



**WHO
CARES?**
SCOTLAND

**CHILDREN &
YOUNG PEOPLE'S**
Commissioner
Scotland

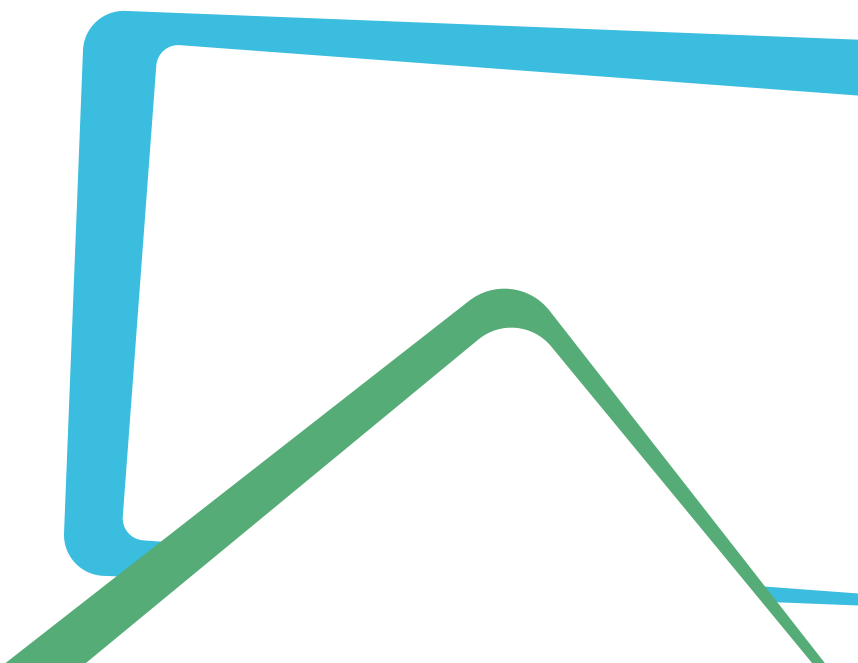
“Exclusion labelled as support”

Care Experienced children in
Scotland's education system

This report informs the Commissioner's strategic priority work on education and is part of the report series:
"This is our lives, it matters a lot" – putting children's rights at the heart of education

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About Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland is Scotland's only national independent membership organisation for Care Experienced people. Our mission is to secure a lifetime of equality, respect, and love for Care Experienced people in Scotland.

At the heart of our work are the rights of Care Experienced people, and the power of their voices to bring about positive change. We provide individual relationship-based independent advocacy in nearly every local authority in Scotland to help Care Experienced people have their views heard and their rights upheld in decisions affecting their lives and their care arrangements. We also provide a range of participation and connection opportunities for Care Experienced people across Scotland.

We work with corporate parents, communities, policy makers, leaders, and elected representatives locally and nationally to shape legislation, policy and practice to keep **The Promise**.

Louise Hunter's Foreword



In 2022/23, the exclusion rate for looked after pupils was almost six times the rate for all pupils.

However, recent duty-bearer rhetoric has been that The Promise is still on track to be kept by 2030. The Promise is the widely-supported outcome of the Independent Care Review in Scotland which was to transform care to make Scotland the best place to grow up loved, safe, and respected so that children can realise their full potential. It called for the rights of children and young people to be upheld, and formal and informal exclusion from education to end.

How can we believe that The Promise is on track when it is being broken so appallingly for many Care Experienced children and young people? How can we talk about education reform without acknowledging this flagrant breach of rights before us?

This report is a reality check for duty-bearers with responsibility for the right to education for all children and young people across Scotland. It is aimed at all duty-bearers, including those who set budgets. We need to ensure that there is enough resource and support in place to adequately enable schools to keep The Promise.

Luckily, there are tried and tested solutions to many of the issues raised in this report. Independent advocacy can support Care Experienced children and young people to access their rights to education. Some local authorities are already leading the

way by embedding a whole-school approach to supporting Care Experienced children and young people. Alternatives to formal and informal exclusion such as virtual headteachers and online schools are making a difference across Scotland.

Let me be clear. It is not enough for Care Experienced children and young people to receive a bare minimum of school, as little as one hour per week. Their full right to education must be realised.

We have the same aspirations for Care Experienced children and young people as for all children and young people in Scotland: to enjoy their [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) Article 29 right to an education which develops their personalities, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Yes, that will require more scaffolding of support – structures and services that provide help and accountability. This will ensure that Care Experienced children, young people, and their families, and the workforce, have the resources they need to thrive.

Let's heed this reality check and take a true children's rights-based approach to education by prioritising those whose rights are most at risk.

Louise Hunter

Chief Executive Officer of Who Cares? Scotland

Executive Summary

This report was created by Who Cares? Scotland to illustrate and amplify the current educational experiences of Care Experienced children and young people and to gather their views on the priorities for change within education. It was commissioned by the Children and Young People Commissioner Scotland as part of their [Strategic Plan 2024-28](#) activity on education and their commitment to include evidence from groups of children less likely to have their views heard.

Who Cares? Scotland use a broad and inclusive definition of care experience, which includes anyone who is, or has been, in care for any period of time, regardless of their age of when their supervision order was removed. Their experience of care could have been in a range of settings, including foster care, adoption, secure care, kinship care, residential care, or being formally looked after at home. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors are also Care Experienced.

In March 2025, the Commissioner published: [“This is our lives, it matters a lot”: Putting children’s rights into the heart of education](#). The report summarised views from children and young people about their experience of education which was grouped into five main themes.

This report into the educational experiences of Care Experienced children and young people highlights key areas of success, and those requiring improvement across those same five themes:

- ▶ Culture – how does school make us feel?
- ▶ Curriculum – what we get to experience and learn?
- ▶ Personalisation and support – how am I supported to learn?
- ▶ Assessment and qualifications – how do I understand and show all my skills and achievements?
- ▶ Purpose – what is school for?

