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The national survey was a substantial piece of work and has given us a wealth of information. Thank you to all the local authorities and partners who put the time and effort into completing this.

Finally, we would like to thank the young people of the South Ayrshire Champion's Board for the help they provided.

The key findings in this review are based on the experiences of the young people we heard from and whose records we reviewed during this review. We cannot say that their experiences were shared by all care experienced young people in Scotland.



Part One

Key Messages

- Almost all the young people we heard from were experiencing positive relationships with trusted staff and felt supported by them throughout the stages of moving on from care.
- A culture of rights and relationship-based, trauma-informed practice for care experienced young people was evident at a national level and in the four areas that participated in the review. Overall, the rights of care experienced young people are being upheld as they move on from being in care.
- When young people were meaningfully included in service design and planning this resulted in innovative, creative services which impacted positively in the lives of care experienced young people.
- The experience of moving on from care, envisaged by the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant (SCLC), has yet to be achieved for all young people. Variable approaches to keeping in touch also means that not all young people have equity of access to all the necessary information during the stages of transition.
- Where areas had gathered the stories of care experienced young people, this added a rich dimension to data already collected and demonstrated the worth of listening to young people's accounts first hand as a means of giving insight into what is important to them.
- Access to suitable housing was the most significant challenge for partnerships and was compromising partnerships' ability to fully deliver young people's plans in the way they would wish to.

Background

The Scottish Government asked the Care Inspectorate to undertake a thematic review which would report on the experiences for young people in and leaving care in Scotland with a focus on how their rights were upheld.

The request was in response to a recommendation made in the '**Youth Homeless Prevention Pathway: Improving Care Leavers Housing Pathways**, published in 2021 by the Way Home Coalition. That report highlighted the need for equality in the provision of **aftercare** services, the importance of **pathway planning**, and of reducing risks and crises for young people in Scotland. **CELCIS Continuing Care: An exploration of implementation**, published in 2022, also noted a need to hear young people's views and experiences of **continuing care** and the impact of continuing care on outcomes for young people.

While our review considered continuing care, the main focus was on the wider experiences of young people between 16-26 who were, or had been, formally **looked after**, and were leaving care.

The Care Inspectorate carried out the review under Section 53 of the Public Services (Scotland) Reform Act (2010). This legislation enabled us to interview staff, read records, speak with young people, reach evidence-based conclusions, and identify opportunities for learning and progression.

Legislation and policy context

The Scottish Government wants Scotland to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up in. Central to this aspiration is the recognition and promotion of children's rights. As well as the national legislative and policy drivers such as the **Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2014**, **Getting it right for every child** (GIRFEC) and **The Promise Scotland**, Scotland also has duties to secure and enact the rights enshrined in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** (UNCRC).

Throughout this report, we refer to the **Scottish Care Leavers Covenant 2019** (SCLC) and the pillars of the Covenant.

- Health and wellbeing
- Housing and accommodation
- Education and training
- Employment
- Youth and criminal justice
- Rights and participation.

These align with the five foundations of The Promise Scotland. **Plan 24-30** outlines where Scotland needs to be for young people moving on by 2030.

What we already know

Our publication on the review of findings from **Joint Inspections of Services for Children and Young People in need of care and protection 2018-2020**, published in 2020, included specific feedback on the outcomes for care experienced young people amongst the overall findings. We reported that:

- three quarters of young people in continuing care/aftercare did not have the level of contact with a lead professional laid out in their care plan.
- there were minimal improvements in wellbeing brought about by interventions in a third of the records we read.
- for care experienced young people, we noted numerous barriers and challenges to moving on and being able to access suitable housing and effective support for mental health or wellbeing issues into adulthood.
- care experienced young people had poorer quality assessments, planning and reviews than other groups of children and young people.
- in partnerships with dedicated **throughcare and aftercare** teams, we saw evidence of the positive impacts on young people.
- overall, the leadership of **corporate parenting** was less well-embedded and impactful than leadership of child protection.

