

# **Jamie's Story: Enhanced Transition Support**

## **Context**

A move of school for any child can be challenging. For the vast majority of school pupils, the move from primary to secondary is a significant life event and their only school move. Care experienced learners are likely to experience more moves than their peers<sup>i</sup> and any change can be disproportionately unsettling. Whilst there are no definitive figures, Scottish Government statistics indicate a distinct group of care experienced learners, who are known as living in 'out of authority' placements. They live and attend school away from the communities they were born in.<sup>ii</sup> These children and young people may need closer attention and support so that they do not miss out on potential sources of support as a result of being geographically distant from their 'home' local authority.

Aberdeen City is a large urban centre and port in the northeast of Scotland. Aberdeen City Council is responsible for approximately 600 care experienced learners with over 200 of these children and young people living outside of Aberdeen City. It was the first local authority in Scotland to establish the post of a VSHT, in 2015. This case study describes how Larissa Gordon, the VSHT, developed support for a care experienced learner who, at the time, lived in another local authority area in Scotland.

## **What were the circumstances?**

A significant amount of the research literature on the education of care experienced learners is concerned with raising academic attainment.<sup>iiiiv</sup> School-based research on social and emotional aspects of learning and wellbeing is less available, although there has been a recent renewed focus on attachment and trauma awareness in education.<sup>v</sup> We know that learners are more able to settle to learn when they have emotional stability. The ability to achieve, attain and access the curriculum is inextricably linked to social and emotional wellbeing. An understanding of how early experiences affect learners and the importance of relationships, underpins much of the Scottish policy landscape.<sup>vi</sup>

Aberdeenshire Council is a predominantly rural council area in the northeast of Scotland. The central council services of Aberdeenshire Council are in Aberdeen City making it the only council in Scotland whose headquarters are located outside its jurisdiction. It has almost 800 care experienced learners and 17 secondary schools spread over a large, almost two thousand square miles, geographical area. This case study outlines how Emma Allen, the VSHT in Aberdeenshire, supported and grew 'care experienced groups' within schools in the local authority area.

### **What did the VSHT do?**

There was no blueprint for Larissa but she knew that she wanted to replicate for Jamie what she did routinely for learners who lived within the local authority area. Her starting point was to fact-find to begin to better understand Jamie's story. She met Jamie's social worker, read Jamie's Child's Plan, and began to build up a picture of who he was as a learner. She was acutely aware that the transition from primary to secondary can be difficult for any child and that Jamie would need targeted support given the challenges he had experienced.

Larissa convened a planning meeting and began the process of building relationships with the network of people around him. A comprehensive assessment led to a bespoke plan to offer support to Jamie, his carer and the school. Over the coming weeks and months Larissa forged connections with those who taught and cared for him. She followed Jamie's progress by keeping in regular contact and listening closely to their feedback and concerns. Whilst there were inevitable difficulties, she was able to anticipate flashpoints and travel to visit Jamie at school when she felt that being there in person was needed to calm tensions, provide reassurance or simply to refocus on Jamie's plan. Through the Aberdeen City Educational Psychologist, Larissa was able to broker bespoke training for the school and promote an attachment-focused 'key adult'<sup>vii</sup> relationship with an identified member of staff.

**Virtual School Head Teachers inhabit the space between policy ambition and practice.**

## **What difference did this make?**

Whilst he acknowledged some difficulties, Jamie described his school experience as good, and his attendance was consistently excellent. He was supported in the transition to secondary school and went on to achieve a range of qualifications. Larissa was clear from the outset that the key to Jamie being able to achieve at school lay in positive, nurturing relationships formed with school staff. The conditions were created for Jamie to experience 'doses' of therapeutic care in consistent, sensitive daily interactions within school.<sup>viii</sup> The consistent and continuous focus on Jamie's plan and the support this provided created the environment for Jamie to be able to go to school, maintain friendships and learn.