Topics covered in this report include:

- ▶ Not enjoying education and wanting to move or leave schools, stigma and prejudice, mental health and emotional support, and a safe space.
- ▶ Formal and informal exclusions, changing schools, knock-on impact of care transitions and educational aspirations.
- ▶ Academic support, additional support for learning, issues with educational transitions, virtual headteachers and online schools, financial support, transport and other rights issues impacting education.
- ▶ Catching up on learning, leaving school early, struggling with transitions.
- ▶ Relationships and stability, and a loss of support.

Across these themes Who Cares? Scotland make three key recommendations, which are interdependent to be most effective:

1. The Promise commitment to end formal and informal exclusions must be enforced immediately, better understood and properly resourced across local authorities.

2. The Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and all education authorities, schools and other educational settings must commit to adopting a whole-school approach to supporting Care Experienced children and young people.

3. The Scottish Government must legislate for a statutory right to independent, relationship-based, lifelong advocacy for all Care Experienced people who need it.

Methodology

Existing evidence

This report analysed evidence on education from over 200 members shared through our 2023 Summer of Participation programme, our internal Advocacy Community of Practice forum, and our internal database of advocacy issues. Quotes evidenced in this report have been anonymised.

Education issues are the third most common reason children and young people request support from an advocacy worker. We also know that education and lifelong learning is the fourth favoured influencing topic for our members, from a recent membership survey with 103 valid responses from October 2024 until January 2025.

From our database, we analysed 1,208 issues raised with us from 718 people relating to education between 01/04/2022 and 31/03/2024. These issues were raised across all 32 local authorities in Scotland, as well as people in cross-border placements. The most frequent age group we supported with educational issues pertains to the transitional period between primary school and high school, aged 11 to 15 years old.

The most common reasons for requesting advocacy were:

1. Support in school.
2. Request(s) to remain in their current education placement.
3. Move(s) to a different school.

Bespoke input to this report

The Commissioner met with a focus group of advocacy workers to gain key insights regarding young people's experiences of education. These are included in the findings of this report. We also created participation opportunities for Care Experienced children and young people to sense check the report's draft findings and recommendations, and to share any further views on the education system.

Children and young people were given opportunities to feed into this work, either by participating in small local participation groups across the country, or by sharing their views on a one-to-one basis with their advocacy worker. This approach ensured that they were able to feed in their views in the safest and most ethical way, given that some will be sharing current unresolved issues. This enabled us to listen to the views and experiences of those less likely to participate in bigger group formats and learn from the experiences of 'lesser heard' groups.

We developed an interactive session plan and designed a participation resource based on the draft report, which advocacy workers could use and adapt to suit the individual needs of the young people who wanted to engage in the project.

One group of six young people aged 12-17 took part in a participation session which gathered their views on the five themes of the report and the proposed recommendations.¹ Two young people both aged 14 engaged in individual sessions with their advocacy workers to share their views about the themes and recommendations.²

¹ Remote rural/island area.

² Mixed urban/rural areas outwith Central Belt.

Care Experienced children's human rights and education

Care Experienced children under the age of 18 enjoy all the same rights under the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) as other children, including the right to education (Articles 28 and 29). In addition, they have extra protections including:

- ▶ Separation from parents (Article 9)
- ▶ Parental responsibilities and state assistance (Article 18)
- ▶ Children unable to live with their family (Article 20)
- ▶ Review of treatment in care (Article 25)
- ▶ Adoption (Article 21)
- ▶ Children in conflict with the law (Article 40)

These rights are protected in Scots law by the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#).

Although the UNCRC does not apply to young people aged 18 or over, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland's remit extends to Care Experienced young people under the age of 21 and Who Cares? Scotland supports Care Experienced people of all ages.

Those aged 18 or over have a right to education enshrined in several international human rights treaties, including the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 2 of the first Protocol), and the International

Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (Article 10) – although these rights are not as wide-ranging as in the UNCRC.

There are also specific parts of these rights which link to commitments made to Care Experienced children and young people in The Promise.

For example:

"The rights of children must be upheld, and formal and informal exclusion from education must end."

"The (education) sector must strive for the normalisation of care experience and stop practices that create and contribute to stigma."

"Every effort must be made to nurture and sustain positive and important relationships for care experienced children."

"Scotland must continue to consider how to create greater equity and opportunity for care experienced young adults, including how to increase opportunity for care experienced people to access employment, training, stable housing and support."

Findings

Culture – How does school make Care Experienced children and young people feel?

Not enjoying education and wanting to move or leave school

UNCRC Article 29 places an obligation on the state to provide an education for, as the UN Committee on the Rights of the child explain: “the development of the individual child’s personality, talents and abilities, in recognition of the fact that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs”.³

Yet, it is still very common for Care Experienced children and young people’s right to an education not to be fully realised.

Many request advocacy for education issues such as:

- ▶ Changes to their timetable
- ▶ To get more or less time in school
- ▶ To get additional support
- ▶ To move or leave school

Often this is because of the way they are feeling in school. It includes factors such as issues at home, relationships with peers, ‘placement’ moves, stigma and/or bullying, and mental health difficulties.

“[Name] is only in school two afternoons a week, they are incredibly bored and want to go full time. They have only recently moved schools and are saying how can they make friends and settle if they are barely there. They stated that they have a right to education and want it.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

“[Name] explained that their placement at [school name] was only supposed to be for one week originally, but they have now been there for months, and the commute is just too far and not sustainable. They explained that they have people they spend time with at school but “wouldn’t call them friends” and feels that the teachers “don’t want me back...”. [Name] feels they are at real risk of “dropping out” if they are “forced” to keep attending school and want to request a move to a school closer to their current placement. They feel this would allow for a smooth transition, if they are to move on to a foster placement.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Young people shared that peer relationships often felt difficult to navigate. Moving between social groups or finding a social group at all could be difficult. They described many school environments as having a culture of bullying and that not wanting to “stick out” too much was a key concern.

