

AccessHE Care Experienced and Estranged Students forum

held on

17 October 2017 (2-4pm)

at

Civic Suite, Lewisham Council

MEETING NOTES

Attendees:

Melanie	Aarons Royal	Lewisham Leaving Care Service
Nosheen	Aslam	London South Bank University
Jon	Chandler	Middlesex University London
Frankie	Chappel	UCL
Peggy	Cooke	Goldsmiths, University of London
Jasmine	Dorsett	Tri-borough Virtual School
Leon	Green	London Borough of Hillingdon
Michael	Griffiths	Kingston University London
Marietta	Harrow	Wandsworth Virtual School
Rebecca	Hughes	St Mary's University
Jamie	Mackay	AccessHE
Bronagh	Maginn	Lewisham Virtual School
Isabel	Patrick	London Metropolitan University
Jon	Rainford	Conservatoire for Dance and Drama
Miranda	Reilly	Drive Forward Foundation
Liz	Routhorn	London Metropolitan University
Anita	Stewart	London Borough of Havering
Helen	Sweet	Become
Beth	Taswell	City, University of London
Sam	Turner	AccessHE
Charmaine	Valente	Student Loans Company
Karen	Western	Brunel University London

1. Welcome to the meeting and introductions from the Chair

Liz Routhorn (LR), Chair of the forum, introduced herself and invited others to do the same.

2. Apologies for absence

Anne-Marie Bird (University of Sussex), Priya Clarke (NNECL), Anna Hawes (University for the Creative Arts), Tracey Lewis (Merton Virtual School), Anne McGrath (University of Westminster), Anna Mepstead (University for the Creative Arts), Karen Tucker (University of Sussex), Jenny Tait (University of West London).

3. Notes of last meeting held on 20 July 2017

LR referred the group to the minutes of the previous meeting and they were passed as accurate. It was noted that AccessHE had circulated the [UASC learner checklist draft](#)

[document](#) for comments and this could now be considered the final draft. Invitations to organisations including STAR, Article 26 and Refugee Support Network to present had been delayed following the setting of the agenda for this meeting around working with virtual schools.

Action:

- ***AccessHE to approach STAR, Article 26 and Refugee Support Network to present at future meetings.***

4. Forum terms of reference

Sam Turner (ST) explained that the forum terms of reference hadn't been updated and still included the previous forum named (Looked After Children forum). An updated version was presented to the forum which included minor adjustments clarifying the forum's work across the student lifecycle (not just within access to higher education but progression through and beyond) for care experienced and estranged students, as well as updates to forum attendance and typical agenda format. No further comments were made and the new terms of reference were passed by the forum.

Action:

- ***AccessHE to circulate the [updated terms of reference](#) with the minutes.***

5. Local authorities and virtual schools

Lewisham Leaving Care Service

Melanie Aarons-Royal (MA-R) began by offering an overview of the structure of support for children in care at Lewisham and how the Leaving Care Service worked alongside the Virtual School to support care leavers. It was noted that, despite a major reduction in staffing, the number of care leavers entering higher education from Lewisham had grown significantly over recent years from an original year cohort of 9 to reach a total of 44 students entering in 2016/17.

MA-R spoke about the range of pre-university support offered to students, including a university road trip, personal statement advice and additional guidance on student finance and accommodation. The university road trip was highlighted as a particularly important early experience for many students.

It was noted that Lewisham offers all care leavers a HE bursary providing they claim the full student loan available, in addition to rent support to cover additional payments during holiday periods. During the often difficult transitional phase, Lewisham also continues to offer emotional and practical support to students and, where possible, work with the universities to monitor their performance and wellbeing before major issues emerge. In addition, students are encouraged to begin preparing for life after university and are signposted to HEI careers services and organisations such as the [Drive Forward Foundation](#).

In terms of post-university support, students are entitled to access careers information, advice and guidance from Melanie. It was highlighted that a particularly vital provision came in being able to offer return to borough support for students who choose to return

to Lewisham at any point following completion of their course. This includes priority nomination for social housing and temporary accommodation whilst applying for permanent tenancy in the period immediately after they finish at university. It is normal for a follow-up meeting to take place about six months after graduation as a typical closing point, but a drop-in service available after this too which Lewisham care leavers have access to for life.

MA-R then offered some areas where HEIs and local authority teams supporting care leavers might be able to work more closely together.

