

## **Response to Scottish Parliament Education, Children and Young People Committee's Call for views on the impact of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.**

**February 2022**

CELCIS is Scotland's Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde. CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre. 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.

We welcome the opportunity to submit our views in response to the Education, Children and Young People Committee's call for views on The Scottish Attainment Challenge. This response will focus on the impact that this funding has made for children and young people with care experience<sup>1</sup>.

### **Key messages**

- There is strong evidence of new partnerships, a more collaborative system, and a focus on health and wellbeing as local authorities continue to develop their understanding of the needs of care experienced learners and discharge their corporate parenting responsibilities.
- The methodology that has been used to allocate funding for the care experienced children and young people's funding has been complex, and arguably inequitable in some areas.
- Development of a narrative approach to evaluate the impact of funding on the 'live', changing needs of care experienced learners and the communities they live in is required. An equal weighting should be given to both quantitative and qualitative measures to capture 'hard' outcomes, alongside the impact on ethos, well-being and capturing the views within schools and the wider learning community.
- An opportunity exists to integrate our learning from the pandemic, which concurrently amplified inequities and created new ways of working and thinking. The sector would benefit from the development of bespoke approaches and toolkits that reflect this learning and capture the changing needs of learners.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Looked after' and 'looked after child' are the terms used in current legislation to refer to a child or young person who is cared for under a formal arrangement with a local authority. It has a specific legal meaning, but wherever possible, the more inclusive term 'care experience' is preferred.

## Background

All children have their own unique strengths, and their own needs. Babies, children, young people (in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, anyone under the age of 18 referred to hereafter as children), in need of care and protection, and their families, are no different. With the right support, all children can thrive throughout their lives, and yet COVID-19 has presented significant challenges in how we respond to the needs of children and families struggling in difficult circumstances. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, care experienced children and their families faced several complex and often difficult circumstances which presented barriers to positive educational experiences; the public health crisis compounded these.

Scottish Government Educational Outcomes data from 2018/19 (the most recent pre-pandemic data available) shows that 'looked after children', on average, have lower attendance rates, higher exclusion rates, leave school earlier, and attain fewer qualifications than all other children<sup>2</sup>. Whilst having experience of care or having an additional support need are not predictors of poor educational achievement or attainment, this data highlights the importance of providing more effective and responsive support to meet children's individual needs.

CELCIS has received additional Scottish Government funding through the Scottish Attainment Challenge since 2020 to support the development of the role of [Virtual School Head Teachers](#) (VSHT) in Scotland, and to host and convene a Network of the practitioners implementing this role. To date, eighteen local authorities have either a VSHT or Care Experienced Team (CET) in Scotland and all are part of the Network. The eighteen membership authorities cover approximately 71% of looked after children in Scotland. This response to the Committee's call for information has been informed by our knowledge and insights gained from this work. In addition to this, we host several of communities of practice spanning the education and children's services sector, including the [CELCIS Education Forum](#), and we are members of a number of other organisational networks which provide us with information and knowledge of the challenges and opportunities facing children and families in need of care and protection and the workforce who support them.

## Questions and responses

### 1. What has worked well?

The range of funding streams within the Scottish Attainment Challenge: funding for Challenge Authorities and Challenge Schools; Pupil Equity Funding; and the

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government (2019) [Looked after children: educational outcomes 2018-19](#). Edinburgh; Scottish Government

Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, has seen spending taking place at each level of the education and social care 'system'. We support the ethos of funding being targeted as close to the needs of children and families as possible and decisions around how funding can best support them being made by the people who know them best.

We are supportive of the recognition that school alone cannot, and should not, seek to close the 'poverty related gap', and the approach taken of disbursing some of the Attainment Challenge funding jointly to education and social work in recognition of this is helpful, and one that we would be keen to see continue.

Specific funding to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for care experienced learners has been positive and recognises the complex needs and the range of additional and nuanced supports that can be required for children with care experience. In addition to this, we note the positive flexibility that has been afforded to local authorities and practitioners during the pandemic in relation to this funding, as this has allowed creative approaches to be implemented which are responsive and sensitive to the needs of individual children and families.