³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001. *General Comment No. 1, Article 29(1) The aims of education.*
<https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2001/en/39221>

Stigma and prejudice

For hundreds of years, the media and news have played a significant role in creating stereotypes of Care Experienced people, which have a direct result on the stigma and discrimination the community faces in their daily life. This is no different for Care Experienced children and young people in schools, who often face prejudice from classmates and teachers. They describe feeling isolated and different, and still experience discrimination, contrary to the UNCRC General Principle of freedom from discrimination (Article 2).

"[Name] feels that everyone in their school knows their circumstances and their past and would like to move schools. Support Worker agreed to look at this."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

During our Summer of Participation 2023, we asked Care Experienced people about their experiences of stigma and school. They gave specific examples of stigma they had experienced in educational environments, such as feeling othered for their clothing, transport, having to leave class and a general level of suspicion and rejection.

"Yes absolutely, I don't get the chance to be "normal" anywhere. When I went to a normal mainstream school, it was obvious I was in care. I had a different guidance teacher, always had meetings, social work visits, it was so clear I was a care kid."

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

"At school when my social worker would visit, there was a lot of stigmas from peers and teachers i.e., "where are you going? Why?"

Participant over 16, Summer of Participation 2023

"I was singled out and people would automatically not consider me as a friend. Although it was never said out loud [that I was Care Experienced], people could tell that I was a bit different. For example, [I was] singled out by classroom assistants always giving extra help when I didn't always need it or being held back in class, so people would think I wasn't behaving but actually there was just stuff going on in my life."

Participant over 16, Summer of Participation 2023

There was a noticeable difference between the over 16 and under 16 age groups, with young participants being much more positive and reporting that they were only treated differently in a positive way which gave them extra supports and entitlements.

"I have never had any stigma off of other pupils at school. About being in care, people usually think 'that person's had a rough time'."

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

"They have but not in a negative way. My teachers treat me kinder because of my experiences, they understand my situation and I get off with some things others wouldn't, like attendance."

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

Who Cares? Scotland advocacy workers report a huge variation in knowledge and attitudes amongst teachers towards Care Experienced children and young people.

Many are sympathetic and supportive. But a lack of understanding of care and the reasons children and young people go into care is a key driver in prejudicial attitudes towards Care Experienced people. One young person told us that her school has never talked about care or Care Experienced people. While there are various rights and Promise-related training opportunities for education staff, from our experience **a sustainable whole-school approach that offers curriculum and resource support is essential to supporting Care Experienced children and young people.**

Emotional support and a safe space

In our Summer of Participation 2023, participants aged under 16 generally reported that their school did not treat them differently because of being Care Experienced, rather that their school offered support to all on a needs-led basis. This was largely seen as a positive by participants. It meant they were offered appropriate and individualised support, rather than being singled out as different for being Care Experienced.

“There was no difference at school which was good because it does not make you feel alienated although sometimes it would be good if you have problems because you are in care or with your mental health.”

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

Of the support that was offered, additional resources such as laptops and bursaries were seen as most helpful. Mentoring and quiet spaces were also mentioned but were not always available nor as beneficial for their recipients.

“We have the nurture base, but you need to book it so if you are having stuff going on at home and told a teacher you can’t just go to the base, you would need to wait and go to your classes until they can book you in. Some people might not be okay to go straight to class and the teachers don’t get that.”

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

“I think they have mentors in the school as my sister gets extra help from one but I don’t, and I am not sure why.”

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

Young people welcomed support being individualised but wished that there were support standards that were shared with them so they were clearer on what they could expect and what they could ask for. They also highlighted that their schools had very little information to give them on their entitlements and rights as Care Experienced people, such as the Care Experienced Bursary, and that if this is given, it’s usually through social work.

Some young people mentioned that their teachers were particularly compassionate and inclusive towards Care Experienced children and young people. Others felt their teachers did not understand their experiences and were unhelpful or harsh as a result, which illustrates the importance of teachers having a good understanding of care experience:

"I think what is helpful is they always ask me if I feel okay in class, for example, checking with me if I want to be in the class while discussing certain subjects or whether I would like to leave the class. I find this helpful."

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

Mental health

Mental health can have a huge impact on education. Our workers provide advocacy in relation to mental health challenges, which are often interlinked with educational issues.

Advocacy workers describe the impact that waiting lists for mental health services and assessments are having on children. Some felt that this has worsened in the past year. **They highlighted a lack of trauma-informed approaches in schools and raised concerns about outdated views and disjointed approaches.**

"[Name] is struggling with attending school due to their mental health. [Name] would like to be put on a part timetable. [Name] feels people are being harder on them and their school attendance now that they are back living at home compared to when they were in foster care."

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"[Name] attends [school], they are in primary 2, they advised they enjoy school, like their teacher [and] has lots of friends. [Name] is doing well in school and recently moved up groups in numeracy and literacy. At the time SW were looking at unification with their brother, school had noticed anxiety they kept asking how long until mum comes to get me, didn't want to go to school claiming their tummy was sore to stay with [mum] however recent reports indicate they are more happier."

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"[Name] wants to leave their [school] and attend [other school] due to recent trauma and the association of their brother at their school – they 'want a fresh start'. [Name] starts at [other school] this week – family very happy, [Name] delighted."

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Curriculum – What do Care Experienced children and young people get to learn and experience?

According to UNCRC Articles 28 and 29, Care Experienced children and young people should expect to receive the same opportunities to learn and follow the Scottish curriculum.

Furthermore, as set out in the Commissioner's "This is our lives, it matters a lot": Putting children's rights at the heart of education report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, having previously noted high levels of exclusion⁴, called on UK governments to:

- ▶ monitor the use of exclusions
- ▶ ensure they are prohibited in primary schools
- ▶ ensure they are a measure of last resort
- ▶ prohibit the use of informal exclusion and off-rolling
- ▶ develop measures to address the overuse of exclusions, in particular their disproportionate use for children belonging to ethnic minority groups and children with disabilities
- ▶ ensure children have the right to appeal their exclusion and access to legal advice and representation.⁵

4 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021. *List of issues prior to submission of the combined sixth and seventh reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.* https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGBR%2FQPR%2F6-7&Lang=en

5 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023. *Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland* <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4013807?ln=en&v=pdf> para 47(d) and (e)

However, due to the high use of part-time timetables, formal and informal exclusions and specialist education placements, many Care Experienced people's absolute minimum requirements of the rights to education (such as to encourage attendance and reduce drop-out rates) are being breached and they are unhappy with their educational experience. Discussion about the attainment gap and Care Experienced young people's outcomes are futile without interrogation of this growing gap in access to education compared to their peers.

