



**Centre for excellence**  
for Children's Care and Protection

**Survey results on the formal exclusion**

**of care experienced children and**

**young people in Scotland**

**Virtual School Head Teachers' Network**

**March 2024**



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### **A note about language:**

The Independent Care Review and The Promise highlighted the importance of the need for the use of non-stigmatising language. Throughout this document we refer to 'care experienced learners' to describe school aged children and young people who have experience of care.

## Context

The reduction of formal school exclusion, along with the promotion of attendance and attainment as matters of national concern for care experienced learners can be dated to the 1980s and has been highlighted in Scotland by subsequent reports as area requiring ongoing attention.<sup>1</sup> Exclusion from school has come into sharp focus following the findings of the [Independent Care Review](#) and publication of [The Promise](#). The aspiration of The Promise is that the formal and informal exclusion of care experienced children and young people from education will end.

There is a consistent consensus and parallels in Scotland<sup>2</sup>, the UK<sup>3</sup> and internationally<sup>4</sup> that care experienced children and young people can face additional barriers to learning and do not always achieve at the same level as their peers on a number of measures including attainment, attendance and exclusion from school.<sup>5</sup> Whilst the most recent data shows that exclusions have reduced overall in the last ten years in Scotland<sup>6,7</sup>, care experienced children and young people continue to be at a disproportionately higher risk of being excluded from school.<sup>8,9</sup>

There is an extensive evidence base that children who are excluded from school can suffer loss and rejection which impacts on their self-esteem and can adversely affect their mental health.<sup>10</sup> They are at risk of missing out on subsequent schooling, more likely to achieve lower exam grades<sup>11</sup> and may therefore have difficulty moving onto further study and securing employment<sup>12</sup>. Exclusion from school can seriously undermine care experienced learners' current and future education trajectories.

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<sup>1</sup> Connelly, G., Forrest, J., Furnivall, J., Siebelt, L., Smith, I., & Seagraves, L. (2008). [The educational attainment of looked after children-Local authority pilot projects: Final research report](#). The Scottish Government.

<sup>2</sup> Connelly, G., Siebelt, L. C., & Furnivall, J. (2008). [Supporting Looked After Children and Young People at School: A Scottish Case Study](#).

<sup>3</sup> Sebba, J., Berridge, D., Luke, N., Fletcher, J., Bell, K., Strand, S., Thomas, S., Sinclair, I., & O'Higgins, A. (2015). [The educational progress of looked after children in England: Linking care and educational data](#). University of Oxford Department of Education/University of Bristol.

<sup>4</sup> Trout, A. L., Hagaman, J., Casey, K., Reid, R., & Epstein, M. H. (2008). The academic status of children and youth in out-of-home care: A review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(9), 979-994.

<sup>5</sup> Luke, N., & O'Higgins, A. (2018). Is the care system to blame for the poor educational outcomes of children looked after? Evidence from a systematic review and national database analysis. *Children Australia*, 43(2), 135-151.

<sup>6</sup> Billingham, L., & Gillon, F. (2023). [\(Re\) moving exclusions: School exclusion reduction in Glasgow and London](#). *British Educational Research Journal*.

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government. (2024). [School exclusion statistics](#).

<sup>8</sup> Foundations. (2023). [School non-attendance by children with a social worker in the UK: A rapid review of extent, risk factors and interventions](#).

<sup>9</sup> Melkman, E. P. (2023). [Out-of-school suspension among young persons in care: The need to respond to attachment needs and provide a secure base that promotes learning](#). *British Educational Research Journal*.

<sup>10</sup> HM Government. (2019). [Timpson review of school exclusion](#).

<sup>11</sup> Melkman, E. P. (2022). Predicting out-of-school suspensions among youth in care in England: A national cohort study. *Journal of school psychology*, 93, 63-78.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, N., Dixon, J., Saunders-Ellis, D., Asker, P., & Ward, J. (2023). [Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England](#).

## The Virtual School Head Teachers' Network

A Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) is responsible for the education of care experienced learners in a local authority. VSHTs work at a strategic level to offer an additional layer of support to learners and those who live with, support and teach them. This is a new and evolving role in Scotland<sup>13</sup> and although more research is needed, there are indications that the approach has a positive impact on reducing exclusion, promoting attendance, improving attainment and supporting the wellbeing of care experienced learners.<sup>141516</sup>

The [VSHT Network \("The Network"\)](#) is a group of VSHTs, or equivalents, from nineteen local authorities across Scotland who use the virtual school model to organise the way they offer support. The Network is hosted by CELCIS and meets regularly to share good practice and co-construct ways to improve the education of care experienced learners.

With a commitment and vision to turn the ambitions of The Promise into the reality of practice, the Network designed and carried out a survey for local authorities in Scotland on the formal school exclusion of care experienced learners. The aim of the survey was to inform a greater understanding of current practice, provide insight, and identify key themes.