Despite the unprecedented challenges associated with the global pandemic, including the complexity of measuring 'impact' in different contexts, there is evidence to indicate that there has been some progress towards a coherent vision and embedding approaches to ensure care experienced learners have access to the support they need to thrive and go onto genuinely positive destinations. Our own findings<sup>3</sup> from work with our VSHT Network and our Education Forum resonate with findings and approaches identified in Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: Fourth interim report – year 5:

- Increased connections both internally, for example, between social care and education, and externally with third sector organisations, is leading to a more collaborative system. Joint working is cited across disciplines and sectors in research literature as a precondition for effective improvement.
- An improved understanding of the needs of care experienced learners particularly in the context of a more nuanced appreciation of the barriers faced by communities affected by systemic poverty. Practitioners are more likely to view the needs of learners in the context of their trajectory through education and consider the impact of this throughout their life course.
- And further, 'system changes' and impact on the culture, ethos and practice. For example, as approaches to equity are being embedded within schools, capacity is built to influence a more inclusive, sustaining system with a balanced focus both on education and well-being needs.

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<sup>3</sup>Joining the dots: Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' Network: Evaluation Report. CELCIS. 2021.

The attainment fund has created energy and provided local authorities with a focus, framework and a mandate to further discharge [corporate parenting responsibilities](#) that has led to progress with 'longer term' outcomes that have influenced attitudes and the wider educational landscape and system, for example strong evidence of new partnerships and collaborations, and considerable focus on health and wellbeing<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. What could improve?**

Practitioners and leaders within local authorities have told us that the short-term nature of funding is detrimental to their ability to plan and commission both strategic and practical supports for children and families. We acknowledge and recognise the positive progress that has been made in Scottish Government's commitment to provide four-year Scottish Attainment Challenge funding allocations to local authorities, but we are disappointed that this commitment has not currently been extended to the Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund.

Members of our VSHT Network have raised concerns that without a longer-term funding commitment in this area, one which aims to support learners who can face some of the most acute vulnerabilities, there is a risk that the needs of care experienced children and young people will not be prioritised.

In order to Keep the Promise of the Independent Care Review, [Change Programme One](#) states that in terms of investment "using money and investing differently to make a genuinely transformational and sustainable shift in services and outcomes requires high levels of joint working across multiple programmes and organisations".<sup>5</sup> We believe that the Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund offers a prime opportunity to work in this way. The [National Operational Guidance](#) related to the fund strongly encourages a multi-agency approach to the planning and delivery of services and supports for children and young people in need of care and protection.

An [evaluation](#) undertaken by CELCIS around the work of VSHTs, who are predominantly funded by the Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund, showed that working across and between services in a multi-agency way was a key strength of their role. A [presentation](#) given to the CELCIS Education Forum by Education Scotland in 2019 showed the range of support that this

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<sup>4</sup> Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation: Fourth interim report- year 5

<sup>5</sup> The Promise Scotland (2021) Change Programme One, accessed online at <https://thepromise.scot/change-programme-one-pdf.pdf>, p58

funding was being used to deliver and commission, and highlighted that many approaches went much further than 'traditional' school-based support.

These examples of joint working across programmes and organisations embody both the recommendations within [The Promise](#) and the ethos of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, however without a longer-term commitment to funding in this area, local authorities and organisations are prevented from being able to plan and invest in longer term supports and already limited resource and capacity is spent on funding conversations and associated activities.

Our networks of practitioners and leaders who are responsible for spending decisions tell us that it can be difficult to find the time, or expertise within their teams, to research and analyse the wealth of information and evidence that is available to support commissioning and service delivery decisions. Education Scotland's [National Improvement Hub](#), the Education Endowment Foundation's [Toolkit](#) and Scotland's Community of Access and Participation Practitioners' (SCAPP) [Toolkit](#) are all helpful and important resources that should be used, alongside robust data, to help plan and implement evidenced based supports for children and families. However, these can only be well utilised if the workforce has the time, expertise and support to use them, and can create robust plans for their review and improvement. More streamlined and accessible resources, alongside creating capacity for those responsible for spending decisions would increase the ability of the workforce to tailor interventions to the specific needs of their children and young people and strengthen the ability to take effective measures to scale.

The methodology that has been used to allocate funding for the Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund has been complex, and inequitable in some areas. Local authorities are allocated £1200 for every 'looked after' child aged 5-15 that they are responsible for, based on [Children's Social Work Statistics](#). However, the National Operational Guidance states that this funding should be used to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people with care experience aged from 0-26.