Jamie's foster carer described her experience of Jamie's education as a roller-coaster. She said that at times she felt judged for the difficulties Jamie had at school and that she often wanted to take away his distress by keeping him off school when things were particularly challenging. At key points during this journey, she wanted Jamie to attend a school that offered specialist provision. Having access to the reassurance and expertise of a VSHT lowered her levels of anxiety and shifted her thinking about his education. Jamie's foster carer began to see how, with the right support in place, Jamie could navigate the transition from primary and thrive in secondary school.

Both Jamie's primary school, and more so his secondary school, benefitted from there being bespoke, co-ordinated support, training and advice in place. His secondary school built capacity and developed particular expertise in embedding social and emotional aspects of learning into the fabric of school life. It became routine for school staff to become more curious, recognise and know what children were communicating; they were more flexible, and quicker to respond. A core part of this was due to training that Jamie's school secured to support the development of his pastoral assistant who became his 'key adult'.<sup>ix</sup> She developed expertise in attachment-focused approaches which has benefitted both Jamie and the wider group of learners that she supports.

## **Implications for practice**

VSHTs and CETs have a responsibility to prioritise the education of care experienced children and young people wherever they live. There is a plethora of guidance<sup>x</sup> on 'out of authority' placements and a regulatory

framework, however these can be complex and bureaucratic. There is emerging research and practice evidence on effective ways of working for children living in 'out of authority' arrangements.<sup>xi</sup> A substantive report from England indicates there is increased co-operation between local authorities as a result of having a VSHT in post but this is described as not consistent or standardised.<sup>xii</sup> The report goes on to highlight the features of "positive" 'out of authority' placements to include high-level planning, robust multiagency working, information sharing and co-ordination.

This Aberdeen City case study demonstrates how VSHTs inhabit the space between policy ambition and practice. They are at the forefront of operationalising guidance and ensuring that care experienced learners experience quality education wherever they live. Many learners who live in an area away from their responsible local authority benefit from an 'overlaying' of support to ensure forward planning, the development of effective working relationships and bespoke support. This additional support, an 'enhanced transition', points to an additional layer of support that some care experienced children need that goes beyond the expectations of what might be considered good practice.<sup>xiii</sup> This support is perhaps more important and necessarily overstated for children and young people living at a distance from their local authority.

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<sup>i</sup> Ofsted (2014) From a distance: [Looked after children living away from their home area](#) London. Ofsted.

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Government (2018) [Children's Social Work Statistics 2016-17](#). Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

<sup>iii</sup> O'Higgins, A. A., Sebba, J., & Luke, N. (2015). *What is the relationship of being in care on the educational outcomes of children? An international systematic review*. The Rees Centre.

<sup>iv</sup> Männistö, I. I., & Pirttimaa, R. A. (2018). A review of interventions to support the educational attainments of children and adolescents in foster care. *Adoption & Fostering*, 42(3), 266-281.

<sup>v</sup> Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme <http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/research/the-alex-timpson-attachment-and-trauma-programme-in-schools/>

<sup>vi</sup> Scottish Attachment in Action (2022). [MAPPING ATTACHMENT-INFORMED, TRAUMA-SENSITIVE PRACTICE IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION](#).

<sup>vii</sup> Bombèr, L. M. (2007). *Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in schools*. London: Worth.

<sup>viii</sup> Treisman, K. (2016). *Working with relational and developmental trauma in children and adolescents*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>ix</sup> Bombèr, L. M. (2015). *The Key Adult in School*. London: Worth

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- <sup>x</sup> Gough, A. (2018) [Secure Care in Scotland: Cross-border placements Glasgow. University of Strathclyde.](#)
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- <sup>xi</sup> Care Inspectorate (2022) [Report on distance placements](#) Dundee. Care Inspectorate.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ofsted (2014) From a distance: [Looked after children living away from their home area](#) London. Ofsted
- <sup>xiii</sup> Skilbred, D. T., Iversen, A. C., & Moldestad, B. (2017). Successful academic achievement among foster children: What did the foster parents do?. *Child Care in Practice*, 23(4), 356-371.