Of the **housing support services** inspected by the Care Inspectorate during 2021-23, only a few were specifically targeted at supporting care experienced young people. Most young people gave positive feedback on the relationships they had with compassionate and caring staff who they trusted and reported as being appropriately involved in their care planning and support. Young people said that their rights were respected, and their views listened to and taken account of in decisions. There were only a few examples of young people being involved in service development. Most young people reported positive experiences and high-quality support from staff who were, in the main, experienced, qualified and well trained in using **trauma-informed approaches**.

Data and performance information in Scotland

A range of data, gathered through the Scottish Government Looked After Children's Statistics (SOLAS) each year, helps to set the context for the demographics relating to care experienced young people in Scotland. This provided useful context for this review. There is widespread acknowledgement that there are inconsistencies in data quality, collection and reporting across the country. As a result, there are gaps in the data that is held collectively about care experienced young people in Scotland. The current datasets, and the lack of linkage between them, make it very difficult to map children's care journeys. The information exists within systems, but without significant input it remains fragmented.

The Scottish Government recently undertook work to reach an agreement on improvements to the current data collection guidance and action. This work looked at the development of a broader care leaver data collection mechanism to include continuing care and aftercare. Guidance has been issued to local authorities and the new data collection is expected to begin for the period August 2023 to July 2024. This data will be reviewed by the Scottish Government in Spring 2025 with a view to working with partners to refine and improve the evidence base that the data collection provides.

PART TWO

The aim and scope of the thematic review

The principles in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 set expectations for how local authorities and **community planning partnerships** (partnerships), in their role as **corporate parents**, should support positive outcomes for all children and young people who experience care.

Although the statutory duties rest with the local authority, the review included the responsibilities of community planning partners in relation to their corporate parenting role. These include collaborative approaches to providing services to all care experienced young people.

The purpose of the thematic review was to establish the following, and in so doing, understand whether young people's rights were being upheld:

- The extent to which young people and their families are actively and meaningfully involved in all decisions about their continued care and have effective opportunities to influence service design and development.
- The extent to which young people's lives are improving through high quality assessment, planning and support which enables them to live in stable and suitable accommodation which is right for them.
- How leaders ensure the effective delivery of services for young people who are either continuing to be cared for or are leaving care.

We reviewed publicly available data and reports.
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We completed a literature review.

We conducted a national survey completed by 31 local authorities.

We undertook analysis of key corporate parenting planning documents from each participating local area.

We sent a survey to young people in the four participating areas and regulated housing support services nationally. We received 82 responses in total.
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We met 38 care experienced young people from four local authority areas and asked them about their experiences. This involved face to face meetings with individual young people and meeting young people as a group in their local equivalents of champions boards.
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We reviewed the records of young people through key processes such as assessment, planning and reviews by reading a total of 20 records across four areas. We did this together with the lead professional for each young person.

We received 273 responses to a staff survey from a range of professionals working with care experienced young people in the four geographical areas

We met with a total of 85 staff representing leaders and corporate parenting groups in the four participating areas.
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How we conducted the review

The Promise Scotland highlights the importance of relationship-based practice. We wanted to learn more about the ways young people are supported and encouraged to make decisions about **staying put** and **moving on**. We focussed on hearing as much as we could from young people: how they experienced services and relationships to support them and how they felt. We considered how those with responsibility for service planning anticipate and plan for young people remaining in positive care placements and for moving on. The review was conducted in two phases.

Phase one took place between April and June 2024. We undertook a literature review which incorporated findings and evidence from national and international research. This enabled us to refine our lines of enquiry. We took some key points from the literature review as important principles to uphold throughout our review:

- care experienced young people are individuals and not a homogenous group
- how professionals measure good outcomes may not be reflective of young people's experience of their lives
- achieving the right pace of change is important and failing to do so can create a tension between service availability and when young people are ready.

