



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

Scotland's Virtual School

Head Teachers' and

Care Experienced Teams'

Network



Context

In 2018, as part of the [Scottish Attainment Challenge](#), funding was made available to all local authorities through the [Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund](#) to provide additional support to care experienced children and young people.

As of the end of 2021, 17 of Scotland's 32 local authorities have chosen to use this funding to establish a specific job role or team who have a focus on improving the educational outcomes and experiences of care experienced children and young people. These posts or teams are commonly known as Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHT) or Care Experienced Teams (CET). The VSHT or CET has a responsibility for all care experienced children and young people within a local authority, regardless of which school the children and young people attend.

In 2019, the [Virtual School Head Teachers' \(VSHT\) and Care Experienced Teams' \(CET\) Network](#) ('the Network') was established by CELCIS to support and connect those working in the role, share good practice, and drive progress towards better educational experiences for all care experienced children and young people.

Our Vision

The Vision of the Network is to play a crucial part in creating a country where everyone gets a quality education and goes on to study, work and live well. We make a difference by working alongside those with care experience to turn the ambitions of The Promise into the reality of practice. We create opportunities by connecting with those who live with, teach and support our children and young people. We will never give up in our determination to shape a compassionate education system that creates multiple opportunities for all, whatever their circumstances. The Network models how an effective system works to support the care and education of care experienced learners.

The education of care experienced

children and young people

All children and young people have a right to a high-quality education. All children need support during their educational journey and care experienced children and young people may require additional support during their time in school to meet their distinct, and often unseen, needs.

While the educational outcomes of care experienced learners have improved over the last ten years, official [statistics](#) show that there is still a gap between 'looked after'¹ children and their peers.

Having experience of care is not a predictor of poorer educational outcomes; the [data](#) demonstrates why it is important to provide effective, timely and responsive support to meet the individual needs of children and young people.

A unifying aim of the Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network is to work alongside those around the child to create environments where care experienced children and young people feel settled, motivated, and resilient, to ensure a better experience at school. This, in turn, will help to improve attendance, educational outcomes, and contribute to better life chances.



¹ 'Looked after' children are those currently in the care of the local authority, while 'care experienced' children are those who have at any time been in the care of the local authority.

What is a Virtual School?

A Virtual School offers an additional layer of support for the education of care experienced learners through one person or team.

The term 'Virtual School' is used interchangeably to refer to:

- The way that some local authorities organise the support they provide for care experienced children and young people
- The cohort of care experienced children and young people who a local authority is responsible for
- The person (VSHT) or team (CET) who offers support to care experienced children, young people, their families and schools

Research on the structure and impact of Virtual Schools is still emerging but there is consistency in the description of the key features of the model:

- Led by an individual or team with specific responsibility for raising awareness of the needs of care experienced children and young people
- Aims to bring about positive and sustainable systemic changes to policy and practice
- Works across all levels of the education and care 'systems', from practice through to operational and strategic activities
- Emphasises the building of collaborative relationships between different agencies
- Focuses on addressing wider factors, such as wellbeing, that can impact on children and young people's educational and life experiences
- Upholds the rights and ensures the wellbeing of care experienced children and young people



How VSHTs and CETs provide support

The Virtual School model is evolving in Scotland. There are variations between local authorities, with each seeking to strike a balance between strategic and operational work in responding to the local context and the needs of their own care experienced children and young people.

VSHTs and CETs are creating relationships with colleagues across local authorities and other agencies. They are collaborating to promote corporate parenting and offer bespoke support to children, young people, their families, parents and carers, and schools.

VSHTs and CETs:

- Work with a range of partners and agencies to improve children and young people's educational experiences
- Seek ways to spend meaningful time with children, young people, and their families to understand their needs
- Collect data to understand the attendance, attainment and progress of care experienced children and young people
- Work with schools to develop and strengthen learning plans for children and young people
- Listen to the views, experiences and needs of children, young people and their families, and ensure these are reflected in their work
- Attend meetings with children, young people and their families and carers to provide support and help develop their learning plans
- Provide training, support and coaching to other professionals
- Attend strategic planning meetings to advocate and plan for the needs and rights of care experienced children and young people
- Commission services to support care experienced children and young people based on their needs
- Line manage and support staff teams who work directly with children, young people and their families
- Develop improvement plans to understand how their service is helping children and young people
- Proactively seek professional learning opportunities for themselves and share learning with other colleagues and teams
- Raise awareness of the holistic needs of children and young people



The Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network

The Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network was established by CELCIS in 2019. The purpose of the Network is to support and connect those working in these roles, share learning from across the education sector, facilitate access to policy, research and practice to inform their approach, and drive progress towards better educational experiences for all. Since its inception, the Network has published guidance, case studies, practice examples, and contributed to consultations and research studies.

The Network meets monthly and is made up of 17 local authority staff who are in the role of VSHT and CET, and colleagues from Scottish Government, Education Scotland and CELCIS. Membership of the Network is open to representatives of any Scottish local authority that has a Virtual School or Care Experienced Team.

"It's nice the peer support you get, listening to people with the same challenge"

- Member of the VSHT and CET Network



The Network collaborated to develop specific aims, objectives and values that underpin their work:

Our aims

- To think collectively and co-construct ways to improve the education of care experienced children and young people
- To provide peer support in this new and evolving role in Scotland
- To create a safe, reflective place to share good practice

Our objectives

- To put the voices, values and aspirations of care experienced children and young people at the centre of our work
- To improve the educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced children and young people
- To work with care experienced children and young people, their families, parents, carers, and teachers, to realise the ambitions of The Promise
- To support and encourage each other, and to share knowledge and experiences that enable the Network to respond quickly to the needs of care experienced children and young people
- To generate and share evidence of good practice

Our values

- Equity
- Connection
- Compassion



Benefits of the Network



The Network provides a valuable resource for all members, whether in the early stages of the role or more established, by offering support, guidance and learning. This was particularly needed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Network meetings moved online and offered a space for reflection and sharing good practice.

