Artsmark & Virtual Schools: Opportunities and Challenges

August 2016

Summary

In May and June 2016, A New Direction brought together representatives from Virtual Schools and arts organisations across England to explore how the Artsmark programme could be used to develop and embed cultural education for children and young people within the care system. Half-day sessions were held in London and Birmingham, using a roundtable format based on a brief Artsmark presentation followed by discussion exercises that explored the Self-Assessment Framework, Statement of Commitment, and other aspects of Artsmark.

In total, the two roundtables included 14 representatives from Virtual Schools. Both sessions were also attended by representatives of arts organisations experienced in working with children in care. The sessions were moderated by Greg Klerkx, director of award-winning arts producing and training company Nimble Fish, and supported by staff from A New Direction. A full list of participants is provided as an appendix.

The roundtable sessions were structured around three questions we felt were key to knowing if, and how, Artsmark might be usefully adapted to support Virtual Schools. We returned to these questions repeatedly during each roundtable session and put them again to participants in a post-session e-mail. This report offers findings in the context of those questions, which are:

- **How might Artsmark benefit Virtual Schools?**
- **What challenges do you see in trying to apply the Artsmark model to Virtual Schools?**
- **How might Artsmark need to be adapted to accommodate and appeal to Virtual Schools?**

This report summarises key messages that emerged under each question, and includes more detailed questions that may require more exploration in any pilot context. Other questions and issues that arose, and which weren't easily captured by our key questions, are addressed towards the end of the report.

What are Virtual Schools?

Virtual Schools are organisations created by Local Authorities that are responsible for monitoring, tracking and promoting the educational achievements and broader care of looked-after children. They are similar to mainstream schools in that they have a Head Teacher, governors or trustees, and are monitored by Ofsted. There is no standardised structure for organizing or running a Virtual School, and their size, staffing and pupil numbers vary widely according to geography and population.

Although there is no 'school' at a Virtual School, staff liaise regularly not only with mainstream and special schools where looked-after children (LAC or CLA) attend, but also with carers, social workers and housing associations, among other partners. According to Ofsted, 'the virtual school approach is to work with looked after children as if they were in a single school, liaising with the schools they attend, tracking the progress they make and supporting them to achieve as well as possible.' [1]

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[1] *The impact of virtual schools on the educational progress of looked after children*, Ofsted, 2012

How could Artsmark benefit Virtual Schools?

It was broadly felt that Artsmark could be a useful and potentially powerful tool for Virtual Schools, and participants believed the programme could:

- Support greater collaboration between Virtual Schools and arts and culture organisations around how the arts engages with and benefits the most disadvantaged children
- Through Artsmark's focus on CPD, develop knowledge and skills in the arts and arts-education practice for VS staff, 'corporate parents', social workers, and other individuals who are typically part of the team supporting Looked-After Children.
- Provide a framework for greater continuity for Looked-After Children, who experience a high degree of uncertainty and significant change in their personal lives
- Offer a way to more closely connect Virtual Schools and mainstream schools, by using the arts to support successful progression of children/young people
- Support a community of VSs who are developing similar themes or enquiries

> Arts are of value for all children; they open doors to new skills and opportunities. Those in care will benefit greatly from this dimension to their lives – in lifestyle choices, skills, and employability to name but a few areas. A kite mark of recognition for Virtual Schools will greatly boost this.
>
> - Andrew Wright, Head Teacher, Birmingham Virtual Schools

Most participants felt that being able to demonstrate Artsmark's impact on progression and support for entitlement was key to its potential success in a Virtual School context.

Entitlement in a Virtual School context is very specifically about three things: participating, spectating, and access to employment opportunities. In this sense, there was a strong feeling that Artsmark in a Virtual Schools context should focus on building confidence within young people about their ability to engage with the arts.

For further exploration:

1. What makes an exemplar Virtual School? How might Artsmark support and become part of that definition?

2. Virtual Schools are where care and education meet. What should the conceptual model for cultural education in these settings look like?

What challenges do you see in trying to apply the Artsmark model to Virtual Schools?

Virtual Schools are not schools in the classic sense: one participant described them as 'brokers', another as 'coordinators', still another as 'focused networks supporting individual children across huge and constant change.' There is not one model for Virtual Schools, though Virtual Schools that are geographically proximate often have similar approaches to similar challenges.

The main themes emerging under challenges had to do with structure and capacity. Capacity issues for Virtual Schools generally fall into two categories:

1) Numbers of staff: one Virtual School employs just seven staff to manage a Virtual School community of about 1,000 children. Another manages 150 children across 100 schools.

Whatever the size or shape of a VS, much of its staff time is spent tracking the movements – often literally – of Looked-After Children as they move schools to help ensure a consistent package of support and care regardless of what circumstances a child might be in. All VS participants said they would require significant support to complete the initial Artsmark process of self-assessment and Statement of Commitment.