We initially met with organisations who formed a professional interest group and colleagues from the Care Inspectorate's children and young people's team. WE formed a reference group with our scrutiny partners, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, Education Scotland and the Scottish Housing Regulator. The valuable input from all these colleagues helped us to develop the scope of what we wanted to learn from young people and staff. We issued all 32 local authorities with a national survey and analysed the responses.

We then asked for four partnerships to volunteer to work with us in phase two of the review which focussed upon the experiences of young people and the quality of the services being provided for them.

In phase two we worked with Dumfries and Galloway, City of Edinburgh, North Lanarkshire and Shetland Islands councils.

In each area we reviewed the records of five young people from the past two years, with their lead professionals. We issued each area with a survey for young people and a survey for staff working in specific teams and services. This included young people in all housing support services regulated by the Care Inspectorate.

We met with:

- young people on the champions board (or equivalent)
- staff who attended a series of focus groups aimed at learning about the approach of leaders
- the corporate parenting board who deliver their statutory duties to the young people in their care.

What the national survey told us

Alongside overarching questions about service delivery and governance, the national survey was based on the six pillars of the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant (SCLC).

Most respondents to the survey were signed up to the SCLC and understood their responsibilities as corporate parents. Almost all partners viewed their approach as supporting a successful transition to adulthood.

In general, assessment and planning processes were thought to be well established and operating effectively in the delivery of support for young people leaving care. A small number of areas noted that assessments were not consistently completed. Some areas had introduced specific assessment, planning and review models which they noted as supporting effective practice. **Independent reviewing officers** and **independent advocates** were playing a key role in ensuring that young people's views were represented in planning meetings and giving young people feedback. All partnerships concluded that their approach supported and promoted relational practice.

Several areas had developed dedicated health, education or support services for care experienced young people. These roles provided tailored and targeted provision to support the effective delivery of services.

The national survey highlighted several general themes:

- Difficulties in accessing suitable accommodation were challenging partnerships to meet all young people's rights.
- Inconsistent approaches to keeping in touch with young people at different stages of transition meant some young people may not have had equity of access to the information they needed.
- While almost all respondents had an agreed definition of care experience, these differed in detail across the country.
- The volume of policy drivers for care experienced young people – and in children's services in general - presented challenges for partnerships.
- Along with existing challenges in staff recruitment and retention and decreasing availability of resources, short-term funding allocation limited partnerships' capacity to sustain services.

Additionally, the survey highlighted these points from the SCLC pillars:

Rights and participation

The majority of partnerships were confident that they provided clear and accessible information on what choices were open to young people as they leave care. They provided young people with information about their rights to continuing care and aftercare support, entitlements to support, participation, advocacy and complaints procedures.

While partnerships were committed to informing young people about their rights and entitlements, national survey responses highlighted difficulties in maintaining a systematic approach to keeping in touch with young people at key stages in their lives.

Health and wellbeing

The majority of partnerships had a lead officer with responsibility for care leavers' health. Respondents were asked about the support provided for physical and mental health, as well as alcohol and substance use. Less than half of partnerships said that they always supported young people to access help for their physical health. Help for mental health and substance-related issues was variable.

Housing and accommodation

Most areas had established multi-agency planning and support forums to explore housing options for care experienced young people. However, the widespread lack of suitable accommodation amid a national housing crisis presented significant challenges for young people who wanted to move on. Although this was beyond the control of partnerships, some described the efforts they undertook to support young people moving on into their own first homes. See Appendix 1.

Almost all respondents said they had a policy reflecting the principles of staying put and continuing care. The majority stated they had a multi-agency planning forum to support care leavers' housing and accommodation needs and completed welfare assessments for young people leaving care.

Education and training

Most partnerships said that assessments were undertaken to determine that young people had co-ordinated support plans.

Employment

Just over half of partnerships had a dedicated '**family firm**' policy in their area. All partnerships had developed relationships with local employers to provide enhanced supportive environments for the most vulnerable care leavers, as a first step into the world of work.

