CELCIS' Response to the Future Sustainability of Secure Care

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CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde, is a leading improvement, innovation and research 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 Scottish Government's consultation on the Future of Secure Care and the opportunity to contribute to shaping a system that safeguards children's rights, recovery and futures. Our comments focus on areas where we hold strong national expertise, including relational and trauma informed practice, child development, residential child care and the wider system conditions that enable children to feel safe, supported and able to thrive.

Our response is underpinned by research evidence, practice experience, and extensive insight and intelligence from lived experience and professional practice gathered through our long-standing, cross-organisational and interest-specific networks. These networks include people across the workforce, including leaders working across the spectrum of children's services and other public services, working in support of children, young people and their families and adults with care experience, amongst others.

Our Children's Services Reform Research highlighted that children's recovery and development is best supported when systems are simple to navigate, well-coordinated, stable and built on strong, trusting relationships (Porter et al, 2023). It emphasised that predictable, clear and relational systems help children feel secure and allow adults to work more effectively for children; these insights are relevant to the future of secure care and point to the need for an approach that is not only safe and consistent, but also developmentally and relationally informed.

Across all our work, we know how essential the workforce is, and the conditions they need to support children effectively. This includes protected time for reflection, emotionally safe and supportive leadership, manageable demands that allow relationships with children to be built and

sustained, stability within teams to reduce turnover of staff, and access to high quality training grounded in trauma, child development and relational practice. These conditions must sit alongside clear national expectations and adequate funding.

Consistent, high quality learning spaces and supervision, both ad hoc and formal, are vital in providing the opportunity for staff to stay attuned, developmentally sensitive and emotionally present (Steckley et al, 2025). This reflective support is not an optional addition; it is core practice that the workforce relies upon. Supporting the secure care workforce to develop reflective, relational and trauma informed practice is therefore essential. Structured, emotionally safe spaces that enable workers to process complex experiences and understand their responses directly enhances their ability to meet children's needs.

Evidence from CELCIS's wider policy and systems work shows that effective implementation of new policy requires clear standards, well trained staff, supportive leadership, and processes that are tested, refined and reviewed in real world conditions to ensure they work in practice and not only designing policy. This means ensuring practitioners have the skills and guidance to respond to children's emotional needs, aligning procedures with trauma informed approaches, and creating feedback loops that allow children's experiences to directly inform ongoing improvement.

Managing change and complexity is essential when reviewing the future of secure care. The Concluding Report within the Children's Services Reform Research (Ottaway, 2023) showed that practitioners operate within an already crowded, fastmoving policy environment where overlapping legislation, resource pressures, and workforce strain create additional complexity and can undermine well intended- reforms. It emphasises that effective change depends on supportive organisational conditions including strong relationships, skilled and stable teams, and systems that enable partnership working, because complexity cannot be managed through structural change alone. A review of secure care must therefore prioritise strong implementation planning and system alignment, ensuring any changes can be delivered consistently in practice despite the complexity of the wider environment.

Keeping connected with family, brothers and sisters, and the communities they have been growing up in, matters for all children and young people. National practice in Scotland guidance, drafted in partnership with CELCIS, offers strong evidence on what the loss of these connections feels like for children and young people with experience of care who have brothers and sisters they do not live with. [Staying Together and Connected: Getting it Right for Sisters and Brothers](#) (Scottish Government, 2021) explains what children have shared about the impact and trauma of losing contact with their siblings and how these relationships are vital to their wellbeing, giving them a sense of identity, belonging, and emotional continuity. The guidance underlines a legal and ethical duty to ensure brothers and sisters can live together or as near to each other as is possible, and to actively support a child's ongoing relationships with their family, wherever this is safe and appropriate for them.

In the context of secure care, where the level of restriction already represents a significant rupture in a young person's life, these principles become even more critical. Being placed in secure accommodation can heighten feelings of isolation, anxiety, and disconnection. Keeping young people close to their communities and enabling sustained, meaningful contact with family and sibling networks can mitigate harm by preserving their identity, strengthening emotional resilience, and supporting their future transitions. When children maintain loving and supportive relationships with people who are important to them, they experience greater emotional stability within care settings.

CELCIS's work hosting the Virtual School Headteachers network also highlights the critical role education plays in the lives of care experienced young people. Education is a right and a critical protective factor and secure care must strengthen, not disrupt it. It is essential that secure care actively prioritises educational continuity, stability and the building of realistic, stretching aspirations for learning. Education must be understood as central to recovery, wellbeing and future life opportunities for children in secure care, rather than as an optional add-on to care and protection.

When learners feel settled, confident and motivated in education, this strengthens their resilience and contributes to improved attendance, engagement and progression. As set out in [Learners who move](#), care

experienced learners are more likely than all other children to experience moves, and those who move are at risk of having their right to education eroded. These risks are heightened for children in secure care, where any further disruption to relationships, curriculum pathways and qualifications is avoidable rather than inevitable. Secure care providers, local authorities and Virtual School Head Teachers must act collectively and with urgency so that children's rights to education are prioritised during this significant life event. In practice the aim should be for their learning to be experienced as coherent, ambitious and oriented towards reintegration and the realisation of their own goals.

CELCIS supports a secure care system that is relational, trauma informed and developmentally aware, where children are surrounded by trusting relationships and supported by a well resourced, reflective and confident workforce. Building a consistent, compassionate, and reliable system that children and young people can experience as protective rather than punitive. These foundations give children and young people the best chance to recover, grow and experience safety.

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