According to p.23 of *The Promise Oversight Board's third report (2025)*:

"School exclusions, reduced timetables and non-attendance can be interlinked. Data sets must be connected to give a clearer picture of what young people need in order to thrive. The Promise Story of Progress, once complete, must be able to tell us how children, young people and their families experience support and therefore what is missing to assist in maintaining attendance and achievement. This change is overdue."
(emphasis in original)

Formal and informal exclusions

The Promise (2020, p72) called for the use of formal and informal exclusions to end by 2030 for Care Experienced pupils. However, Scotland's *Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23 Statistics* showed that the rate of exclusions had increased for the first time in twelve years and was nearly six times higher than the general population.

Since 2023, our advocacy workers report a sharp increase in informal exclusions and a change in language around exclusions to circumvent new exclusions policies stemming from *The Promise*.

This includes exclusions often recorded as authorised absences, or drastic part-time timetables offering as little as 30 minutes of education a week, which effectively exclude the young person from education but are not recorded as such. One advocacy worker described this as improving the school's statistics at the detriment of the needs of the child. Another called it as "exclusion labelled as support".

"[Name] is having problems with school... They feel stigmatised and excluded. Their timetable has been reduced to such an extent, that they have been asked to attend for 30mins, three days per week. [Name] reports that when they are in school, they are excluded from the support hub, and are sent to a room on their own with a classroom assistant. Whilst there, they are left to their own devices to play on their phone. As a result of this, [Name] does not see the point in going to school, and their mum and dad are reluctant to encourage attendance if this is all that they are being offered. [Name] would like to be able to attend at least some mainstream classes, and would like support to be able to achieve this."

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Young people told us that many of them had experienced exclusions or alternatives to exclusions, and that these measures often made them "feel like failures." They felt that there was favouritism amongst teachers, and that once they were "branded as a problem child" they would get blamed for things that were not their fault. Rules such as no mobile phones or exclusions were implemented very inconsistently across peer groups. They spoke about how language from teachers, such as "you're a bad pupil" negatively influenced their mental health. They also described how hard it could be to return to school after a longer period of exclusion, and that feelings of anxiety around this could often prevent them from returning at all.

One young person reported that their school set up just one hour per week for them to attend as an alternative to school. Offers of alternative education must be improved to ensure that UNCRC Articles 28 and 29 are still upheld for young people out of mainstream education.

In secure and residential school settings, one advocacy worker shared that as these facilities promote their education services as being built around the child and their needs; what would, in mainstream education be called "exclusions", is referred to in these settings as "co-operative assessment". This sets out when it is safe for a young person to move about the house/school and has the same effect of removing the child from their learning environment and opportunity to study the curriculum. Some children removed from mainstream education and placed in specialist education settings also disagree that this measure is necessary or helpful.

“[Name] would like to move to a mainstream ‘normal’ school. They said they don’t enjoy their current school due to the types of peers that attend the school, they are not the type of people they wish to be around. [Name] would like to attend a mainstream school in their local area so they could remain living at their current placement and said they would want to attend the school every day.”

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Advocacy workers have also shared frustrations that minimal education provision such as reduced timetables of two hours per week or encouraging young people away from achieving qualifications into short-term vocational courses are widely accepted by panels and professionals, alongside a frequent absence of educational representatives at Children’s Hearings. There was agreement that other issues such as family relationships are more prioritised by Hearings and social workers, particularly as a young person gets older, at a detriment to their education. In some children’s homes, children choosing not to attend school is accepted and unchallenged by staff.

“[Name] wants to be back in school but school are saying due to the behaviours and incidents they can’t be back yet but want them to work with the outreach teaching and the aim is for them to be back at school when they feel everyone will be safe.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Changing schools

Changing schools is a common experience for many Care Experienced children and young people. It can significantly disrupt their rights to education, impacting on their learning experience and opportunity to follow a comprehensive curriculum.

Some children and young people request to change school, often to be with friends or family. Others request to change school because they are either struggling in mainstream education and would like to go to a more specialist placement; or because they want to return to a mainstream school. The reasons for struggling in mainstream education include stigma from teachers, bullying from other pupils, and a lack of support. This is discussed in more detail under the personalisation of support theme.

“[Name] has not been in school since December 2022 due to now living in a new place which is outwith the catchment area. [Name] wants to attend a new school closer to where they are living with their [family member].”

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Many other young people request advocacy support to prevent being moved schools. While we know that Care Experienced people often have several care placement moves across their lives, Scottish Government data records the number of care placement moves in one year only. For academic year 2022-23, 13% of children in care had two placement moves, and 4% had three or more.⁶

⁶ Scottish Government, ‘Looked After Children Statistics 2022-23 Additional Tables’ (30 April 2024): <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2022-23-looked-after-children>

As per UNCRC Article 12, it is key that the child or young person meaningfully participates in decision-making when a care placement move is necessary. There needs to be more flexibility from schools to accommodate young people outwith their catchment area and from carers to support transport arrangements that work for the young person. Transport is further discussed later in this report.

"[Name] would like to remain in [current school] as all of [their] friends attend this school. And although [they have] to get up early to attend [they'd] prefer to get up early than to move schools."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

"[Name] has recently moved to [current school] and wishes to remain there. [Name] told me [they have] attended six different schools and [they are] in [primary school]. [They do] not want to move schools again."

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Knock-on impacts of care transitions

Care Experienced young people have told us about the impact leaving care or transitioning to adult services had on other areas of their life, including education. This included a lack of support and guidance to help them adapt to living independently, making it difficult for them to give full attention to their schoolwork, and preparation work for leaving care making them feel different to their peers.