Youth and criminal Justice

Almost all partners had systems in place to identify people with care experience when they entered the justice system. Less than half had completely embedded the principles of the **whole system approach**.

Key learning

This section brings together the key learning from all stages of the review under the three statements underpinning our scope. This combines and aligns what we learnt in the four participating areas, with the findings from the national survey.

1. The extent to which young people and their families were actively and meaningfully involved in all decisions about their continued care and have effective opportunities to influence service design and development.

We were confident that young people and their families were involved in decisions about their own continued care. Staff found it difficult to meet all young people's wishes for suitable accommodation. Some young people had effective opportunities to influence service design and development.

Trauma-informed, relationship-based practice supported young people to make positive changes in their lives. All young people in the sample of records we reviewed had the opportunity to develop a relationship with a key member of staff. We heard about strong relationships between young people and their allocated workers, some forged over many years. These relationships demonstrated a needs-led, flexible, adaptable approach which young people valued.

Where young people had developed positive relationships with key staff, they felt listened to and understood. Their views were considered and reflected in the plans and decisions about their lives. The majority of young people were informed about their rights, including the right to have their views listened to when decisions were being made which affected them. While all young people had been informed about independent advocacy, they were less likely to use it when they had confidence in the staff they knew. Young people experienced the input from throughcare and aftercare teams as particularly positive. In the areas we visited, we heard first-hand about the impact of throughcare and aftercare workers who were characterised by their tenacity and commitment to 'walking alongside' the young people they were supporting.

What young people said: We asked young people to tell us what the relationship was like with the person who supported them when they were moving on. Most comments were very positive and indicated that relationships were meaningful and based on genuine interactions. The words 'trust', 'respect', 'helpful' and 'reliable' were frequently used and good relational practice was a key factor. What made a difference for young people was good communication; feeling their workers knew them; feeling listened to, understood and supported; feeling workers were on their side, an ally, and there were illustrations of the value of 'getting things done'. Young people's feedback highlighted the importance of workers' personal qualities and their ability to provide both emotional and practical help. Where the feedback was less favourable, the converse was true. For example, not connecting well with a worker or things not happening as they should were highlighted as well as lack of communication and choice.

For those who had a positive experience, the responses were characterised by being kept up to date with actions, being happy about moving on and feeling supported.

All young people said they had stayed in touch with people who were important to them. After moving, the quality of the relationships with the person providing help were really positive. The feedback reflected a balance between appreciation for personal skills and qualities, and delivering practical help.

There was a consistent commitment across the country to ensuring the meaningful involvement of care experienced young people in making decisions about their continued care and ongoing support as they were moving on. Young people wanted to be fully involved in planning their support and the majority were routinely involved in assessment and planning processes which meant that they were having their say and being listened to.

The significant challenge of identifying stable and suitable accommodation compromised how effectively staff could respond to young people's views about their housing options. Some staff were concerned that young people were under pressure to move on when they were not ready and were concerned about the lack of available housing options, which reflected what young people said. Where young people were supported at a pace that suited them there was a marked positive difference in their experiences and their feelings of hope for the future.

Senior leaders were strongly committed to listening to young people. Staff were optimistic that the views of young people were having an influence on policy and practice. We heard examples of young people's views being sought via individual team or service reviews, corporate parenting engagement events and links between strategic planning and representative young people groups. Specific examples of participatory activity included: re-designing corporate parent boards; campaigning (highlighting rights and challenging stigma); reviewing housing services (16+ accommodation) and co-designing of services (an employability project, a counselling service, and a residential care advisory group).

Examples were shared of a range of local initiatives expanding on the 'champions board' model. The creation or development of bespoke spaces across the country for care experienced young people, often driven by young people, reflected this commitment.

City of Edinburgh Council staff listened to care experienced young people in developing a bespoke meeting space (the Hub) in the city centre. Extensive work at the start of 2024 meant that the champions boards now had their own venue. The initial spaces included lounge and meeting areas and a small kitchen.

