

Young Inspectors Report 2024

**The Big Ambition – Virtual School for children
looked after and previously looked after**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Young Inspectors is an annual programme involving young people with lived experience of services, who are trained and supported to inspect our work and make recommendations aimed at service improvement. The Young Inspectors undertake research into the views of children, families and professionals - about services provided by social care and partner agencies responsible for safeguarding children.

Feedback gathered by the Young Inspectors provides a foundation to the recommendations for service changes and development.

2. YOUNG INSPECTORS 2024 THE BIG AMBITION – VIRTUAL SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND PREVIOUSLY LOOKED AFTER, children with a social worker and Kinship

This year, a team of six young people aged 18-22 applied their own experience of Camden services in the planning and conduct of the project with the focus on the Virtual School for looked after and previously looked after children. This was requested by the Head of the Virtual School in order to get more insight from children into their service.

“The role of the Virtual School Headteacher (VSHT), and the Virtual School team, is to promote the education of children and young people in care and previously in care, and to ensure that the local authority’s statutory duties in this area are discharged effectively.

Looked-after and previously looked-after children start with the disadvantage of their pre-care experiences and, often, have special educational needs. Virtual School Heads have a key role to ensure these children have the maximum opportunity to reach their full educational potential - an important part of why this role was made statutory.

- For looked-after children, as part of a local authority’s corporate parent role, the VSH needs to be the educational advocate that parents are for others.
- For previously looked-after children, the VSH will be a source of advice and information to help their parents to advocate for them as effectively as possible. VSHs are not acting as part of the corporate parent role in these circumstances but are there to promote the educational achievement of these children through the provision of advice and information to relevant parties listed in Previously looked after-children. Looked-after children
- Local authorities have a duty under the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child looked after by them. This includes a specific duty to promote the child’s educational achievement, wherever they live or are educated. The authority must, therefore, give particular attention to the educational implications of any decision about the welfare of those children.”
- Department for Education, Statutory Guidance – Promoting Education of Looked after and previously looked after children 2018.

3. WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE PROJECT

Meeting the staff from the Virtual school and hearing how different they are from each other and how they work in different ways and yet they complement each other.

The most challenging task was to plan a focus group discussion with young people to talk to them about the virtual school and the Personal Education Plan meetings. It was fun but challenging to plan the questions we were going to ask them and how we were going to present it in an interesting and engaging way.

I have gained a new skill that is how to be a good presenter and get the audience's attention.

Abdi, Young Inspector

The sense of purpose I have found working in this team is something I have never experienced before.

I used to struggle with working together with peers, but I have now the understanding of being a part of a team and wanting to be a part of the team. Also, this group has given me perspective into my own personal life and how things matter in relation to learning and celebrating victories.

Mary-lynn, Young Inspector

This opportunity has enabled me to discover aspects of myself that I didn't know existed such as my great confidence in speaking in public as opposed to the panic attacks I would have when presenting in front of my teachers in schools. It was also great to come together with young people of diverse mindsets and experiences and come up with such a career changing project in such a short period of time.

It was also very easy and safe for us to converse with people who work in Camden. Our opinions were always heard and our input to the project was always valued.

Nihad, Young Inspector

Most enjoyable part for me was speaking to members of the Virtual school directly. As a former child of the virtual school, it is truly wonderful to have the opportunity to understand who the people supporting me were, and how dedicated they are in making sure that all looked after children overcome their limitations.

Princess, Young Inspector

One of the challenges I faced was the language barrier. Understanding and processing information in a second language took extra time.

This experience has been incredibly valuable for me. I have gained a deeper understanding of the Virtual School service and picked up several new skills, such as conducting interviews, taking detailed notes, and analysing information from various sources. Additionally, I have improved my ability to communicate effectively within a team. Beyond that, I have also learned about setting goals and having ambitions.

This project has provided me not only with professional knowledge but also with general life knowledge.

Sam, Young Inspector

The skills I have gained include confidence to talk in a group setting, improved planning skills and working together with other young people.

This project has rekindled my 'why' for helping young people, as one day I aspire to become a therapist for adolescents. It has also helped me to gain insight as to the amount of work each member of the Virtual school do.

I am immensely happy knowing my role will make the difference. Along with seeing that change, it will make me feel like the hard work I had put into the project was worth it.

Aisha, Young Inspector

4. AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The Big Ambition – Virtual School for children looked after and previously looked after.

The main focus of the young inspection was:

- **To find out about the experience** of children and young people of the support they receive from the Virtual School.
- **To identify main themes** based on the feedback from focus group discussions with young people and members of the Virtual School staff.
- **To develop recommendations for the Virtual School** based on the feedback from the focus group discussions.

5. APPROACH

The Young Inspectors approach to their investigation:

- Focus group discussion with young people to learn about their experience of support from the Virtual School. Nine young people took part in the discussion age 14-22 from diverse backgrounds that are representative of Camden's children in care population.
- Interviewing and discussions with the Virtual school members of staff: Head of the Virtual School, Deputy Head of the Virtual school, Education Consultant, Special Reintegration and Inclusion Officers and Education Navigator.
- Research of publications and videos relating to promoting the education outcomes of children in care.