2) Staff skills relevant to the arts and culture. Again this varies hugely by VS: some Virtual Schools place a great premium on the arts, while others said they don't have the budget or staff ability/capacity to manage anything more than a minimum offer.

> Virtual Schools have LAC (Looked-After Children) in a diverse range of provision. Some have one child in each of several schools. It may be that the Virtual Schools introduce Artsmark at a particular key stage or to a provider, e,g. secondary schools or PRUs or supported housing, in order to build from there.
> - Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent, Operations Director, Coram

Many participants believe that the main potential solution to capacity issues revolved around external partners. Several Virtual Schools already have strong support from arts organisations with a speciality, or a specialist, in Looked-After Children or children in challenging circumstances. Derbyshire Childrens Services (DCS), for instance, has developed a 'creative mentor' scheme in which 14 individual artists support more than 100 VS students to view the creative industries as a path to employment. The creative mentors attend team meetings around individual pupils, ensuring strong integration of their work across the VS provision for that pupil. The programme is managed by a freelance arts specialist.

Structural issues around Virtual Schools are more complicated, and in many cases it was felt that existing Artsmark self-assessment terminology would not easily apply in a Virtual School context. For instance, Pupil Engagement is a huge challenge for children who range in age from less than one year old to 25 years old, and many of whom do not show up for schooling of any kind (or show up sporadically). Also, many VS children struggle with any kind of social engagement or even verbal engagement.

Likewise Curriculum Design, since Virtual Schools do not design or directly offer any curriculum: this happens at mainstream or special schools and the job of the Virtual School is to know, for any given pupil in their care, what is being offered, how a child is performing, and what intervention or support might be needed to help. It was suggested that Provision or Offer might be alternative terms, intended to capture the breadth of what a VS pupil is receiving across his or her educational experience.

Clashes of existing Artsmark structure and terminology are explored in more detail in the next section. However, most participants felt that trialling some ideas and seeing what works and what doesn't would likely form the most useful approach to any pilot programme.

For further exploration:

1. Every Virtual School 'pupil' has a Personal Education Plan (PEP) that forms the foundation from which VS teams support and monitor their progress. Could Artsmark in a VS context revolve around a Personal Arts Plan?

2. How could Artsmark meaningfully involve the entire team around VS children: designated teachers, foster parents, social workers, health professionals, etc?

3. Who is CPD for in a Virtual School context…particularly when so many Virtual Schools have small, overstretched staff teams?

4. Is there learning from past or current Artsmark work in PRU settings that could help address anticipated challenges in a Virtual Schools context?

5. Leadership in Virtual Schools is only statutory at the Head Teacher level. What other outcomes might there be for a focus on Artsmark leadership, e.g., attendance, attainment, engagement?

How might Artsmark need to be adapted to most effectively accommodate and appeal to Virtual Schools?

The broad analogy of Virtual Schools as educational brokers, working at the intersection of care and education with a unique focus on individual progression, implies significant adaptations of Artsmark for Virtual School contexts. Following are some broad themes:

1. **Self-Assessment criteria need rethinking**. This was the most frequent point of discussion across both roundtables. Some self-assessment areas, like Partnerships and Values and Ethos, were considered to be a reasonably good fit for Virtual Schools; others, particularly Pupil Engagement and Curriculum Design, may need to be minimized, recast ('Offer' or 'Entitlement' were suggestions to replace Curriculum Design), or perhaps applied only to specific aspects of what Virtual Schools do.
   a. There were also several discussions about how 'play' – which often involves the arts, but not always – could be factored into Artsmark, since play as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool is often central for younger VS children in particular. It was remarked several times that social pedagogy is a concept common to almost all Virtual Schools.

2. **A more significant Critical Friend role may be needed**. Capacity and structural issues unique to Virtual Schools suggest that the Critical Friend might need to be a collaborator and partner all the way through the Artsmark journey, from assisting with self-assessment and Statement of Commitment through to the development of the Case Study.

3. **The role of mainstream schools needs to be carefully considered**. It is likely that some mainstream schools in a Virtual School 'universe' will either have Artsmark or be working towards Artsmark. What role would a Virtual School have in that context, and would it change how a mainstream school approaches its Artsmark journey? Could improving arts provision for children in care become a key driver of a mainstream school's Artsmark programme?

4. **Artsmark VS needs to strike a balance between School v Personal improvement**. Artsmark as applied to mainstream schools is about systemic progression, whereas Virtual Schools are driven by individual student progression as represented by Personal Education Plans (PEPs). This is a significant difference between VS and mainstream settings and needs to be considered in any pilot programme…not least because, again, Virtual Schools do not deliver any arts curriculum directly, but instead effectively curate and monitor arts and other curriculum for the benefit of individual children as part of a larger package of support.