The champions had settled in well to the new space and had taken a lead role to make sure the space was homely. Early in the summer a Community Benefits donation helped them to create two brother and sister spaces, co-designed by young people. The Hub also hosted the corporate parenting team and young people benefitted from the accessibility of staff.

Young people were very proud of the space they had helped to create. More than this, they had also developed other ideas to support care experienced young people, for example setting up a cashless shop with free-to-access goods for their homes. This early success helped to secure further financial commitments from corporate parents and others.

They received significant donations of electrical goods from local businesses to give to care experienced young people living independently. The champions board was also fully involved in making future plans for the Hub.

Despite a clear commitment to meaningful involvement and participation across the country, some young people were unaware of opportunities to influence service design and development. It could be challenging for staff to engage with an often disparate and dispersed cohort of young people regarding service development. Efforts to recruit and retain members of care experienced representative groups were most effective where young people were regularly engaged with care services. There was inconsistent practice across local authorities when it came to supporting young people living outwith their 'home' authority.

Staff with corporate parenting responsibilities were not consistently gathering care experienced young people's feedback and using it to inform developments. As a result, some young people were unclear about the potential impact they could have, and this was a missed opportunity for corporate parents.

2. The extent to which young people's lives are improving through high quality assessment, planning and support which enables them to live in stable and suitable accommodation which is right for them.

In relation to assessment and planning, clear processes used consistently by skilled and confident staff supported improvement in young people's lives. The impact of support and help with securing stable accommodation and accessing mental health input was less robust.

Knowledgeable and dedicated staff were proud of the contribution they made in effectively supporting care experienced young people. They felt enabled to work in a relationship-based way and felt valued for the work they did. This was echoed by the young people we heard from.

We saw individualised assessments and plans in all young people's records. The detail, depth, quality and recording of assessments and pathway plans varied. Where these were thorough, it was clear the young person's needs and views were fully understood. Others were lighter in detail and constrained by workers' perceptions about the value of the plans as young people got older, more independent and wanted less information shared about their lives.

Practice example: Young person's development project

The young person's development project, funded by **Dumfries and Galloway Council** and the Big Lottery, opened in 2012, providing support to help young people transition from leaving care into independent living. The development, in Dumfries, consisted of ten self-contained properties, with a separate staff base. Housing support staff were available seven days per week, with access to out-of-hours security staff. The young person's development project supported care experienced young people with a whole range of support needs.

During our engagement activity, staff and young people told us about the ways in which they valued the service and the support that it offered. Some young people who had lived at the project commented positively about the difference it made to their lives, including transitions into independent living, practical pregnancy support, and in accessing other services such as mental health, education and employment support. Young people were supported to plan using structured tools, which helped evidence progress around intended outcomes.

Some young people living in the project had originally arrived in Dumfries and Galloway as unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. In the summer of 2024, the project hosted an event for World Refugee Day, which brought several of the residents together with refugees and staff from across the area. This created a safe space for young people to share their stories and experiences, whilst enjoying food from around the world that they had prepared.

Overall, care experienced young people that we spoke with had access to a range of support services to meet their needs at the right time and at a pace they were comfortable with. The key agencies worked collaboratively and creatively to meet the needs of care experienced young people in continuing care or moving on. Targeted, tailored provision made a positive difference to young people's lives.

Practice example: North Lanarkshire Council's approach to improving access to health and wellbeing services:

Listening to the voices of care experienced young people and involving them in service design has been central to North Lanarkshire's approach to removing barriers for young people to access health services.

In response to care experienced young people identifying a difficulty in accessing counselling support that was flexible enough to meet their needs, the Tomorrow Not Today (TNT) champions group, representing young people aged 14 – 26, was involved in the design, commissioning, and procurement of The Exchange Project counselling service, a dedicated service for care experienced young people.