"The lack of support after transitioning to adult services is also the reason I could not continue school, without support it took years to achieve the stability on my own to resume my education. As the transition to adult services takes place before age 18, I think support is even more vital to ensure opportunity for education is not jeopardised, however, this isn't happening often enough."

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"I hated doing the pathways as I felt singled out because I was care experience[d]. My friends didn't need to do it – so I'm not going to."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Educational aspirations

As the Commissioner's report "This is our lives, it matters a lot" highlights, UNCRC Article 29 places education firmly outwith the traditional concept of 'the three Rs'. Instead, the focus is on developing the child and preparing them "for a responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin"⁷ by empowering "the child by developing his or her skills, learning and other capacities, human dignity, self-esteem and self-confidence".⁸

However, young people felt that often the school and professionals around them only cared about them passing Maths and English, but neglected the importance of other subjects in meetings. They believed that instead of caring for them, the school was instead, as one child described it: "just dragging them along until they're 16 and the school can take them off their books." This experience clearly conflicts with their rights under Article 29 to enjoy an education that develops their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential and fosters a respect for others and the natural environment.

Most enjoyed the opportunity to study college linked courses as part of their electives. They reflected that what they learnt in a class was often dependent on the teacher's teaching style and whether or not the class was engaging and enjoyable.

⁷ Article 29(1)(d).

⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001. *General Comment No. 1, Article 29(1) The aims of education*. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2001/en/39221>

Personalisation and support – How are Care Experienced children and young people supported to learn in ways that work for them?

This section discusses what Care Experienced people regard as helpful support in schools (beyond mental health and emotional support covered earlier in Culture). It covers academic support, additional support for learning, issues with educational transitions, alternative approaches such as virtual headteachers and online schools, and practical support (finances and transport).

As set out under other themes, understanding of Care Experience is patchy in schools, and there are often insufficient responses from professionals, schools and panels when a child or young person disengages with education, particularly if they are near the age of 16. Care Experienced students are often offered part-time timetables which informally excludes them from learning. Support to help them plan their future training, education or employment can be patchy and unambitious. Moving schools can also fracture relationships and create logistical difficulties for young people, and transitions in particular can induce anxiety and often create a cliff edge of support.

This all has an effect on the attainment gap. For pupils looked after at any point between August 2022 and July 2023, almost a quarter left school without one or more qualification at SCQF level 4 or better. A lower proportion of looked after children achieved Curriculum for Excellence levels relevant to their stage compared with all pupils.⁹

⁹ Scottish Government, 2024. *Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-outcomes-for-looked-after-children-2022-23/pages/key-points/>

Academic support

Some young people regularly request, via their advocacy worker, additional academic support, including one-to-one support, tutoring on particular subjects, or help with assignments or exams.

“[Name] stated they do not get supported at school and has not been in a year or so. They do not want to go to school and would like a tutor if possible. They would like [advocacy worker] to contact school to see if this is possible and what support can they put in place...”

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“[Name] would like extra supports in literacy and numeracy, whilst being afforded opportunities for practical learning such as job experience. [Name] feels hands on learning is a more favourable way for them to learn. [Name] would like such focus to come at the expense of subjects they feel as superfluous-such as foreign languages. They feel a more streamlined timetable which allowed for a shorter day might help their focus and lessen their anxieties.”

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These approaches may not be offered to most students but given the disruption to their education many children in care experience, and that children are requesting them, these methods should be explored by local authorities as a way to rectify the impact of moving around in care and to close the widening attainment gap.

Additional support for learning

All Care Experienced children and young people have the right to additional support in school, to ensure that their right to education is realised. UNCRC Article 23 entitles children and young people with disabilities to assistance that ensures they have effective access to receive an education which fully develops their potential. Disability has a broad meaning in the UNCRC, including “long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.¹⁰ Many Care Experienced children and young people also have a disability.

Advocacy workers agreed that Coordinated Support Plans (CSPs) were rare in schools, despite the [Education \(Additional Support for Learning\) \(Scotland\) Act 2004](#) which states that all looked after children and young people¹¹ have additional support needs (unless the local authority is able to demonstrate that additional support is not required for an individual to benefit from school education); placing a duty on education authorities to have arrangements in place. Education authorities must consider whether a looked after child meets the criteria for a CSP and if they do, must prepare one. Where children are receiving support from multiple services, or are subject to compulsory measures through a children’s hearing, and have experienced disruption to education or have additional support needs, they are likely to meet these criteria.

¹⁰ UNCRC Article 1, adopted as the definition of disability by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No. 9 in 2006.

¹¹ ‘Looked after’ has a legal meaning which differs from care experience: <https://www.celcis.org/our-work/about-looked-after-children>

Care Experienced children in further and higher education have the same right to education and should receive support to realise this right. Disabled children and young people have additional rights in relation to education in Article 24.

"[Name] has not been attending college due to declining mental health. After a recent incident in their placement and missing lessons again, they feel their place may be at risk. [Name] would like support to make contact with their LDW [learning development worker]... to see what their status is on the course and what their options are... [Worker] emailed back to say they are aware of [Name]'s difficulties and offered reassurance that they are actually on track with their studies and course work at present. Fed this info back to [Name]."

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Issues with educational transitions

Transitions in education can be difficult for everyone, and many of the people we support will go through more transitions than other children. This can feel unsettling, and often children ask their advocacy worker to get reassurance about what will happen, or information about their options. Advocacy workers highlighted that this can be particularly difficult for children and young people with complex needs or additional support needs.

"[Name] would like an enhanced transition into high school as it is causing them anxiety about what high school will be like – spoke with [social worker] the issue is that [Name] moving to new carers and high school may change."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Additional support is needed particularly around transitions for Care Experienced children and young people to ensure these periods of uncertainty have minimal disruption on their learning.

Virtual schools

In Edinburgh, our **Communities that Care team** (see Appendix) work particularly closely with the Virtual School team (VST), which includes a Care Experienced Quality Improvement Officer, virtual headteacher, pupil support officers, educational psychologists and the lead for outdoor education. We believe this to be a larger team than most councils' virtual school set-ups.