Scottish Government and local authorities do not routinely collect data on the number of children and young people who are care experienced, making it difficult to estimate the number of people who may be eligible to benefit from this funding, but the number of people with care experience who are aged 0-26 is significantly higher than those aged 5-15 who are 'looked after'.

In real terms, this means that the amount allocated per person is greatly reduced. In addition to this, as there is no legal definition of care experience, eligibility for support from this funding is largely dependent on the criteria that each individual local authority uses to determine care experience. This creates inequity for children and young people as their access to support may depend on where they live rather than their level of need.

As the expectation is for the funding to support people from the age of 0-26 though, consideration must be given in all future planning to the roles of early learning and childcare settings and further and higher education. Up until this point, spending has been largely focused on school aged children due to the focus of the departments who hold the budget, however if the intention is to equally support all care experienced people aged from 0-26, then there must be greater expectation on social work and education to work with partners in early years and post school settings to ensure equity of access to support.

The variance in the amount of funding allocated to local authorities through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, based on the number of 'looked after' children they are responsible for, has been raised with us as an area that may inadvertently cause structural inequality. According to the allocation figures for 2021/22, the local authority with the fewest 'looked after' children received £18,000 compared to the local authority with the most 'looked after' children which received over £2 million<sup>6</sup>.

Some local authorities with lower allocations have told us that they would have liked to have implemented an approach such as a VSHT, however were unable to due to the level of funding they received. This may risk inequity in the level and type of support that young people with care experience are offered access to, based on where they live. We recognise that this has been addressed, to a degree, in the overall Scottish Attainment Challenge allocations for future years, with smaller local authorities being given a higher level of funding that would allow them to explore a wider range of support options and we would urge a similar approach being taken towards allocations for the care experienced children and young people fund.

### **3. How is the impact of funding measured?**

#### **Measures set out by SAC**

From its inception, The Scottish Attainment Challenge set out a broad framework for local authorities to consider a range of measures and outcomes when considering impact. These included traditional quantitative perhaps 'easier to measure' indicators, such as education outcomes (e.g., attainment, attendance, positive destinations). There was however equal weighting given to qualitative measures, and what could be termed 'harder to measure' areas which took into consideration less tangible but nevertheless crucial aspects to driving improvement (e.g., collaborative working, pupil voice and a trauma informed ethos).

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/>

It can be easy to lose sight of the presumption and need to collect a broad range of data to capture a narrative of what change is happening in the context of a complex interrelated systems. There can be an overemphasis in the sector, often amplified by commentary in the media, that focuses on simplistic measures such as attainment and exam results which represent a narrow definition of the purpose of education, and risks failing to see the broader impact on ethos, thinking and the communities we serve.

### **Issues which arose for outcome measures during the pandemic**

Whilst it is hard to generalise as experiences varied across local authorities, the pandemic highlighted fundamental issues about the purpose and nature of data, recording, evidence and impact. The reality was that some measures became obsolete, irrelevant, or unfit for purpose in the moment, for example, attendance and exclusions, and others took on a new significance and rose to become a priority, for example, wellbeing and vocational qualifications. We know that the pandemic both disrupted people and systems whilst simultaneously creating new ways of working and thinking, and efforts should be made to capture key learning from this time.

Gathering and holding accurate data on 'groups' of learners can be inherently challenging. Definitions of care experience and the additional transitions that some experience, coupled with a lack of integration in local authority data systems compound the issue.

Typically, there are two systems (education and social care) which hold some information, but not one system that holds all. More traditional measures such as attendance and positive destinations became less relevant during the pandemic as children were not attending schools. However, there are limited systems in place to capture data such as vocational qualifications and wider achievement which would have been more relevant and helpful in understanding how children were progressing. The flexibility within the framework allowed a necessary move away from a focus on education outcomes to wellbeing.

Due to the modification of the assessment and exam process and school closures, there is an acknowledgment that routine data cannot be meaningfully used to compare the pandemic with other time periods. Measurement of progress in achieving national priority outcomes will be hampered by gaps in data and multiple disruptions. Direct engagement between education and families became more important and frequent during the pandemic. Practitioners created new relationships with families and communities and captured these through in the moment feedback and case studies<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Joining the dots: Virtual School Head Teachers' and Care Experience Teams' Network: Evaluation Report. CELCIS. 2021.