- *Consent to share documents:* It was noted that agreements between care leavers, local authorities and universities to share information about students were important in order to ensure learners accessed help as soon as it was required. However, the process for establishing agreements could be streamlined more effectively.
- *Reducing non-continuation:* Although increasing the numbers of Lewisham care leavers entering HE has been celebrated, they are increasingly at risk of dropping out of their courses due to financial worries and difficulties adjusting to university life and learning practices. It was reported that some students with qualifications below what would typically be expected were being made offers by universities, and therefore struggled during their first year especially. Lewisham had been discouraging students from entering into particular stand-alone foundation year programmes at providers where no guaranteed progression pathway was offered and where non-continuation was especially costly. It was suggested that additional work around managing expectations and supporting through the transition period would be useful.
- *Formal recognition of learning:* For those who did drop out of university, it was noted that they often left without anything to show for their time there. Being able to offer at least a Certificate or Diploma of HE where appropriate was considered extremely helpful when applying for future work etc.
- *Targeted careers support:* Given the additional challenges for care leavers accessing work experience at university (e.g. lack of personal networks), it was offered whether targeted careers support could be more widely offered to enhance employability skills (e.g. directly encouraging participation in a student ambassador scheme).

Lewisham Virtual School

Bronagh Maginn (BM) then provided an overview of the challenges and opportunities from her perspective as KS5 Leader at Lewisham Virtual School. The School had identified poor guidance for post-16 students within the current electronic Personal Education Plan platform and a need to work with their provider to include better information around universities and other HE choices.

It was noted that Lewisham Virtual School Head and Chair of the London Virtual School Heads, Patrick Ward, had recently met with the London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, to discuss issues around supporting the progression of care leavers, including issues with funding

and foundation years. It was suggested that the concept of a post-16 Pupil Premium allocation could be raised again within the next budget, which would release considerable additional funds for schools supporting learners in care. BM highlighted issues with students often not declaring or not knowing about Specific Learning Difficulties when applying through UCAS, and therefore not getting the necessary support either before or when at university. Lewisham advocated that their students partake in extra-curricular activities such as the [National Citizen Service](#) to help them demonstrate skills and subject exploration in their personal statements. Although schools were supportive of work experience, it was often expected that students would find this themselves, but students in care lack the personal connections to do this.

Interestingly, it was noted that an increasing number of students were applying and entering HE with high grades in BTEC qualifications. A Levels were of course common too, but nobody at present was taking the IB. Many KS5 Virtual School students were slightly older than a typical school-leaver, often having spent some time taking ESOL qualifications.

Questions and discussion

Charmaine Valente (CV) and Isabel Patrick (IP) clarified the arrangements around the funding of foundation year programmes: such courses should be taken ideally when part of an extended degree programme with a clear progression route to a full 3-4 year degree. Given funding arrangements provide support for the length of a course plus one extra year, this offers some contingency in the event of a course change, whereas a stand-alone one year foundation programme may not.

Jamie Mackay (JM) suggested that university staff might be able to attend the Lewisham children in care council, offering a pre-visit presentation ahead of a later university trip for example.

LR asked whether there had been efforts for standardising consent to share agreements between students, local authorities and universities. Forum members noted how it was arranged at their institutions, with some completing forms during induction, others by an email verification process and others through pre-university meetings between all parties. Karen Western (KW) noted that she had found success holding meetings with students and personal advisors at the university itself before they started their course.

Jon Chandler (JC) enquired as to the suspected reasons for higher drop-out rates amongst care leavers. MA-R suggested that unrealistic expectations played a key role, particularly not understanding the demands of the course and individual study. Although mentoring and support services were helpful at university, it was key to try and address this problem before the application stage. Beth Taswell (BT) highlighted that it is often when students are most at risk that they often disengage with the support services offered to them. Some students worry that they might be forced to stay, but in fact staff are on hand to support them *out* of university where that is the best course of action for

the student. BM suggested that delivering independent learning workshops could help in offering the skills care leavers need to adjust to university learning.

LR closed the questions by asking what the single most valuable thing which HEIs could offer to local authorities and virtual schools would be. BM identified the power of peer outreach and having children in care engage with care leaver student ambassadors who could talk about their own experiences. The forum agreed and it was made clear that HEIs were more than happy to offer ambassadors to support at events where appropriate, and requests could be directed via AccessHE if desired.

