

Creating a pathway to success

The following case study was published in January 2023. Any identifying features of the children and young people referred to in this case study have been changed to protect their identities.

Context

Moving from secondary education into further study or the world of work is a significant life event and transition for most people, and this is no less true for children and young people with care experience. Scottish Government data and statistics indicate that people who are 'looked after'¹ in Scotland leave school, on average, at an earlier age and stage² than non-'looked after' children and do not move into further and higher education at the same rate as all school leavers.³ The annual participation measure⁴ also points towards a gap in the number of care experienced people 'sustaining positive destinations,'⁵ that is moving into training, work or study. There is a growing body of research⁶ that is helping everyone who supports care experienced learners to better understand the importance and impact of ensuring that care experienced people are well supported during their transition from secondary education and onto further and higher education. These studies are also showing that, with the right scaffolding and support into further and higher education, care experienced learners can have similar or better educational and employment outcomes to other students.⁷

Scottish Borders Council (SBC) is a predominantly rural local authority in the southeast of Scotland. It is bordered by six Scottish and two English local authorities. It has almost 300 care experienced learners and nine secondary schools spread over a large geographical area of almost two thousand square miles. This case study describes how Scott Watson, the [Virtual School Head Teacher](#) (VSHT) in SBC, worked alongside local partners to collect and use data and statistics in a different way to better understand the learning journey of care experienced children and young people. As a result, Scott was able to develop and adjust services to improve educational outcomes, experiences and post school destinations for care experienced learners living in the Scottish Borders.

What were the circumstances?

'Post-school' transition planning meetings are a feature of most education settings in Scotland. These meetings routinely plan for learners' careers and aspirations after leaving school and involve a range of partners including colleges, [Developing The Young Workforce Scotland](#) (DYW), [Skills Development Scotland](#) (SDS), relevant local authority services and third sector organisations. These meetings provide touchpoints for practitioners to listen to young people and provide the support they need to progress towards their career aspirations and ambitions.

In SBC these were called 'sixteen plus' meetings. SBC held these meetings for all learners, but they were more frequent for learners who required additional support in their transition on from secondary education, including young people with care experience. Whilst meetings were convened regularly and changes were made to learners' plans, there were no formal 'outputs'. This could make it difficult to get a real time understanding of learners' strengths and difficulties.

There was some central coordination but no clear process for tracking and monitoring the data and statistics that helped understand both the journey of individual children and young people, and groups of learners through their education journey. This meant that it was hard to build a picture of the difference these meetings were making on progress in the moment and on learners' future journeys and destinations.

What did the VSHT do?

Scott began by building upon work started by colleagues before he came into post. He worked with staff in education settings across SBC to embed changes in the timing of transition meetings so that they were held from the age of fourteen rather than sixteen. Earlier planning enabled better opportunities for those involved in supporting care experienced learners to have a deeper understanding of the young person. It also encouraged conversations with and for young people that prepared them for the next part of their learning journey rather than the 'end' of school.

Secondly, Scott identified a more strategic way to collect and use information and data collected about care experienced learners to understand their experiences. He described the changes he made as 'using existing systems and resources differently, rather than doing anything new'. He started by working alongside partners to co-construct and redesign the process and paperwork used in planning meetings. He

created a form that could be used to capture key information such as learners' aspirations, strengths, engagement, and attendance. He used this information alongside learners' own thoughts and views to identify support that may be needed in the moment, or in the future, and get a sense of how urgently this support was required.

The final change that Scott made was the introduction of regular monthly meetings with staff at [Borders College](#). Given that 75% of care experienced school leavers in SBC go on to study and train there, it was helpful for learners that links should be strengthened and formalised. Monthly meetings were set up between Scott and staff at the college to consider the needs of each care experienced learner and understand their attendance, attainment, and learner engagement. Where appropriate, these meetings led to proactive support being offered, for example making referrals to specific individuals and agencies that can help young people with any challenges they are facing. As financial support can be a key factor in ensuring care experienced learners are able to sustain their place at college or university, Scott acts as a key link in this area, liaising between learners and agencies to ensure timely access to funding such as the [Care Experienced Bursary](#).

What difference did we make?

Scott received a 100% return from secondary education settings to the new process of collecting information on children and young people's plans and their progression. This has helped him to create a clear and real time understanding of the needs of the learners that he is responsible for supporting. By introducing relatively small changes he has created a process that enables him to have an overview of how his learners are progressing as they transition on from secondary education. Regular focused meetings with education staff and staff at the Borders College gives him a snapshot into the detail of children and young people's every day educational experiences. He describes this as a way of 'knowing' the learners he is responsible for when it would not be possible to personally meet, see or work with all of them in the same way as a teacher who is based in the same setting as the learner.