Finally, there have been inevitable delays in some initiatives which were de-prioritised or put on hold. For example, many VSHTs intended to meet learners in school, consult pupils and provide opportunities for them express views on their wellbeing, but this was paused due to school closure during the pandemic. These activities will be taken forward again when public health guidelines allow.

### **Learning from efforts to measure impact?**

With the increasing lifting of restrictions, alongside significant proposals for education reform, it would be opportune to take stock and consider what learning can be taken about measuring the difference made to the lives of care experienced children and young people.

Care experienced learners' trajectories through education vary from individual to individual. This includes conventional and straight forward pathways to those which are more idiosyncratic. Education is not just about attendance or exam results. Education is about engagement, inclusion, improving health as well as supporting wider skills such as confidence, wellbeing and life skills. Any framework for measuring impact should be nuanced and have sufficient flexibility to adapt and track this diverse cohort and meet their changing needs as they move through their education journey.

The dominance of discourse that focuses on short term 'hard' education outcomes and metrics risks undermining fundamental principles of The Promise of the Independent Care Review, which challenges us to consider the needs of care experienced young people in terms of their full life course. A narrative approach is called for that builds up a picture of the current needs and views of a community and of the individual learning in that context, giving equal weight to quantitative metrics and the development and refining of qualitative approaches.

VSHTs have articulated a vision for a national live database that incorporates key information on all care experienced learners as both an aspiration, but a pre-requisite for their work. They also routinely gather broader information, including feedback from schools and families and create cases studies to demonstrate impact.

The [Bright Spots](#) initiative demonstrates an entire system approach that routinely gathers the views of young people on a range of areas that embraces social media and provides regular feedback to schools and local authorities on issues that are important to care experienced children and young people they support.

The sector would benefit from the development of tailored approaches and toolkits that reflect the holistic needs of learners. For example, the VSHT and CET network is working to develop a bespoke self-evaluation tool for Virtual

Schools that reflects the diversity of the work they do to bring about systemic change and in supporting learners, schools, and families.

#### **4. What has been the impact of the pandemic on attainment and achievement in schools?**

As there is little data that can be robustly used to compare attainment and achievement for care experienced children before and after the pandemic, it is difficult to understand the quantitative impact on the areas that are routinely measured at a national level.

We do however have insight into the areas of children and families' lives that have been impacted which will undoubtedly have an influence on children and young people's attainment and achievement.

It is important to note too that the pandemic may have had a positive effect for some children and families due to creative and personalised approaches used by practitioners in their response to providing support and it will be important to ensure that these positive stories and lessons are used and built upon as part of the pandemic recovery.

Areas of particular relevance and concern are:

##### **a) Loss of learning**

During the two lengthy school closures during the 'lockdown' levels of restrictions in first year of the pandemic in 2020, education hubs were made available to support specific children and families. The criteria for accessing education hubs (children of key workers and 'vulnerable' children) meant that some children and families who would have benefited from this vital support missed out due to the variable and inconsistent ways that local areas assessed 'vulnerability.'

Whilst initial rigidity in these criteria did become more flexible, not all care experienced children were assessed or prioritised for this support, despite many being on Compulsory Supervision Orders. Additionally, families who were already struggling with multiple issues and were not able to access support from a hub were faced with the challenging task of attempting to meet the range of children's educational, social, and emotional needs at home without the supports and protective measures offered in a school environment.

This said, there are positive lessons to be taken forward from this experience. Some children felt more able to engage in and participate in their learning while they were at home. We must listen to children to understand why this was and

ensure that the curriculum is flexible enough to apply these principles, as far as possible, in an education setting.

## **b) Understanding need and wellbeing**

During the school closures, loss of learning, and limited contact with trusted adults within schools who provide nurturing and consistent relationships for children and families, impacted not only on children's education, but their wider wellbeing. Although a range of work is underway, there is currently no nationally agreed method of measuring children's wellbeing. The tools that schools use to understand children's wellbeing can vary within and between local authority areas.

Due to this variability, it is difficult to build an accurate picture of how the pandemic has impacted and continues to impact on children, either individually or as a population. Understanding children's needs and how their life and circumstances have been impacted by the pandemic is dependent on the adults in their lives who know them and understand their needs. Children and families will need the adults who know them, alongside other relevant organisations, to develop robust plans to support them.