The partnership between the Virtual School and Communities that Care has enabled them to deliver joint training to teachers which offers both a deeper understanding of care experience and practical teaching guidance. The VST also has access to data which enables schools with poorer outcomes for Care Experienced children and young people or a particular number of Care Experienced pupils to receive a targeted 'Communities that Care' whole-school approach.

The link with the Virtual School is also highly valued by our advocacy workers in the area, who are able to raise educational issues with the virtual school and have them directly intervene and create positive change for them. Advocacy workers also noted that the VST were really useful in establishing measures to avoid exclusions or get young people back into school as soon as possible.

An advocacy worker was supporting a young person who wanted to move school but the school were not listening. Once the advocacy worker linked in with the virtual school, the

virtual headteacher was able to intervene from the school's perspective with the young person. The young person changed schools pretty quickly and are currently flourishing at their new school.

“At my old school, I was told I wasn’t allowed to take a five-minute break because I needed it after everything that had happened. Here, I get five minutes’ break. It helps me focus on one thing at a time. I have quite a lot of adults here I can talk to if I’m down or even if they see me in the corridor, they ask me how I am. The biggest difference between my schools is I have an opportunity to have my voice heard.”

Advocacy case study, 2025

While virtual schools are largely highly praised by our advocacy staff, we are aware only 18 local authorities currently have one in place and would like to see this support available to all Care Experienced children and young people, regardless of where they live. Advocacy workers in other areas of the country felt that there is often low awareness of them and what they offer, as well as sometimes being hard to access.

Online schools

Advocacy workers reported that access to digital learning or online schools was seldom available for Care Experienced children and young people on part-time timetables. Different local authorities had different programmes but these were difficult to access and many had waiting lists. The national service, iSgoil, has closed its waiting list due to excess demand. Expanding this service would help address gaps in education and extend provision for children who are not currently in school, for whatever reason.

Financial support

A major consideration for many Care Experienced young people is how to finance their education and associated living costs, despite UNCRC Article 28(b) requiring states to offer financial assistance where required for young people to be able to enjoy their right to an education and children's right to benefit from social security (Article 26).

Our advocacy workers are often contacted by young people struggling to claim Educational Maintenance Allowance or the Care Experienced Bursary. Difficulties in being able to access services, complete applications for funding, prove their eligibility, navigate the benefits system or create a budget that is feasible to live on can all prevent young people from choosing to remain in school past 16, or going on to further or higher education.

“[Name] was looking to get support in gaining confirmation that they are Care Experienced from [Local Authority] but is unable to get a hold of anyone either by email or calling.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

“[Name] cannot currently claim EMA due to their immigration status. They have asked for support with appealing this. [Name] is also asking for support from their social worker and lawyer. Update: [Name] is unable to appeal this decision until their immigration status is finalised. There are strict rules around EMA and its criteria.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

"[Name] does not want to go to uni if their grandparents will lose their allowance. They would like advice on this."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

We are aware of instances in areas with extremely tight budgets where advocacy support was necessary to be able to get funds for a child to have a new school bag and stationery. Children and young people have described the stigma they felt when moving schools and wearing different uniforms, or having to ask for approval for such small spends and collect receipts.

"Asked Social Worker if they could help financially to get [Name] new bag and some stationary items for beginning new school – Social Worker agreed to help with this – [Name] delighted."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

"I felt this stigma particularly when I was at school and being dropped off by taxi ... it was very obvious that with my social status and the way I dressed my family could not afford to send me in a taxi every single day so people knew this support was coming from local authority."

Participant over 16, Summer of Participation 2023

Transport

We provide advocacy around transport to and from school, due to placement moves creating logistical challenges to travelling to their preferred school.

"[Name] wants to remain at the same school as they are at even when they move to mum's but they aren't keen on getting a taxi – 'It's a stranger in the car for half an hour, it's just a bit weird'."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

"[Name] wished everyone to know that they do not wish to change school and wishes to remain at [school] but would prefer if the taxi could be on time as they get to school very late and have to leave early – not their fault – [Name] to remain at [school] for present."

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

One young person who took part in an individual session shared how they felt their preferred primary school and the travel arrangements that would be required had not been taken into account when they had moved into foster care:

"If you're going to move to a foster placement they [social work] should try to make it as close to your school as possible. I had to travel 45 minutes each way in a taxi every day to stay at my school. They should look for foster placements that are not so far away. The travel made me feel sick. I had sore heads sometimes. Travelling on the road so often I got travel sickness. After a long day at school I felt ill with travel sickness."

Other rights issues impacting on education

Attendance at education or returning after an absence are issues Care Experienced people seek advocacy for.

Long absences can occur for a variety of reasons, but mental health is a common cause of these absences.

“[Name] isn’t enjoying school and their attendance has deteriorated since the pandemic. Much of this is linked to their anxiety re health and awaiting results from Dr’s etc.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Advocacy workers describe frequently encountering issues with education being unwilling to work with other services, such as CAMHS or a young person’s carers. They also highlight the impact cuts to resources have had, particularly in rural areas and the islands, and note a withdrawal of looked after children teachers and support for learning centres. Hubs in schools are often used as a holding space rather than a learning space as limited resources, such as classroom assistants, are being used in other areas of the school.

While there may be a classroom assistant or support for learning, their capacity is divided between others in the classroom which may not necessarily deliver the individualised support pupils require. This may have been exacerbated by the reported average additional support for learning spend per pupil has been cut by nearly a third (30.1%) over the last decade.¹²

Young people told us that most did not have individual education plans in place for their additional support needs, which leads to varied interpretations of their needs by different teachers. They also highlighted how long waiting lists for disability assessments (up to two years) could hinder them getting the right support in place, despite UNCRC Article 23 (3):

“Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education... in a manner conducive to the child’s achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development.”

Young people also raised that sometimes they can feel overwhelmed by the number of external agencies that become involved in their lives when there are attendance issues. This resulted in a lot of new temporary relationships and young people having to share their stories over and over again.

It is key that support in education takes a joined-up, relationship-based and trauma-informed approach to limit this for children and young people in care already surrounded by numerous professionals.