5. **Age range is an issue**. VS children range from a few months to 25 years old. This vast age range has implications for how Artsmark would apply, particularly at the 18+ level when the 'team' around a VS child grows thinner yet issues like self-esteem and employability remain very much in play. Participants in both roundtables were keen to explore how Artsmark, and the arts sector more broadly, could help Virtual Schools support children into young adulthood.

6. **All VS partners need to be involved**. This could include foster parents, social workers, housing associations and even some representatives of the criminal justice system along with teachers and school staff. Many participants felt that learning how such partners could meaningfully contribute to, and benefit from, Artsmark should form a strong part of any pilot programme.

> The reality that Virtual Schools need to network extensively and are 'brokers' with the intention of putting the right things in place for the individual young person is interesting – a 'project' approach to Artsmark across a number of products and services might be a way of refining the offer.
> - Karen Birch, The Mighty Creatives

7. **The Quality Principles could take a more central role.** Participants in general responded more positively to the QPs than the self-assessment criteria, feeling they were more flexible markers of progression that could be more easily adapted to the unique needs of Virtual Schools.

For further exploration:

1. Could a Virtual School have Artsmark for part of its programme but not for all? Suggestions included emphasis on a specific theme, e.g., progression; a setting, e.g., residential care; or an area of work, e.g., family learning or EAL.

2. How could Artsmark allow Virtual Schools to influence the practice of mainstream schools and develop better collaboration?

3. Could a pilot involve a small 'hub' of Virtual Schools or regional 'flagships', resulting in a case study that shared learning and provided advocacy to other Virtual Schools?

4. Might a pilot focus on a specific context – e.g., progression or confidence – that is common to all or most Virtual Schools?

5. Might there be a range, or even different 'levels', of Artsmark VS offer to provide flexibility and reflect the huge diversity of Virtual Schools?

What else?

Following are some questions and possible areas of exploration that did not fit neatly into our three core questions. These deserve further consideration in the context of any possible Artsmark VS pilot programme.

1. What is the potential for advancing the learning of artists and arts organisations to work more effectively with children in care? How might Artsmark help them develop or refine approaches, methodologies and understandings?

2. The role of the Personal Education Plan is critical and needs to be included or referenced in any Artsmark VS programme.

3. Do Virtual Schools have the opportunity to fundraise and develop activity based on Artsmark, or even to learn fundraising skills to support such activity? It was suggested that Pupil Premium support, in an Artsmark context, could serve as a match in a Grants for the Arts application.

4. Should there be an audit of Virtual Schools, perhaps in the context of the national conference in February 2017? The conference will have an arts theme running right through it, performances by children throughout. It was suggested that, were a pilot programme to happen, there could be an Artsmark workshop or session of some sort at the conference, and perhaps even a formal launch of the pilot itself.

Virtual Schools Roundtable: Tuesday 23rd May: Wellcome Collection, London

Anita Stewart	Assistant Head, Virtual School, Havering Education Services
Peter Taylor	Strategic Manager, Artswork
Bernadette Alexander	Interim Headteacher, Hillingdon Virtual School
Munita Gata-Aura	Pupil Premium Project Manager, Achieving for Children Virtual School
Rosemarie Zaubzer	Headteacher, Virtual School for Sutton
Anne Applebaum	Senior Manager, Children & Young People and Learning, Arts Council England
Si Wharton	Coordinator, Tri-borough Virtual School
Clive Niall	Teacher for Looked After Children, Tower Hamlets Virtual School
Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent	Director of Operations, Coram
Tim Fleming	Artistic Director, Whitewood & Fleming
Stella Barnes	Director of Participation, Ovalhouse Theatre
Greg Klerkx	Director, Nimble Fish
Anthony Ruck	Programmes Manager (Young People), A New Direction

Virtual Schools Roundtable: Tuesday 28th June: MAC Birmingham

Andrew Naylor	Advisory Teacher, Coventry Virtual School
Karen Birch	Acting Chief Executive, The Mighty Creatives
Hazel Townsend	Development Manager, Artsmark, The Mighty Creatives
Kim Johnson	Arts Education Consultant, Derbyshire Children's Services
Christine Haywood	Arts Education Consultant, Derbyshire Children's Services
Will Hack	Education Mentor, Staffordshire Virtual School
Pepita Hanna	Associate Director, Arts Connect
Helen Frost	Programme Developer, Arts Connect
Sue Holmes	Advisory Teacher, Dudley Virtual School
Vivien Tetley	Head Teacher, Leicestershire Virtual School
Andrew Wright	Head Teacher, Birmingham Virtual School
Natalie Loon	Corporate Parenting Coordinator, Birmingham Virtual School
Stella Barnes	Director of Participation, Ovalhouse Theatre
Tim Fleming	Artistic Director, Whitewood & Fleming
Renuka Jeyarajah-Dent	Director of Operations, Coram
Greg Klerkx	Director, Nimble Fish
Anthony Ruck	Programmes Manager (Young People), A New Direction
Annie Thorpe	Information Manager, A New Direction