## **c) Alternative certification**

Isolation, and mostly forced isolation, during the pandemic had a significant impact on mental health. A recent survey by the Children's Parliament has also highlighted a rise in children feeling scared or anxious because of the pandemic and there being a lack of appropriate support around this<sup>8</sup>.

With the 'cancellation' of exams and development of the Alternative Certification Model (ACM), children's anxiety and fear relating to the pandemic has been added, driven by uncertainty about the impact of assessment changes on their futures and how their educational achievements will be recognised.

Some care experienced pupils felt that the Alternative Certification Model was preferable to the traditional exam diet as it allowed their efforts throughout the academic year to be recognised, and they felt end of year exams could put pressure on pupils and did not take account of individual circumstances<sup>9</sup>.

However, alongside others, care experienced learners have also highlighted the confusing impact and intense pressure of multiple changes to assessment; poor communication and not knowing what to expect in school; and concerns that

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<sup>8</sup> Children's Parliament (2020) *Corona Times Journal: Edition 2*, online resource <https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/childrens-journal-2/>

<sup>9</sup>SPICe (2020) [Summary of evidence young people alternative certification model.pdf](#); Edinburgh, SPICe; (pg. 16)

limited account is taken of challenging circumstances if appealing grades (for example a child having to move from one foster carer to another during the assessment period).<sup>10</sup>

As uncertainty over assessment arrangements continues, children not only require clear communication about what to expect, but for their rights to participate in decisions around assessment to be fully and meaningfully realised. An opportunity exists to integrate our learning from the pandemic and the Alternative Certification Model for care experienced learners, to inform the wider approach to reforms of the Scottish Education System currently being consulted on by the Scottish Government.

As corporate parents, Scottish Ministers and other public bodies have a duty to ensure services meet the needs and promote the interests of those with care experience. It is vital that any reform relating to the curriculum and assessment is undertaken with care experienced learners' needs and views at the heart. Seeking, and incorporating, the views of children and families is an asset and lever for change. Done well, participation in decision making can lead to responsive, inclusive, and meaningful service redesign and delivery.

#### **d) Regular support, attuned to needs**

All children benefit from predictable, consistent patterns and routines, particularly those with additional support needs. [The Promise](#) of the Independent Care Review recognises the important role schools have in enabling children to enjoy stable, nurturing relationships<sup>11</sup>. Over the past 2 years public health guidelines have necessitated restrictions to specialist and peripatetic support being available within schools. This reduced children and family's access to crucial additional supports e.g., educational psychologists, mentors, speech and language therapists, social workers, counsellors, and school health staff.

#### **e) Listening to children and young people**

Children's rights to express their views freely in all matters affecting them is a general principle underpinning the UNCRC. Children's views must be sought, heard, and taken into account, yet the pandemic has had a significant impact on children's participation. For all children, but particularly for children have experience of care, their right to participate must extend from the everyday decisions in their lives about the care that they receive, to the policy decisions that affect them. The opportunity must be taken now to learn from the

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<sup>10</sup> Currie, L. (2021) *Education, Children and Young People Committee School Assessment: Alternative Certification Model 2021*. Edinburgh: SPICE.

<sup>11</sup> Independent Care Review (2020) [The Promise, Glasgow: Independent Care Review \(pg.70\)](#)

experiences of children during the pandemic to inform decision making for recovery. To enable meaningful participation takes time and resource, as well as strong relationships between children and the adults around them.

#### **f) Supporting the workforce**

Through engagement with the [CELCIS Education Forum](#) and our [Virtual School Head Teacher \(VSHT\) Network](#) we know that education staff have found working conditions and workload in the current context extremely challenging, and continue to do so. We have heard that teachers and other education staff are exhausted and facing challenges with their own mental health and wellbeing. We know that these issues are not unique to the education workforce but are present for all the children's service workforce staff who have continued to work tirelessly to provide support to children and families throughout the pandemic. The ongoing programme of policy and legislative reform will have a continued impact on the energy and ability of the workforce to both engage in change processes and provide quality care and education for children and families. The pressures and challenges felt by children in relation to the Alternative Certification Model have also been felt by staff. Meaningful, consistent relationships with trusted professionals who are responsive to the needs of children and families are crucial, and to provide this, the needs of staff require significant attention. The health and wellbeing of the workforce is intrinsically linked to the health and wellbeing of our children. We must ensure that the workforce has access to appropriate and meaningful support to enable them to care for and educate our children.

**Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.**

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