6. EMERGING THEMES AND REFLECTIONS

6.1 Emerging themes and reflections from focus group discussion with young people.

The four emerging themes from the focus group discussion with young people were:

Theme 1 - What makes going to school a good experience?

- Having a great teacher who is easy to talk to and who explains things well.
- Teachers who understand what motivates you to do well.
- Having a teacher who helps you to achieve your goal.
- Studying subjects that I love
- Seeing friends.

Theme 2 - What makes for a good Personal Education Plan discussion?

- Talking directly with the teacher or social worker about the Personal Education Plan meeting prior to the meeting.
- Being involved in preparation for the Personal Education Plan meeting.
- Knowing or having a reminder of what has happened since the last Personal Education Plan meeting.
- Having the PEP meeting later in the day, towards the end of the school day.

Theme 3 - What could improve the experience of Personal Education Planning meetings?

- Professionals to stop using acronyms.
- Young person's favourite teacher to attend Personal Education Plan meetings.
- To help young people engage more in making plans for their education by discussing PEP prior to the meeting and providing support through the PEP process.

Theme 4 - What is most important about the person from the Virtual school who helps children and young people with education?

- Is a good listener and gives suggestions about how to improve the education of children and young people and to solve any difficulties they may be experiencing.
- Helps to empower children and young people to make decisions.
- Has faith in young people when they are short of faith in themselves.
- Has high expectations for young people in care and to encourage them towards achieving their goals
- Gives support with connecting to further opportunities in education like universities or training.
- Seeing young people through the lens of strengths and resourcefulness.

6.2 Emerging themes and reflections from discussions with the Virtual School staff.

Discussions with the Virtual School staff have highlighted the following reflections:

- Virtual school staff champion the education of children in care.
- All staff members are advocates for young people.
- Staff members are very good at building strong relationships with young people
- Happy, motivated children with learning resilience are some of the positive outcomes which the Virtual School is striving to promote.
- Virtual school staff members are experts in their fields bringing different expertise to their work with children and young people.
- Virtual school staff provide tailored support to meet the needs of each child.
- Quality assuring of Personal Education Plans is one of the strengths of the service

Challenges for the Virtual School include:

- Bringing partners together to provide highest quality of the Personal Education Plan for every child.
- Consideration of whether Education Consultants have the capacity to attend every Personal Education Plan meeting to provide advice, support and quality assurance.

7. ASPIRATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

Last year, in April 2024, children looked after took part in a two-day drama workshop - "All about Me". The two-day workshop provided an opportunity for young people to explore their strengths, interests and ambitions for the future. Young people made a wish list of their aspirations and made reflections on what would help them to achieve their goals.

The wish list included becoming a pilot, police officer, computer scientist, TV superstar, sports car dealer, interior designer and a perfume entrepreneur. Reflections on what and who would help them to achieve their goals were: "hard work, education, apprenticeships, support from family, motivation and love".

The Virtual School has an important role in supporting these aspirations of young people and the Young Inspectors report links to this through Theme 4 outlined above, which is around supporting children in care to achieve their career and life goals.



8. YOUNG INSPECTORS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The Young Inspectors do not rate services (unlike Ofsted inspections process which results in ratings) but overall, they found that the Virtual School offers children in care an excellent service. Considering this, their recommendations are focused on continuing to build on these foundations. The six key recommendations were:

- 8.1 To improve young people's engagement in making their education plan and attendance at Personal Education Planning (PEP) meetings - by social worker discussing PEP prior to the meeting and providing support through the PEP process.
- 8.2 All professionals including foster carers, agree to use language that enables each young person to engage in their PEP meetings - not using acronyms and ensuring that interpreter is available where necessary. This includes the use of accessible language in written reports.
- 8.3 Professionals, where possible, to attend PEP meetings in person. The key people are: the teacher that the young person would like to attend, their social worker, foster carer/carer, their Designated Teacher and when appropriate, a representative of the Virtual School.
- 8.4 Virtual School to deliver training programme for foster carers to ensure that they are confident to navigate the education system and provide support for young people. Virtual School to collaborate with Family, Friends and Fostering service to ensure the training is advertised and promoted to foster carers.

8.5 Virtual School education leads to provide more intensive preparation time and additional support with young people and education providers at these key transition points to support choices: year 6 to 7, year 8 to 9 and year 11 into year 12 - post 16.

8.6 The Virtual School to co - design resources with young people and Personal Advisors about higher education and degree apprenticeships that can be accessed by social workers and Personal Advisors to support young people with further education choices.

9. RESPONSE TO INITIAL FINDINGS AND HOW RECOMMENDATIONS WILL BE TAKEN FORWARD

9.1 The Corporate Parenting Board, which includes the Virtual School, discussed the Young Inspector's findings and key recommendations during their meeting on 22 October 2024. The Board strongly supported the recommendations and took the opportunity to acknowledge the hard work of the young people involved and extended their thanks for producing an excellent report.

9.2 The Virtual School Annual Report, which is scheduled to be presented at the next board meeting in January 2025, will address the findings of the 2024 Young Inspectors report. The report will provide detail about how these will be integrated into the Virtual School's service planning for 2025 and beyond, including an action plan to ensure that the recommendations are being taken into consideration.

9.3 The recommendations will also be reflected in the new Corporate Parenting strategy (2025-2028) which will be presented at the Cabinet meeting in April 2025.