The creative approach in placing young people at the heart of this process, has been recognised nationally and the project selected as a finalist in the GO Excellence in Public Procurement Awards Scotland 2024/25.

Responding to the identified barriers to care leavers accessing universal health services in relation to their physical and mental health, North Lanarkshire's health and social care partnership had also funded two throughcare and aftercare nurses to deliver a direct clinical and care service to care experienced young people and to further understand the barriers to access. This provides the basis for an options appraisal of long-term sustainable options to promote better access to physical and mental health services for care leavers.

What young people said: Across all the pillars of the SCLC, young people were more positive in their feedback about service delivery than staff were. This is perhaps reflective of young people experiencing the results rather than the challenges involved in delivering their plan. Where planning for moving on worked well, having the same worker throughout was a contributing factor. However, moving on was not always experienced positively by all care experienced young people. Both young people - and the staff working with them - felt that they were not always ready or prepared for moving on, nor were living in the right environment once they had moved on.

Young people told us about the support they received when they were planning to move on. We asked them to think about the support in the context of how optimistic they felt, how happy they felt about where they were moving to, and how reassured they felt about continued support and keeping in touch with people important to them. There was a mixture of reactions, with some young people expressing their nervousness about moving and taking the next step. Some did not feel optimistic, and others felt they needed more help from professionals. For some, there was a real sense of neither feeling ready nor having a say in the move, which felt dictated more by circumstances rather than the young person being ready and having actively made a choice.

There were indications of young people making choices about who they met, when they met and for what purpose. Young people were in touch with a mixture of long-standing workers and new workers who were giving targeted help. The range of services mentioned by young people indicated, at that stage, the right worker from the right service for the young person's needs was key.

What young people told us worked well

The young people's views about what worked well can be categorised across three themes: support received; environment; and people who supported them.

- In relation to the support received, what worked well included getting the right support, from the right person at the right time for the young person.
- A range of support to address practical, emotional and social needs was felt to be important.
- Young people talked about living in the right environment as being important to allow them to feel safe, to be part of a community and to have had a choice in where they live and when.
- Of the person who gives support, young people said that someone who was kind, caring, trustworthy and available when needed worked best.

What young people said could be better

Many young people who responded to our survey felt that nothing needed to improve and that their experience was sufficiently positive. Of those who felt there could be improvements, there were three core themes: communication; choice; and support.

- Young people said communication needed to improve. They needed more information and to be involved more in making decisions about moving on.
- Young people said choice was important; choice in where, when, how to move in and with whose support.
- In relation to support, young people said it was important that the right support, from the right agency and person was available and accessible when needed. This included a few comments about funding and money management.

3. How leaders ensure the effective delivery of services for young people who are either continuing to be cared for or are leaving care.

Leaders had a clear focus on the planning and delivery of services for care experienced young people. Commitment to a rights-based culture supported staff to focus on relationship-based practice. In the four participating areas, staff told us they were given the time and space to develop this approach across every aspect of young people's care experience journey.

Young people's views were proactively sought and included in individual planning for their care and support. Their influence on wider service developments, policies or strategic planning was more varied. However, we heard about examples where action was taken to improve relationships, policy or practice as a result of what care experienced young people said. This was impactful for young people and adults alike. Where this was working well, young people were fully involved and supported to be so. They were active co-producers, leading meetings and having a say in agendas and goals for change.

Shetland Island Council and Who Cares? (Scotland) support the **#shetlandcrew**, a group of care experienced young people who have influenced change and shown themselves to be leaders in their community.

By way of a project called Home and Belonging, supported by the Life Changes Trust and with funds from the National Community Lottery, the **#shetlandcrew**, as the champion's board equivalent group, developed effective engagement with corporate parents.

