC)</td>
<td>Cllr Louise Mitchell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 November</td>
<td>Corporate Parenting Board</td>
<td>Education Scrutiny Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 December</td>
<td>Virtual School Improvement Group</td>
<td>Cllr Louise Mitchell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 December</td>
<td>Discussion with foster carers</td>
<td>Cllr Louise Mitchell and Cllr Richard Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 December</td>
<td>Informal evidence session before committee meeting</td>
<td>Education and Social Care Scrutiny Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 December</td>
<td>LAC Insight Project Workshop</td>
<td>Education and Social Care Scrutiny Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 December</td>
<td>Discussion with portfolio holder</td>
<td>Education Scrutiny Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 December</td>
<td>Care Leavers CiCC meeting</td>
<td>Social Care Scrutiny Committee (on behalf of Education Scrutiny Committee)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2: Update on Ofsted improvement plan actions relating to the educational achievement of LAC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Improvement area</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Desired impact/outcome</th>
<th>Update on progress January 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce the number of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training.</td>
<td>Benchmark best practice across areas with similar demographics and scope an new strategic approach</td>
<td>Strategy agreed by the Corporate Parenting Board</td>
<td>Establishment of Virtual School Improvement Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Virtual School review due to report its findings in early 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Newham’s Virtual School Head employed since November 2015 to provide support and guidance on service improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implement a new multi-faceted approach to working with young people to maximise their educational and employment outcomes</td>
<td>Incremental increase in the number of care leavers EET by closer scrutiny of, support and challenge for schools to improve GCSE results</td>
<td>Virtual School review due to report its findings in early 2016</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>New PEP template has been designed and is being piloted</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of a specialist targeted approach through the new service above to create opportunities for care leavers who are already NEET</td>
<td>Increased availability of in borough training and employment opportunities for care leavers</td>
<td>Work in progress to develop a bespoke package of careers advice and support in partnership between the Children in Care Team, the Virtual School and the Employment and Skills service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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