¹² Scottish Children’s Services Coalition (2025): <https://www.thescsc.org.uk/call-for-greater-resourcing-as-spending-to-support-vulnerable-children-in-scotland-is-slashed-by-just-under-a-third/>

Assessment and Qualifications – How do Care Experienced children and young people understand and show what all their skills and achievements are?

Catching up on learning

Young people felt that the purpose of school is primarily for learning, getting qualifications and starting a career. However, there isn't enough academic support available for many Care Experienced people to achieve this, particularly when they have additional support needs.

They discussed how they felt too far behind to complete assessments, and that a tutor would help with this but could take a long time to find, particularly in rural areas. They did highlight the benefit of having smaller classroom settings and additional support, but felt that support could take too long to put in place for them to be able to complete exams. It was not clear enough what options were available to them.

One young person who took part in an individual interview said that they found it difficult to know who to talk to about this:

"I'm struggling quite badly in some subjects but nothing is being done about it. I've spoken to my guidance teacher about it but they're busy and I don't know what they could do about it... If they (teachers) notice you are struggling, they should take action and allow 1:1 with teachers or Social Workers as soon as they notice it."

Leaving school early

Our advocacy workers report that many of the young people they work with are still encouraged to leave school before S6 by their schools. They describe a stark difference between the narrative around attainment and the reality of exclusions, part-time timetables, and young people being pushed out of schools towards vocational training.

"A 14-year-old has been out of education a while and was offered vocational training despite being capable of Nat 5s."

Example from advocacy worker

Struggling with the transition from school to employment or training

Transitions in education can be unsettling, and often people ask their advocacy worker to get reassurance about what will happen, or information about their options. They want to know how to access training courses, apprenticeships and work experience, and how to pursue further or higher education. Young people leaving school should be able to expect to get this support from their guidance teachers, careers advisor and carers. There is a concerning gap in planning, support and aspirations for young people in care moving on from school.

For some young people placed far away from their communities, an uncertainty about their care and where they would be living can inhibit their ability to make decisions about their future.

“[Name] wants the ability to move on to apprenticeships and further their education, and they feel that being in Scotland is stopping this as they can't make future plans for attend[ing] college without knowing where they will be living. They like the practical elements of school in [school location] but struggles with incidents in the classroom by other young people impacting their learning.”

Entry from Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Young people explained that they had received good support transitioning from P7 to S1, but felt that support with post-school education and next steps was limited and mostly offered to 'pupils with prospects'. Students who have struggled with their academic achievements were more likely referred on to third party services in the community.

Purpose – What is school for?

Relationships and stability

According to The Promise: “The importance of relationships cannot be overstated.”¹³ For Care Experienced children and people experiencing turbulent home lives, school can offer an anchor with steady relationships and a sense of belonging, as well as a protective factor. Many who request advocacy are positive about their current educational situation and want it to remain the same, even after having moved home. Other young people have experienced multiple school moves and request advocacy to be able to have some stability within their education.

“[Name] would like to remain... at their current school if [they are] moved placement to foster care. [Name] said [they have] good friends at school who help and support [them] and... is able to speak to some of [their] teachers there. [They also like] that [they] have a designated safe, quiet space [they] can use in the school.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Our advocacy workers reflected that schools often don't realise how important they are for children and young people, and highlight the immense benefit felt when schools have a nurturing approach and good understanding of care experience. Young people under 16 told us they generally had good relationships at school, and many highlighted a teacher of special importance. Several also told us how important their friends were to them. For some, these were the most important relationships in their lives.

¹³ <https://thepromise.scot/resources/2020/keepthepromise-education.pdf> – p. 3

“School is ok, my teacher is really nice and I know they like and care about me.”

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

“I have a good friendship group at school and I have friends I can talk to.”

Participant under 16, Summer of Participation 2023

“School isn’t about all the textbooks or sitting at a desk. I’d say the most important thing about school is finding out who you are and making friends. Academia is more about learning life lessons...who to trust.”

Individual participant

A loss of support

Advocacy workers felt that often young people are well supported and nurtured in primary school and during the transition to secondary, but then experience an absence of relational support between the ages of 12-15, despite ongoing challenges in their life.

“[Name] would like to have 1:1 support in school. They had a Support Worker before summer but this didn’t continue in the new school year. [Name] has stated that this will help them focus better and stay in class.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

This contributes to many young people not enjoying school and wanting to leave or struggling with school and displaying behaviours that lead to exclusion. Support in school is discussed in more detail under the personalisation of support theme.

“[Name] expressed that they have ‘hated’ school since the first day they arrived. However, any time they have asked to be moved they have always been told no. They think they are being made to stay to complete their exams but expressed, ‘exams are the last thing on my mind at the moment’, and that it’s been difficult to prioritise their studies with all they have been dealing with recently.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

“[Name] has returned to school after the summer term and it is going well. [Name] struggles in the mornings as they feel sick and nervous but they are OK once they get there and tend to enjoy it. [Name] would like to have a school counsellor so they can go and speak to someone during the day if they need to.”

Entry to Who Cares? Scotland advocacy database

Recommendations

To uphold Care Experienced children and young people's rights under the UNCRC and to keep The Promise, Who Cares? Scotland makes the following recommendations:

- 1. The Promise commitment to end formal and informal exclusions must be enforced immediately, better understood and properly resourced across local authorities.**

Moves to change language around exclusions to circumvent The Promise must not be tolerated. The Children's Hearings System must play a greater role in scrutinising educational arrangements for young people in care. Panel members must confirm that all children and young people have a Coordinated Support Plan in place unless assessed as not required, and that young people's views regarding their education are heard and their rights to education upheld.

There should be greater awareness of specific supports tailored to individual Care Experienced pupils' needs, such as:

- ▶ Increased capacity for virtual headteachers and online schools to enable greater access to education for some Care Experienced pupils.
- ▶ Sharing of good practice between education authorities to ensure a range of support is available for Care Experienced pupils.
- ▶ Additional resources as required such as laptops, financial and travel assistance, access to trauma-informed counselling, mentorships and peer groups, not limited to the transitional period between primary

and secondary school, or stopping once a young person has reached 16.

