



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

The Virtual School

Head Teachers' Network

Terms of Reference September 2026



Contents

Context	3
Amendments and changes	3
Vision for Scotland’s care experienced learners	4
Vision for the Network	4
Our values	4
Aims	5
Objectives	5
Our way of working	5
Group functioning	6
Frequency and format.....	6
Joining the Network.....	7
Meeting notes and confidentiality	7
Information sharing and communication	8
Membership	9
Resources.....	10

“
We create opportunities for care
experienced learners to grow at
every age and stage of their lives
from birth to adulthood
”

Members of the Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experienced Teams' Network: September 2026



Context

All children have a right to an education. For children and young people with care experience this may mean that additional support is required during their time in school to meet their distinct, and often unseen, needs. One of the key goals of Virtual School Head Teachers (VSHTs) is to help create environments where care experienced children feel more 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.

A 'Virtual School' is an organisational framework that offers an additional layer of support for the education of care experienced students through one person or team. There is surprisingly little in the research literature that explicitly refers to Virtual Schools or Virtual School Head Teachers. The Virtual School also describes the cohort of care experienced young people that 'belong' to the local authority but attend a range of 'bricks and mortar' schools, including a significant number living out of authority. VSHTs collect, monitor, and track data on the attendance, attainment and progress of care experienced children and young people and work with a range of partners to improve their educational experience.

VSHTs are senior members of education staff in a local authority who work at a strategic level. The role is different to but is key in supporting that of the Designated Manager; a senior member of staff in every education establishment who has overall responsibility for the planning of assessment and support for care experienced children and young people. Network members' responsibilities focus on supporting the improvement of the educational experiences and outcomes of care experienced children and young people in the whole local authority area. Members also provide key links between multi-agency teams and advocate for the needs and rights of care experienced children and young people.

Amendments and changes

All terms of reference, including vision statements and values should and will change over time. These terms of reference will be amended annually after consultation with group members. Minor variations and updates can be addressed by members through Network meetings.

Vision for Scotland’s care experienced learners

The Network’s vision is that Scotland is a country where everyone gets a quality education (see Article 29 of [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)), dreams big and goes on to study, work and live well. Care experienced learners thrive in education, and we are ambitious about what they can achieve. We give everyone what they need to do well at every stage of their lives. Scotland creates opportunities for all learners to grow whatever their circumstances.

Vision for the Network

The vision of the Network is that we 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 and nurturing education system that creates opportunities for all, whatever their circumstances. The Network models how an effective care system works to support the education of care experienced young people.

Our values

Equity	<p>We support learners to thrive in education.</p> <p>We create multiple opportunities at every age and stage.</p> <p>We advocate, challenge and support to ensure fairness.</p>
Connection	<p>We listen to and are led by care experienced learners.</p> <p>We build relationships with those who live, support and teach our children and young people.</p> <p>We Network across systems to create pathways to success.</p>
Compassion	<p>We hold the hands of those holding the hands of our children.</p> <p>We make a difference by taking action above and beyond expectations.</p> <p>Our work is driven by a commitment to do what a good parent would do.</p>

Aims

CELCIS convened this group with the original purpose of bringing together representatives from local authorities alongside Education Scotland and Scottish Government with a view to having a broader perspective of the work of Virtual Schools. It was envisaged that learning would be shared across the sector and to give members access to policy, research, and practice to inform their approach. There was an explicit desire to develop an evidenced based understanding of the unique core components of a VSHT.

- To think collectively and co-construct ways to improve the education of care experienced learners.
- To provide peer support in a new and evolving role.
- To create a brave, reflective place to share good practice.

Objectives

- To improve the education experiences and outcomes of care experienced children and young people.
- To put the voices, values and aspirations of care experienced children and young people at the centre of our work.
- To work with care experienced children, young people, their teachers, and carers, 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 children and young people.
- To generate and share evidence of good practice.

Our way of working

The Network strives to be a safe space to share information and ideas and a place where questions, curiosity and discussion are encouraged. A variety of methods are used to include members, encourage debate, collect ideas and share views. The Network has agreed to shared values and core principles to underpin how it functions and operates.

The following principles have been reviewed and agreed:

- The Network aims to create a safe space to share information and ideas.
- Questions and discussions are encouraged.
- Getting to know each other and building relationships is key to our work.
- Consistency of membership helps to build relationships.
- There is no expectation to attend every meeting.