The project involved young people and adults working together using artistic expression and developing a culture of co-participation. As a result, the corporate parenting board was re-named The Meids and a Meids pledge was signed by all lead agencies, marking their commitment to this refreshed approach that the lead young people had taken. "In the context of care, a Meid* has been interpreted as a parent who will help young people to know where they are, or where they want to be, and help steer them to safety". (Shetland Islands Council). The **#shetlandcrew** and the Meids have formed a meaningful, effective partnership.

Young people co-chair the Meids and through acts of creativity and kindness have helped to steer other young people in care to safety and shown them they are not alone. The **#shetlandcrew** produced thought-provoking zines which collected together their personal accounts of care experience with the intention of sharing these with younger people to let them know they weren't alone in what they might be feeling at times of change.

*A Meid is a prominent feature on the land which enables fishermen to establish and maintain their position at sea.

While all four areas had strategic approaches in place to facilitate hearing the voices of children and young people, these views were not always sought as part of a regular schedule of consultative arrangements. Most staff thought leaders had a range of opportunities to hear from care experienced young people but there was potential to increase the impact of these opportunities. Aside from attending established groups, there were challenges for some care experienced young people to collectively contribute their views.

Leaders were working hard to provide the best services they could for young people within a complex landscape. They were required to navigate multiple policies and decreasing resources, compounded by recruitment and retention challenges. They described an uphill struggle to direct services that would ensure all care experienced young people received the right support at the right time from the right services. We heard that the range of policies contributed to a cluttered landscape that was difficult to co-ordinate. Funding workstreams were very often short term, despite the longer-term needs of care experienced young people and this compromised sustainability. There were issues recruiting and retaining the right staff, especially social workers and foster carers, at a time when demand for services was increasing and all partnerships were having to make budgetary cuts.

Alongside this, many areas were trying to balance providing continuing care in line with legislation with the increase in need for care placements for children and young people of all ages. Some areas had an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, some of whom were entitled to corporate parenting support. To ensure equity of service, a crucial balance had to be sought in getting it right for these young people alongside the significant impact on resource management amidst the wide-ranging challenges.

Leaders were not always able to articulate the difference their services were making to the lives of care experienced young people. Performance was largely based on quantitative measures which did not adequately adapt to hearing about young people's qualitative experiences. This meant that, despite the numerous positive stories we heard across the four areas we visited and the overwhelming support for the staff and services, there was no local mechanism for sharing experience and capturing the impact of services from a young person's perspective.

In the partnerships we visited, there were examples of services exploring how to best gather more meaningful qualitative information to understand how they were making a difference for young people. Thought was being given to how they could sensitively involve young people in telling their own stories and experiences therefore contributing to an overarching 'quality assurance' of care experience. Over time, this had potential to build a more personalised account of the impact of services by listening to what mattered and had made a difference to young people.

Upholding young people's rights

We considered the extent to which young people's rights had been upheld, respected and encouraged. Using the SCLC pillars and the three statements as a foundation for the review, we gathered a clear picture of how the articles of the **UNCRC** were met for young people. All the rights outlined in the UNCRC were pertinent to consider in relation to care experienced young people. To align the pillars with our approach, we paid particular attention to the following:

Article 2 (non-discrimination) The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, sex, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background.

Article 3 (best interests of the child) The best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.

Article 6 (life, survival and development) Every child has the right to life. Governments must do all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential.

Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.

Article 13 (freedom of expression) Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law

Article 42 (knowledge of rights) Governments must actively work to make sure children and adults know about the Convention.

- **Young people were supported to express their views** as demonstrated through reading records, young people's views and experiences and the views of staff working with the young people. Young people felt empowered to make decisions to stay.
- **A predominant culture of rights and relationship-based, trauma-informed practice for care experienced young people.** This was evident at both a national level and in the four areas that participated in the review and in the views shared by young people, leaders and frontline staff.