- ▶ Ensuring Care Experienced young people are aware of their options after leaving school, and are supported to move on to a positive destination that they feel good about.

- 2. The Scottish Government, Education Scotland, and all education authorities, schools and other educational settings should commit to adopting a whole-school approach to supporting Care Experienced children and young people.**

This should offer **curriculum and resource support**, target all school staff, pupils, and offer opportunities for the voices of Care Experienced children and young people be heard and influence their school's policies and support. Please see the Appendix for more information.

- 3. The Scottish Government must legislate for a statutory right to independent, relationship-based, lifelong advocacy for all Care Experienced people who need it.**

The upcoming Promise Bill is a critical opportunity to enshrine this right in law, fulfilling the commitments made to Care Experienced people five years ago. This report clearly indicates the essential role of the advocacy worker in helping Care Experienced children and young people realise their rights to education, and supporting them through educational and care transitions.

Appendix

Who Cares? Scotland's **Communities that Care** whole-school approach offers training, tools and resources to allow schools to keep The Promise by fully supporting Care Experienced children and young people to realise their rights to education. This approach is currently being delivered across Renfrewshire, Edinburgh and Clackmannanshire councils and involves the following key stages:

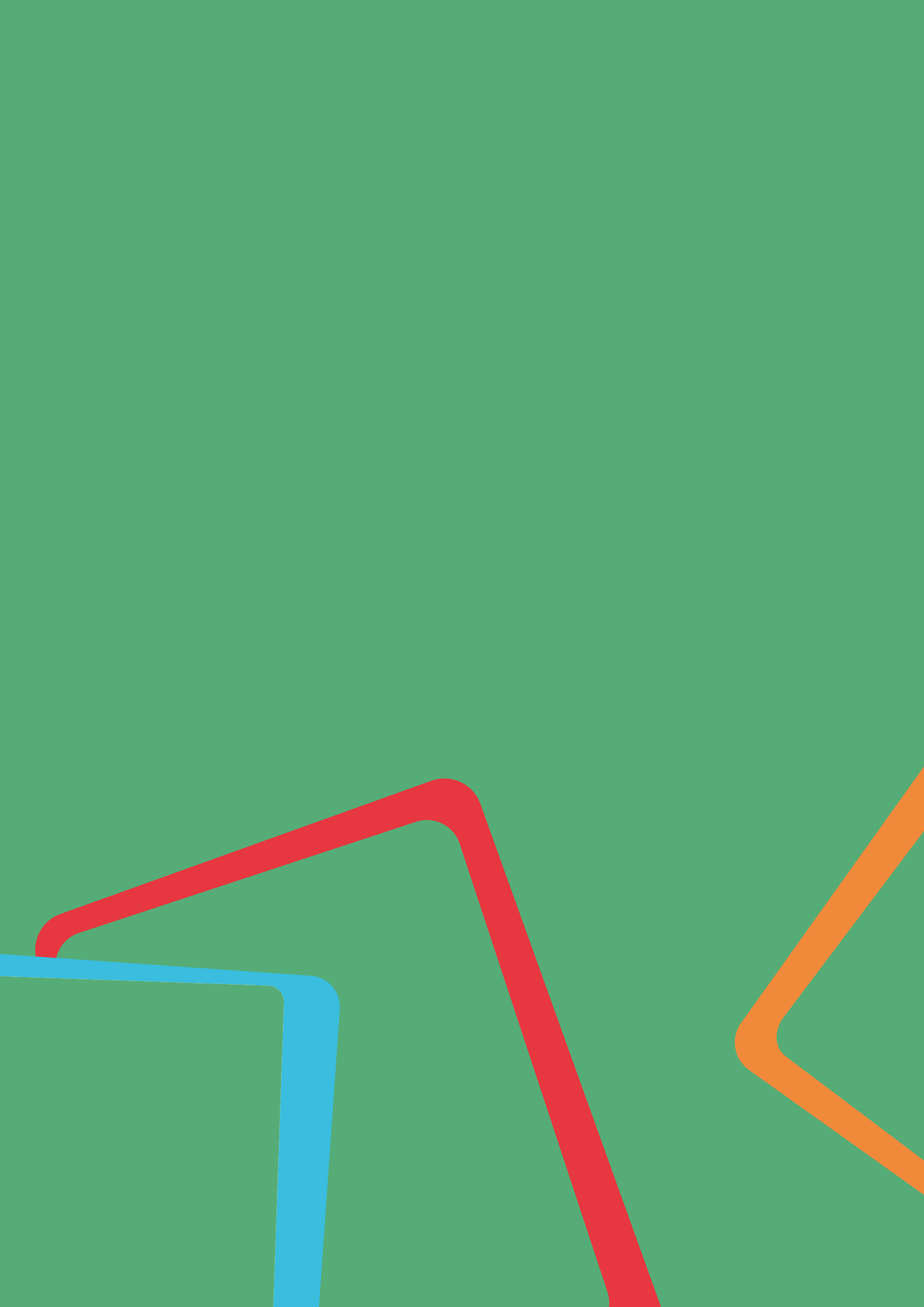
- ▶ Delivering training to all school staff;
- ▶ PSE inputs to pupils to sensitively challenge stigma and champion care experience as a different type of family;
- ▶ Drop-ins for Care Experienced pupils; and
- ▶ Access to our Communities that Care Curriculum and Resource pack (designed in collaboration with partners in education and Care Experienced children and young people), resulting in a sustainable, school-led model.

“What I found interesting was the fact that the UNCRC rights are given to everybody, but not everybody is able to experience them.”

Secondary school pupil, 2024

“It will empower our Care Experienced children whilst also giving a greater understanding to those who are not.”

Teacher feedback, 2024





Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
Edinburgh EH7 4NS

Tel: 0131 346 5350
Young Persons' Freephone: 0800 019 1179
Email: administration@cypcs.org.uk
cypcs.org.uk

 @cypcs  @cypcs  /cypcs

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