Actions:

- ***AccessHE to circulate [MA-R's presentation slides](#).***
- ***Local authorities/virtual schools to contact AccessHE if they would like student ambassadors from multiple HEIs to join any future events.***

6. Forum themes and outputs 2017-18

LR reminded the forum of its aims and objectives, and the capacity it has to deliver outputs as well as acting as a consultative forum for discussion and debate, as seen in the checklist of questions for UASC learners and the Life After University event for example. Given that no specific pressing outputs were identified by forum members over the summer, and the forum continued to meet the objectives set out in the terms of reference, it was agreed that this action point would remain ongoing with members encouraged to contact AccessHE or LR to highlight themes or outputs they would like to explore in relation to the following questions:

- What do you want to get from the forum in terms of training, knowledge and networks?
- Is there anything from your personal expertise you can offer the forum?
- How can the forum help you to deliver specific targets (e.g. from institutional Access Agreements, Strategic and/or Operational Plans)?

LR suggested that a very short survey could be circulated after each forum meeting to gather ongoing feedback to help with this. Also, it was offered that meetings could be followed by an informal networking/socialising opportunity for those who want to continue discussions outside of the forum.

MA-R offered one possible output: could we monitor as a group how many of our care leaver and estranged students were studying at each institution and track how they progress? Whilst supportive, the forum noted that there would likely be a number of data-sharing concerns to address before this could be accomplished.

ST offered some suggestions from other AccessHE forums as to typical outputs, such as member surveys, publications, collections of good practice, resources webpages, newsletters, events and research projects.

Actions:

- **Members to consider questions above and contact LR/ST with possible output suggestions as they arise.**
- **AccessHE to include short post-meeting survey and add optional informal networking at the end of the next meeting.**

7. Life After University event

ST provided an update on the Life After University event scheduled for February 2018. It was noted the working group had met in September and that Matthew Blood (Islington Virtual School), Drive Forward Foundation employers and Become had confirmed their desire to lead sessions again, and Barclays Life Skills had also been optimistic but hadn't yet confirmed. ST drew the forum's attention to the flyer and registration of booking page on the AccessHE website and encouraged HEIs and other organisations to circulate to any care experienced students currently studying at university.

At the working group meeting, a question had been raised about extending the remit of the event to welcome estranged students as, depending on the timing of estrangement, may share similar concerns regarding accommodation, financial management and jobs. ST consulted the event partners Become and Drive Forward Foundation as well as Stand Alone who all agreed that estranged students should be welcomed, but speakers would need to ensure clarity about what is appropriate to each group (e.g. in the case of rights and entitlements available only to care leavers).

LR proposed a forum vote and members agreed unanimously to include estranged students within the invitees for the event.

Actions:

- **Forum members to promote the event to care experienced and estranged students in HE.**
- **ST to update [website](#) to include estranged students as an audience.**

8. News from our partners

Student Loans Company

CV provided a helpful overview of what is meant by 'estrangement' for the purposes of student finance. It was noted that, working closely with Stand Alone, a number of enhancements had been made to the service for estranged students, including:

- a revised estrangement declaration form;
- the removal of the requirement to evidence ongoing estrangement for returning students; and
- new dedicated estrangement assessors and a telephone review process.

CV suggested that any student in care ideally meets with a student financial advisor at the university they are interested in studying at to ensure they fully understand what they are entitled to receive at the HEI.

NNECL

As London NNECL representative, BT reported back from a roundtable she had attended at City Hall on supporting children in care. Whilst there is no statutory responsibility within the Greater London Authority for looked after children or care leavers, the Mayor can act as an advocate and will employ this 'soft power' where possible to support. BT also reminded the forum about the upcoming [NNECL Conference](#) in York on 7 December which included the release of findings from the [HERACLES research project](#) led by UWE. In addition, the next London NNECL group meeting had been scheduled for 11:00 – 13:00 on Wednesday 29 November 2017 and invitations would be circulated in due course.

Become

Helen Sweet (HS) reminded the forum about the launch of [Become's new coaching programme](#), a free service for care experienced young people in London, as well as a new [training and consultancy](#) offer.

9. Any other business

IP noted that she was exploring an event or guidance for students studying at universities in London about preparing for the Christmas period, which can be particularly lonely and isolating for care leavers and estranged students. The forum agreed this would be a good idea, especially if it might signpost to other opportunities available across London such as [The Christmas Dinner](#) for care leavers.

LR highlighted the upcoming HELOA London Group 'HE Awareness Day for Care leavers and Looked after Children' taking place on 25 October 2017 and encouraged local authorities and virtual schools to share with their students.

BM asked whether universities had any additional guidance on how funding arrangements might look for students with EU citizenship following Brexit. LR clarified that whilst students beginning their courses in 2018-19 were confirmed as home fee payers, it wasn't yet confirmed how this might change for students in later years.

10. Date and time of next meeting.

The next meeting date was confirmed as Thursday 18 January 2018.

The meeting closed at 4.12pm.

AccessHE is a Division of London Higher