The survey was sent to education managers in all 32 local authorities in May 2023 and 14 responded. Respondents could choose to remain anonymous. This paper was co-constructed by members of the Network following an analysis of survey results.

The findings within this document refer to the 14 local authorities who responded to the survey.

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<sup>13</sup> McIver, L., & Bettencourt, M. (2024). [Virtual schools for care-experienced learners in Scotland: Reflections on an emerging concept in a new context](#). *British Educational Research Journal*.

<sup>14</sup> Foundations. (2023). [SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE BY CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER IN THE UK: A rapid review of extent, risk factors and interventions](#).

<sup>15</sup> Education Scotland. (2024). [Education Scotland Scottish Attainment Challenge National Summary Report August – November 2023](#).

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, N., Sebba, J., Wigley, M., Pryor, R., & Blyth, F. (2023) [Improving the effectiveness of virtual schools](#).

## Key Findings

### 1. Local authority policies

#### Key finding:

All of the 14 local authorities had a policy that explicitly referred to care experienced learners which aimed to reduce or prevent exclusion in recognition of the additional vulnerabilities that care experienced learners can experience.

- All respondents were members of the VSHT Network.
- All had local authority exclusion policies which made explicit reference to care experienced learners.
- All policies encouraged a discussion with a senior local authority leader prior to a decision to exclude a care experienced learner.
- One local authority was in the process of writing a policy to end formal exclusion for care experienced learners.



## 2. Consulting with children and young people

### Key finding:

There was no consistent proactive approach to considering the views of care experienced learners, their families and carers on their experiences of formal exclusion.

- Three local authorities consulted care experienced learners when producing or updating their exclusion policies.
- Five local authorities were not aware of a formal way of collating the views of children and young people on formal exclusions.
- More than half of local authorities consulted learners throughout the exclusion process (e.g., return to school interviews and re-admission paperwork).
- Four local authorities were considering how to formally consult with care experienced learners and their families about their experience of the exclusion process.



### 3. Recording and data

#### Key finding:

There was variability in when and how schools informed central local authority education services of the formal exclusion of a care experienced learner.

- All of the local authorities had systems and procedures for collecting, sharing and analysing data at a central local authority level on the formal exclusion of care experienced learners to inform planning and support.
- Three local authorities received and recorded information from schools on a weekly basis.
- Four local authorities received and recorded information from schools on monthly basis.
- Three local authorities reviewed exclusion information on a termly basis.
- In one local authority schools were asked to inform the local authority at the point when an exclusion had occurred.
- There were occasions when local authorities found out about a formal exclusion of a care experienced learner after the decision had been made by a school.



## 4. Challenging and Supporting

### Key Finding:

There was a consensus from respondents on the need for a 'gatekeeping' discussion, to consider a range of options, between a school and local authority central services prior to the exclusion of a care experienced learner.

- All of the local authorities had policies that stated a discussion should take place between schools and a local authority prior to any formal exclusion of a care experienced learner. Respondents reported that this did not consistently happen.
- Three local authorities used a 'checklist' (or similar) to prompt challenge, support, advice and to offer alternatives for schools to consider before going ahead with a formal exclusion.
- Half of the local authorities who responded routinely challenged schools on a decision to exclude a care experienced learner.
- One local authority challenged some schools on decisions to exclude a care experienced learner.
- The majority of local authorities ensured that alternatives to exclusion were considered in policy and discussion.



## 5. Return to school interview

### Key finding:

There were differences in approach, quality, purpose and focus of return to school interviews for care experienced learners. Some meetings were described as solution focused while others as punitive.

- All of the local authorities' policies required having a return to school interview or meeting between the school and parents and carers following a formal exclusion.
- While all local authorities required having a return to school interview or meeting between the school, parents and carers, not all local authorities managed to do this routinely.
- Five local authorities indicated that interviews followed a solution-focused or restorative framework.
- One local authority invited the young person's social worker to the return to school interview.
- Three local authorities recorded discussions where formal exclusion was avoided in order to capture good practice and inform future learning.



## Summary Reflection

This publication was driven by the agenda of the VSHT Network as we work towards our vision of delivering on the education aspirations of The Promise. We hope that this survey offers insight and adds to the evidence base on practice in Scotland. It has been helpful to gain insights on local practices related to formal exclusion, however we recognise that these perspectives were limited to one set of respondents. It is important that the views and perspectives of care experienced learners are also gathered and used to inform future work in this area. High rates of exclusion of a particular group of learners are a symptom of a system that is failing to include children and young people. These survey findings point towards inconsistencies in how learners experience both exclusion and support. More work needs to be done to ensure the reality of practice is aligned to policy aspirations and this should be underpinned by listening more closely and responding to what children and families tell us they need to be fully included in school.





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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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