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| Report of: | Councillor Mieka Smiles - Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Children's Services Rob Brown - Director of Education and Partnerships |
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| Submitted to: | Executive - 14 February 2022 |
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| Subject: | Virtual School Peer Review |
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Summary

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| Proposed decision(s) |
| That Executive receives and notes the outcomes of the Virtual School peer review and endorses the accompanying action plan. |

| Report for: | Key decision: | Confidential: | Is the report urgent? ¹ |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|------------------------------------|
| Information | No | Not applicable | No |

| Contribution to delivery of the 2021-24 Strategic Plan | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| People | Place | Business |
| Provides the Council with an opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of the Virtual School peer review which will help shape the improvement journey and provide external evidence of impact for Ofsted and others. Note: This is not an inspection report. | Not applicable. | Not applicable. |

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| Ward(s) affected |
| Not applicable. |

¹ Remove for non-Executive reports

What is the purpose of this report?

1. The purpose of this report is to advise Executive that Children's Services has received the Virtual School peer review report from the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH). Children's Services would like Executive to note the findings of the Virtual School peer review report and endorse the accompanying action plan. This is not an inspection report however the learning still remains valuable and supports the broader improvement journey.
2. The Virtual School is composed of a small team of officers that sits within Children's Services as part of the Education and Partnerships Directorate. The team is managed by the Virtual School Head which is a statutory post within all Local Authorities. The purpose of the Virtual School is to champion and prioritise the educational provision for looked after children. This means that staff work in partnership with schools, carers, Social Care and a wide range of other stakeholders to ensure that looked after children receive the best and most appropriate education possible.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

3. Given that NAVSH peer reviews involve external consideration of the Council's processes and procedures with regard to the support offered to looked after children, it is appropriate that Executive endorsement is sought prior to the report being published.

Report Background

3. A system of peer review has been developed by the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) to help Virtual Schools improve and develop. The Council is keen to regularly access such support to independently assess its position in relation to services provided to support children. The Peer Review of Middlesbrough VS took place on 21st and 22nd September 2021 and the final report was made available in October 2021.
4. As part of regular engagement with NAVSH, and in line with the Council's commitment to ensuring the sector-led improvement opportunities provided by NAVSH are used to their full potential, Children's Services commissioned NAVSH to undertake a peer review of the Virtual School. This was the first such review NAVSH has carried out in Middlesbrough.
5. NAVSH assessed the Council against four core themes:
 - How well does the Middlesbrough Virtual School and the Local Authority work with external partners, specifically schools, to improve outcomes for children in their care?
 - How effective is the PEP process and are the current monitoring systems effective?
 - What steps have been taken to ensure the Virtual School Head and the Virtual School champion all children with a social worker: How strong is partnership working between the Virtual School and Children's Social Care in Middlesbrough
 - Are the Virtual School's current arrangements for tracking, monitoring and supporting children who have been excluded, are without a school place or are on part-time tables effective in ensuring these children are accessing appropriate and quality education?

6. In line with the Council's commitment to transparent and honest engagement, the findings of the review will be published if approved and endorsed by Executive.

What decision(s) are being asked for?

7. That Executive receives and notes the outcomes of the Virtual School peer review and endorses the accompanying action plan.

Why is this being recommended?

8. The peer review allowed Children's Services to utilise the NAVSH resource and provided an opportunity to gather views from a range of experienced Virtual School Heads from Local Authorities in other parts of the country. The resulting report allows officers to reflect on the strengths of the current provision and helps identify areas for development. The areas for development can be considered within an improvement action plan, which will help guide Virtual School officers and provide a clear framework for monitoring their progress and holding them to account. This in turn will lead to an improved service and enhanced offer to schools and our looked after children.

Other potential decisions and why these have not been recommended

9. The Council could choose not to endorse the action plan. This option is not recommended because Children's Services is keen to build on the strengths of the Virtual School, and to encourage it to improve and develop alongside all aspects of the services we provide for children. Not endorsing the action plan may slow the speed of improvement or may prevent the Virtual School from deriving maximum benefit from the peer review process. This in turn may lead to a less effective service being provided for looked after children.

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

Legal

10. There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Financial

11. The cost of the review was £2500. This cost was borne by the Virtual School and no additional funding is sought.

Policy Framework

12. No impact on the Policy Framework.

Equality and Diversity

13. Not applicable.

Risk

14. Commissioning a peer review is not directly relevant to risk management, however findings may identify new risks or suggest some current risks should be reassessed if the

review finds that there is a disconnect between the Council's understanding or a risk and wider perceptions. No such disconnect was identified.

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

15. The Peer Review report will be published on the Council's website and distributed to all schools and settings that have looked after children on roll.

Appendices

16. Appendix 1: VS Peer Review Action Plan
Appendix 2: VS Peer Review Report

Background papers

| Body | Report title | Date |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Not applicable | | |

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