



**Edward Timpson MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Dear Colleague,

12 December 2012

## **EDUCATION – A TOOL FOR LIFE: HELPING LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL**

I recently wrote to you about improving outcomes for care leavers. I am writing now about the educational outcomes of looked after children to express my appreciation of the hard work that authorities across England have invested to raise awareness about the importance of education to this group of young people.

Today the Department has published the official statistics for 2012 on the education and other outcomes achieved by looked after children. The attainment of looked after children continues to improve and this year's statistics show encouraging signs that we are beginning to narrow the attainment gap at Key Stage 4. That is a tribute to Virtual School Heads, schools and foster carers. I know you would agree, however, that we still have a lot more to do to significantly narrow this attainment gap.

I therefore wanted to take this opportunity to bring you up to date on a number of policy developments I have been working on since becoming the Minister for Children and Families.

I know that each one of you is as committed and ambitious as I am about giving looked after children the educational opportunities they deserve to help turn their lives around. Over the past decade, through the hard work of many local authorities, we have seen some improvements but in spite of those best efforts the message from today's statistics is that we need to do even more.

As the former chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Looked After Children and Care Leavers during its Inquiry into their educational attainment I am very aware of the challenges involved in securing those modest improvements. The APPG report made a number of key recommendations for action by central and local government. I want to update you on what my Department is doing to take some of these forward.

### Making the Virtual School Head (VSH) statutory

I know that most local authorities have some form of Virtual School Head (VSH) arrangements in place. It is clear from Ofsted's recent thematic inspection of virtual schools that at their best VSHs make a real difference to children's educational progress. Inspectors saw evidence of very effective support involving the virtual school that not only made a difference to children's educational progress but also often enhanced the stability of their placements and had a positive impact on their emotional health.

That is why we plan to introduce legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows to make the Virtual School Head a statutory post with responsibility for discharging the existing duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of their looked after children, wherever they are placed.

### Better support to help foster carers support education

I am today, through fostering agencies, telling foster carers about the important role they have in helping the children they care for to do their very best particularly in relation to their education. Last month I launched the Fostering Information Exchange (FIE), a secure online platform on the Local Government Association's Knowledge Hub. This has been developed with the sector, in response to demand, and will provide a valuable source of information and support, including in relation to how foster carers can support the education of children they care for.

The Department has also today published an education 'aide memoire' to help those who support foster carers to address the information they need to have about the education system as part of their training.

### The role of the National College

Those who are doing the job of a VSH have told us they do not always feel part of their local network of school leaders. They have also told us that more needs to be done to support VSHs and designated teachers to continue raising awareness in schools about the particular needs of looked after children. We are responding to those needs by asking the National College to take forward a new programme of work in 2013-14. There will be changes to the College's modular curriculum to help drive up the attainment of looked after children. Materials in the Chairs of Governor Leadership Programme will also be enhanced to improve the understanding of governors about how they can support the needs of looked after children and the work of VSHs.

### The Pupil Premium

Looked after children already attract Pupil Premium funding, which will be worth £900 per pupil in 2013-14. I want to maximise the benefits of this extra funding. The unique legal status of looked after children means that everyone involved in their lives has a responsibility to help them reach their full potential. That is why the Pupil Premium terms and conditions of grant letter for 2013-14 will be explicit about the need for schools and virtual school heads to work together to ensure



that looked after children benefit to the full from the way the school uses this funding.

We are also looking carefully at the recommendation in the report from the APPG calling for a looked after children 'Pupil Premium Plus' as part of the overall arrangements for Pupil Premium funding in 2014-15.

Reducing variable practice by spreading the best: a shared priority

I know from many conversations during the course of the APPG Inquiry that there is excellent practice in many local authorities. Many of those conversations also conveyed the passion and commitment that VSHs and others bring to support education outcomes for looked after children. I am concerned, however, by Ofsted's finding that there are uneven levels of engagement on education from corporate parents across the local authorities visited during their virtual school inspection.

The link between strong corporate parenting and the capacity of the virtual school and their heads to achieve sustained improvement for children is compelling. That is why I have asked my officials to support the essential work of Virtual School Heads through their existing networks and the online community hosted by the National College to spread and help everyone to act on the best practice identified in the Ofsted and APPG reports.

I am, through this letter, also asking you to continue to champion and promote the principles and practice that we know make a difference to the education of looked after children. Annex A sets out key messages from Ofsted's report on virtual schools and other sources about the characteristics of effective virtual school practice. Please do consider what more your authority can do to share and develop its best practice and help to embed it across the country.

Should you or your VSH wish to discuss this letter with the policy official lead for the educational attainment of looked after children please email [michael.allured@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:michael.allured@education.gsi.gov.uk), telephone 0207 783 8081.

Yours Sincerely,



**Edward Timpson MP**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families**

## **Annex A**

To maximise the educational achievement of all your looked after children Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members are encouraged to work with virtual school heads and equivalent named officers and other professionals to champion and embed the following effective practice.

- Promote the findings set out in Ofsted's thematic inspection of virtual schools (Reference no. 120165) and the cross party inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children in England and discuss how best to implement the recommendations in each report for local government.
- Empower their Virtual School Head and ensure they have the level of seniority and professional background to be an effective strategic manager. Strategic ownership is embedded into ways of working and reporting. Senior managers and elected members should have a comprehensive understanding of their children's attainment and what needs to be done to improve educational outcomes.
- Have robust data systems that track progress in relation to school attendance and education outcomes. Good quality data are used to inform strategic decisions about the allocation of resources.
- Have Personal Education Plans (PEPs) that focus on learning outcomes for the child and which are backed up by strong professional relationships and regular communication between designated teachers, virtual school heads and other interested parties about the on-going commitment of all parties to support a child's learning.
- Promote positive relationships with schools which facilitates constructive dialogue with designated teachers about how looked after children are benefitting from the Pupil Premium and striking the right balance between supporting and challenging schools.
- Support virtual school heads to work within structures that break down barriers between different professionals and encourage collaborative working and knowledge sharing.
- Give looked after children and care leavers, including through Children in Care Councils the information that they need, particularly in relation to the 16-19 Bursary and the Higher Education Bursary to be able to make the most of their educational opportunities.
- Ensure that the virtual school and its head has a visible presence and a strong influence on key strategic bodies. Monitoring of performance by senior managers and councillors should be detailed, regular and challenging.