Scott has also used the data he has collected to better understand trends and inform strategic planning and support for learners. He was able to identify a dip in the number of care experienced young people who were participating in a positive destination after leaving school, from 71% three months after leaving school to 63% nine months after leaving school. With focused and bespoke support provided to learners, this increased to 83% of care experienced learners in training, study, or work by the end of the year. The data, coupled with Scott's knowledge of every young person

that these statistics represent, allowed for timely and bespoke supportive actions to be put in place.

As a result of this increased help, a number of schools in SBC now routinely check in with their care experienced young people a year after they have left school. This adds an additional layer of support to the post school system and demonstrates to young people that there are adults they know who continue to care for them and who they can turn to for guidance and advice.

Data analysis also highlighted a gap and an opportunity to enhance the offer available to care experienced learners once they were attending the college. Borders College had an existing programme which provided mentoring for learners over the age of sixteen who needed additional guidance and support. Scott and staff at the college were able to identify a group of care experienced learners who had left school before they were sixteen and who were attending college but were not eligible for this programme due to their age. Scott was able to use funding from the [Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund](#) to extend this mentoring programme to younger care experienced learners. Using data alongside relationships forged with staff at the college has provided an opportunity to be more responsive to a larger group of care experienced learners both in the moment and in the future. An additional group of six learners are being supported through this funding and meet regularly with a mentor. In total nineteen young people with care experience are discussed at monthly meetings with a view to timely support being provided should they need it.

Implications for practice

Care experienced learners follow a variety of diverse pathways into education, training and employment.⁸⁹¹⁰ The need for high quality support for them as they move into adulthood is a consistent theme in the research literature¹¹¹² and there can be a stark difference between how what is on offer translates into practice.¹³ Having a strong universal pathway from both secondary and further education settings is one example of care proofing the 'system' to promote a seamless transition into the world of work. The relationships between services are critical to the success of partnership working alongside credible and trusting relationships between professionals.¹⁴¹⁵

The Promise is clear in its ambition. Data should be used in a way that makes meaningful change for care experienced people and schools have a crucial role to play in ensuring care experienced learners move onto genuinely positive destinations. By using data alongside the views, thoughts and feelings of young people, Scott and his colleagues were able

to quickly adapt and adjust services to provide support to learners in a way that was helpful to them at a time when they needed it most. This case study exemplifies how the role of VSHTs can act as a catalyst in forming relationships between different agencies and services, bringing to live the statutory duty of [Corporate Parents](#)¹⁶ to collaborate where appropriate 'to promote and safeguard the wellbeing of children and young people'. By putting in place tangible ways of working together and utilising the data and statistics available, these relationships can help improve the educational experiences of care experienced learners and ensure they go on to pursue the work, training and studying they wish to when they move on from secondary education.

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.

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-looked-children-2020-21/>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-looked-children-2020-21/>

⁴ <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/publications-statistics/statistics/annual-participation-measure/> e

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-looked-children-2020-21/pages/2/>

⁶ Harrison, N., Baker, Z., & Stevenson, J. (2020). Employment and further study outcomes for care-experienced graduates in the UK. *Higher Education*, 1-22

⁷ Harrison, N. (2020). Patterns of participation in higher education for care-experienced students in England: why has there not been more progress?. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(9), 1986-2000.

⁸ Brady, E., & Gilligan, R. (2019). Exploring diversity in the educational pathways of care-experienced adults: Findings from a life course study of education and care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 104, 104379.

⁹ Mendis, K., Lehmann, J., & Gardner, F. (2018). Promoting academic success of children in care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(1), 106-123.

¹⁰ Arnau-Sabatés, L., & Gilligan, R. (2015). What helps young care leavers to enter the world of work? Possible lessons learned from an exploratory study in Ireland and Catalonia. *Children and youth services review*, 53, 185-191.

¹¹ Harrison, N. (2017). Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education.

¹² McNamara, P., Harvey, A., & Andrewartha, L. (2019). Passports out of poverty: Raising access to higher education for care leavers in Australia. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 97, 85-93.

¹³ Strahl, B., van Breda, A. D. P., Mann-Feder, V., & Schröer, W. (2021). A multinational comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation. *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 37(1), 34-49.

¹⁴ Salazar, A. M., Roe, S. S., Ullrich, J. S., & Haggerty, K. P. (2016). Professional and youth perspectives on higher education-focused interventions for youth transitioning from foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 64, 23-34.

¹⁵ Singer, E. R., Berzin, S. C., & Hokanson, K. (2013). Voices of former foster youth: Supportive relationships in the transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(12), 2110-2117.

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/statutory-guidance-part-9-corporate-parenting-children-young-people-scotland/pages/9/>