Group functioning

The Network has worked hard to build and sustain relationships and create a brave space and the conditions for collaboration. In order to maintain the ethos of the group, contribute to efficient organisation and respect pressures on time the Network agreed that:

- CELCIS will convene, host and chair Network meetings and provide the infrastructure to support the work.
- Each local authority will have one representative who will ordinarily attend Network meetings. This will be the VSHT themselves, or the person who has delegated authority for care experienced learners.
- If the role of VSHT is shared between two post holders (job share), or there are two VSHT in the same local authority, who have the same responsibilities, then both will be permitted to attend.
- To assist with organisation members will accept/decline calendar invites.
- If a member cannot attend, they will let CELCIS know.
- Meeting invites will not be forwarded to other colleagues without prior discussion and agreement with CELCIS.
- Any standing change in membership will be discussed, and the new member will be offered the same support as newly joining members.
- If a member is unable to make three meetings in a row a meeting will be arranged with CELCIS to discuss ongoing involvement and any necessary support required.

Frequency and format

The Network is hosted by CELCIS. It takes place remotely for two hours every month and in-person for a day, twice a year. The group will review the meeting frequency and format annually. Some sessions are recorded or transcribed in order to assist with keeping an accurate note. Consent has been sought from all members but this can be withdrawn by any member at any point by notifying CELCIS. Recordings and transcriptions will be deleted once a note of the meeting has been made.

Joining the Network

Any local authority who wishes to join the Network should discuss their role with CELCIS. These discussions will ensure that the representative is the dedicated VSHT or equivalent with a remit and focus on the education of care experienced learners. It will also highlight the Network's ethos, way of working and the expectations of members.

CELCIS will offer an invitation to join if the work and role is aligned with that of the Network. It is good practice for members to seek permission from the relevant lead in their local authority prior to joining. The criteria used in consideration of membership is:

- A senior strategic education lead.
- Responsibility for all care experienced learners.
- Using the 'virtual school' model.
- The significant majority of the post holders' remit is a focus on supporting the education of care experienced children and young people.
- All new members will be inducted into the Network through a follow up meeting with CELCIS. They will be introduced to members by email, sent the notes of the most recent meeting, the terms of reference and the dates of future meetings.

Meeting notes and confidentiality

A detailed note of discussions is produced and distributed to all members following a Network meeting with headlines and a summary of actions highlighted at the beginning. Any amendment requests to the note will be responded to by CELCIS. Notes are anonymised to protect the confidentiality of group members and encourage a spirit of free discussion.

Members may disseminate information to their own organisation or Networks but ensure they follow in-house procedures for this and any confidentiality agreements with other members of the Network. During the course of any discussion, members may highlight an issue as confidential, and it will be subject to scrutiny and the members' approval before being shared. Being part of the distribution list means consenting to a member's email address being disseminated to the group and therefore should a member wish this to no longer be the case they should inform CELCIS.

Members are reminded that any information that is shared is intended for recipients on the agreed list and due consideration or permission sought before forwarding information to third parties. It is good practice to only include those on a circulation list for whom information is relevant.

Information sharing and communication

Members are asked to consider that any information sent in written format or said during recorded events may be subject to FOI requests. Members are asked to apply conventional rules of engagement and follow organisational regulations, values and policies. CELCIS and Network members will always seek consent before recording events or meetings. CELCIS and Network members are not able to manage how email communications or recorded information is used once it is sent or published.

Emails, MS Teams channels, or other communications sent within the VSHT Network group are intended for those recipients only unless otherwise stated. If any member wishes to share information out with the recipient list, then permission should be sought from the original sender of the communication. To be compliant with GDPR regulations no persona information should be shared.

If any member has any concerns, questions or queries about any communications sent to the group, they should in the first instance contact the original sender or speak to a member of the CELCIS team.

Membership

The membership organisations:

- 1 Aberdeen City Council
- 2 Aberdeenshire Council
- 3 Argyll and Bute Council
- 4 CELCIS (Host)
- 5 Clackmannanshire Council
- 6 Dumfries and Galloway Council
- 7 East Dunbartonshire Council
- 8 East Lothian Council
- 9 Edinburgh City Council
- 10 Education Scotland
- 11 Falkirk Council
- 12 Fife Council
- 13 Glasgow City Council
- 14 The Highland Council
- 15 Inverclyde Council
- 16 Midlothian Council
- 17 Moray Council
- 18 North Ayrshire Council
- 19 North Lanarkshire Council
- 20 Renfrewshire Council
- 21 Scottish Borders Council
- 22 Scottish Government
- 23 Stirling Council
- 24 South Ayrshire Council

Resources

CELCIS has been granted funding from Scottish Government to facilitate the Network. This funding covers internal CELCIS expenditure for personnel and infrastructure costs including evaluation. At the time of writing (August 2024) there is no budget which is available to cover any local authority member's expenses. Any travel or expenses involved in participation in the Network would require to be agreed within a member's own organization.



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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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 [linkedin.com/company/CELCIS/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/CELCIS/)