

Staffordshire Virtual School

A case study of Artsmark in a virtual school

Virtual schools are specialised teams within Local Authorities, dedicated to promoting the educational achievement of children in care. This includes looked-after children, previously looked-after children, and other vulnerable groups, such as children with a social worker or in kinship care.

At Staffordshire Virtual School we work as an advocate and coordinator with schools, carers, social workers, and other professionals. Our responsibility is to ensure that our children receive tailored educational support and enrichment opportunities, giving them the best chance for positive outcomes as they become more independent.

Who we are

Staffordshire Virtual School has around 1,300 children in care, placed in over 400 schools or education settings in Staffordshire. They range from 0-19 years, often with complex needs. Approximately 25% of our children are placed in schools outside the Local Authority.

Children are placed in a variety of homes, including foster carers, residential care homes, supported accommodation, with family members or independently living.

We work across all key stages, with early years settings, mainstream schools, colleges, special schools, pupil referral units, alternative provisions and tutors where our young people are currently not in school. Over 50% of our children have special educational needs and a small proportion are awaiting a school place.

Our team of passionate professionals want all children to have stable educational placements that understand the impact and potential barriers which past life experiences may have on their attainment and achievement. We encourage schools and social workers to adopt our RADY principles to 'Raise the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters', including wider learning opportunities outside of the curriculum.

Our aspiration is that all Staffordshire schools become relational and restorative in their approaches, underpinned by a knowledge of attachment and trauma. This understanding is key to ensuring that our children can feel secure and supported to thrive in their education.

Photo © Staffordshire Virtual School / Staffordshire children in care rehearsing for the misunderstood film



How Artsmark has worked for us

Our Artsmark journey began as part of a pilot scheme, with several other virtual schools, to identify if Artsmark could work for us in the same way it does for schools.

It has been a positive and insightful experience, allowing us to reflect upon our practice. As we do not influence the children's mainstream curriculum, we audited our previous offer, planning what extra-curricular support we could deliver to develop children's skills further.

Strategic change and capacity-building

To be able to deliver our aspirational plans, we needed to change the structure of the team, creating additional capacity. We trained the team in first aid and safeguarding at a higher level to ensure every member could fully commit and be involved in delivery of our arts offer. We delivered training to Staffordshire Social Care, teachers and foster carers to fully embrace the support around the child to access our offer.

We altered our electronic personal education plan (e-PEP) system, to include cultural entitlement pages, ensuring this was a focus for everyone at termly meetings.

Increasing and broadening our offer

As set out in our Statement of Commitment, we developed a two-year calendar of inclusive extra-curricular learning activities and events as part of our Artsmark journey.

All our work is child-led and we wanted to nurture the arts in a variety of contexts. Arts Awards are nationally accredited qualifications for young people that offer them personalised pathways to explore the arts. Arts Award was an important tool in our own Artsmark journey and we trained two members of staff as Arts Award advisors, helping young people gain their qualification. Our advisors worked with residential staff in secure units and hospitals to deliver elements of the Arts Award, which were accessible and focused around the needs of the child. We supplied resources to enable these settings to support children in their care.

Photo
© Staffordshire Virtual School / Staffordshire care leaver taking part in an arts activity.



All children attending events and activities worked towards an Arts Award at some level.

Work experience and career development opportunities were provided for those showing interest in the arts. By collaborating with Entrust Music Service Staffordshire, and providing training, we increased the uptake of music lessons within schools for children in care. We also created a Virtual School Council, using the voice of the child to guide choices of activities and help shape the program.

What impact has Artsmark had?

The Artsmark journey has given a sense of purpose and rationale for the activities and events we deliver and we've seen the number of participants increase. We now have a regular cohort of children that are connected to us as a Virtual School through arts and culture. Relationships have strengthened and we have seen confidence and self-esteem rise in both our children and staff.

We have further developed the role of arts and culture in our setting through a strategic way of working that promotes our values and celebrates the positive impact of the arts. Artsmark has driven a more formal evaluation of our cultural entitlement offer, allowing us to evidence the work we do. It has helped to develop our understanding of why we value the arts, creating a better ethos and wider acknowledgement of its importance.

As a result of Artsmark, we are now more aware of what's available in our communities. Staff signpost and encourage those who are interested to join a club, to participate in a sustained activity, giving our young people a sense of belonging, friendships and personal progression.

Where a young person may be faltering, arts and culture can be a mechanism of hope. We have seen a growth of individuals who have found success through creative activities.

“ **D used to be self-conscious, with low levels of confidence. Spending time with a technical crew, gave him tangible evidence of the progress he's making and the range of things he's capable of.**

Foster carer

What we'd recommend

Virtual Schools are challenged by the fact our children are not under one school roof and access to them can be difficult. To overcome this, we have to be creative, innovative and imaginative.

Belonging: It's important to create safe, inclusive spaces for children to explore and develop. Encourage the young people to lead the program, to give them a sense of ownership. Building strong relationships is key – work closely with foster carers and social workers, strengthening relationships and providing support networks for the children.

Staffing: Make sure you have adequate staffing to deliver against your Statement of Commitment. Support staff by providing training and development opportunities, making sure there is commitment from all involved. A dedicated member of staff who is fully invested in Artsmark, to lead and oversee the program is key, as is support and financial backing from senior leaders and governing bodies.

Engagement: It's hard and requires perseverance to get young people involved. Offering a range of locations and activities to meet everyone's needs, and support for transportation, means more children will be able to access your offer.

Build in Arts Award to give children nationally recognised qualifications. This increases the sense of purpose and meaning to the arts activities they engage with.

Consider the complexities of children in care and make sure all events are delivered in an equitable way. All our offers were attachment-aware and trauma-informed, underpinned by relational and restorative practices.

Provide a safe and secure environment for children to express themselves and to deepen that sense of belonging. Our young people fed back that they 'wish[ed] the sessions would go on forever', which is evidence of the level of engagement we achieved.

Working in partnership: Be creative in choosing which external providers and cultural organisations to commission, whilst ensuring they are experienced and qualified to work with children in care.

We found the peer support from other virtual schools essential in building confidence, momentum and in sharing practice. Building on the experience of Artsmark, we were able to connect with people such as the Children's Commissioner. We also worked with Department for Education (DfE) to leverage further funding and run a large-scale creative mentor program through The Mighty Creatives, a cultural organisation based in the East Midlands. This kind of partnership raised our ambition and capacity to deliver.

Artsmark provided a framework which enabled us to develop and deliver a cultural and arts offer for our young people which has had real impact on their learning and wider lives. One final recommendation would be to not underestimate children with a social care involvement. Through the arts and through Artsmark you can really help them to reach for the stars and meet their full potential.

For further guidance about how Artsmark can work for you, see our specialist settings guidance.

artsmark.org.uk/specialist-settings