The Network provides a space for VSHTs and CETs to feedback information and insight to policy makers about how policy and legislation is being implemented at a local level and how it is experienced by children, young people and their families. Meetings are developed collaboratively with members reaching a consensus on content and key themes. External partners or organisations are invited to attend and present based on priorities agreed at the beginning of the academic year.

When asked to consider the benefits of the Network, during an evaluation of the work, members reported:

- Accessing support from colleagues in a similar role
- Welcoming the opportunity to share ideas and seek guidance
- Making connections and building relationships with equivalents in other local authorities
- Developing links with Scottish Government and Education Scotland
- Appreciating the collaborative and supportive atmosphere
- Advantages of a flexible and responsive agenda
- Feeling that it is a safe space for discussion
- Recognising the opportunities to develop joint working relationships
- Developing awareness and understanding of their role within the local authority

"[The Network]...Helped me to develop my role, understand wider context across Scotland, keeps me motivated."

- **Member of the VSHT and CET Network**



"I think just knowing that everyone was in the same boat was helpful. Some days felt really isolated and lost, then when we had our calls it all made sense and suddenly realised everyone was in the same boat. The Network impacted by allowing me to implement anything new that the group would discuss, approaches that were shared that were positive and also reassurance about our role and what we are doing collectively is making a difference."

- **Member of the VSHT and CET Network**

Impact of the Network

Since the Network was established in 2019, it has almost doubled in size, representing more than half of local authorities in Scotland. In this time, it is estimated that the reach of Network members has increased from 40% to over 70% of 'looked after' children and young people in Scotland.

Since the Network began, broader information and feedback has been gathered, as well as routinely collected data, to demonstrate the impact of the role for care experienced children and young people.

Further research currently underway to capture the practice of virtual schools in Scotland

In 2021, 13 Network members participated in one-to-one interviews. Their responses are being analysed as part of a new piece of research to identify key features of the virtual school and how the Scottish legislative and policy context is influencing their development.

Case studies

Individual case studies from different local authorities are being collated from those in the role to reflect the scope and reach of the work being done, and to illustrate how VSHTs respond in a highly individualised way to meet the needs of care experienced children and young people.

Links with NAVSH

The impact of the Network has been strengthened by forming close links with [NAVSH](#), the National Association of Virtual School Heads. NAVSH is a charity which brings together VSHTs in England, where the role is statutory, to support them in the role, and the Network is now represented as part of NAVSH governance both on the board and research subcommittee.

Research and feedback

A recent [evaluation](#) of the Network found that VSHTs and CETs in Scotland:

- Made substantial connections both within local authorities and with external partners
- Offered support at an individual, school, cluster and local authority level
- Increased understanding of the needs of care experienced children and young people
- Used challenge and support to bring about change in practice, culture and ethos
- Supported the emotional well-being of children, young people, their families, and the wider workforce

Supporting the implementation of policy into practice

VSHTs and CETs have significant insight and expertise in identifying the needs of care experienced children and young people and how these can be met by schools and the wider community. Members of the Network are well placed to understand what practitioners and leaders need to implement policy and legislation into practice in a way that is meaningful and effective for children and young people.

During the COVID-19 Alternative Certification Model, the Network came together to produce [practice guidance](#) for Designated Managers and SQA coordinators in schools; focusing on specific areas that would uphold the rights and ensure the wellbeing of care experienced learners during this new process. The insights and reflections that members shared, both individually and collectively, have been used alongside evidence and feedback from other forums to inform several policy consultations which have the potential to impact the education for care experienced children and young people.

"There is one lad who wasn't in school for two years and in the last year he hasn't gone to school, but he had an alternative timetable and he's got seven qualifications. He is my pride and joy. So I have improved one child's attainment this year. Not just one, but that one really matters. That was really deep work and hopefully transformative in that lad's life."

- Member of the VSHT and CET Network

Looking to the future

The Virtual School model is being implemented in over half of local authorities in Scotland and reaching over 70% of 'looked after' children and young people. The fundamental aim of the Virtual School Head and Care Experienced Team Network is to improve educational experiences and outcomes for care experienced learners.

The VSHT and CET role is evolving and adapting according to each local context. Members have reported a number of benefits to being a part of the Network, including mutual support and collaboration as well as a forum to consider and generate evidence of impact despite the challenges of the pandemic.

We look forward to continuing to work together with existing Network members and welcoming any new colleagues that join us to continue to drive progress for care experienced learners.

"I am grateful to our partners at CELCIS and the 16 local authorities involved for their leadership, enthusiasm and commitment in driving this work forward."

- **Scottish Government Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville, September 2021**

Useful links

and further reading

Virtual School Head Teachers' Network webpage

Find links to key reports and contact details for Scotland's Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experienced Teams

Evaluation

This evaluation report provides an in depth discussion of the Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network in 2020-2021

Evaluation Summary

This summary report brings together the key findings of the Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' Network Evaluation Report 2020-2021

Looked After and Learning

An evidence-based toolkit and bench marking guide to support the education of care experienced learners in schools in Scotland

Network Terms of Reference

The vision, values, aims and objectives of the VSHT and CET Network for the 2021-2022 academic year

NAVSH

The National Association of Virtual School Head in England



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About CELCIS

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

For more information

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