- **Most young people were helped to understand their rights, including the right to be heard. Most were informed about their right to continuing care and aftercare support.** In the four areas that directly participated in the review, there was a clear strategic commitment to a rights-based approach in all services working with children and young people.
- **Corporate parents were strongly committed to delivering The Promise and implementing UNCRC.** Senior leaders involved in the delivery of corporate parenting plans reported on their aspirations and efforts to further embedding these approaches.
- **Staff working in transition services were confident in their knowledge of the rights of young people.** They clearly recognised their role in helping young people to understand their rights. In the records we read, all young people had been informed of their rights and this was reflected in assessments, plans and in conversations with staff. Staff were creative, responsive and adaptive to what young people wanted.

Conclusion

Much of what we say in this report will not be new for many readers. We built on research and publications in Scotland and previous strategic and regulatory scrutiny. Similar themes emerged throughout this review. During our phases of activity, we gained a national understanding of issues for partnerships. We also spoke to young people and staff in the four participating areas. The views of young people are to the fore within this review and speak to the importance of listening to their experiences to ensure their rights are consistently upheld and their lives improve as a result of the support they receive.

A resounding message from this review is the value that young people placed on the good relationships they experienced with the staff who were working with them. The right worker was as important as the right service, and individual qualities of workers were as important as the work they do. We were impressed by many positive examples of relationship-based practice and how important that one person could be at a time of significant change. Young people valued being listened to and understood by people who know them well.

While staff were effectively listening to young people in relation to their individual planning, the level of influence young people had in the services that were there to support them was variable. Where they had influence, the impact was powerful, but many young people were unaware of how to become more involved, if they wished to. Meaningful involvement and participation is time-consuming and requires a genuine commitment driven forward by the right people. In times of financial pressure, staff vacancies and resource pressures, this is challenging and can drop in priorities. In areas where young people and their families were effectively influencing service design and development, leaders could see the long-term benefits in sustaining communities and building resilience.

The provision of suitable accommodation for young people leaving care remains a significant issue. It is an ongoing challenge for local authorities, corporate parents and ultimately young people who deserve a better start into adulthood. While it is beyond the control of individual areas and services to solve a national housing crisis, initiatives to support young people moving into their own tenancies can help mitigate the challenges, if the resource is available to provide this service.

At all levels of organisations, staff were working hard to ensure that young people's rights were upheld. A rights-based culture was embedded in corporate planning and was reflected in partnerships' vision and values. Young people were informed about their rights, including the right to have their views listened to when decisions were being made which affected them. Young people were being empowered to make decisions to stay put and they were aware of their rights to aftercare and continuing care. While there were areas for improvement and change, we were heartened by what young people told us and the valued support they received from trusted staff.

This review focussed on young people's experiences. What we know is that relationships are vital and young people shared many of the personal qualities they appreciate and value in those working with them. When relationships are developed and young people are listened to with understanding, support and trust, it is likely that more positive outcomes based on young people's needs and wishes are possible. If young people decide not to keep in touch, they should nevertheless continue to be offered opportunities to make this an informed choice with a clear route back, should they so wish.

From all that we heard during this review, some areas for development stand out. These are based on what we saw was working well and conversations we had that highlighted partnerships' aspirations and young people's experiences. These are presented as considerations for future practice.

Considerations for future practice

1. **Suitable, stable accommodation** and the challenges associated with providing this for all young people leaving care, runs through this review. The challenges are well known and understood. Amid a national housing crisis, significant effort is required to review and leverage available resources to identify and promote opportunities to counter the shortage of suitable accommodation.
2. **Keeping in touch with young people.** While acknowledging that some young people will have reached the stage where they choose not to be in touch with their workers, others may have drifted out of contact and may still need access to know the route back into services for support and information. We would encourage building in ways of regularly checking in with the young people who haven't been in touch and ensuring they are updated on rights and entitlements and know who to contact if they need to.
3. The national survey revealed that partnerships do not have an agreed and **shared definition of 'care experience'**. While this is not a legal definition, clarity on what is meant by this term would be very helpful. We welcome the consultation seeking views on the need for a universal definition of care experience, launched by Scottish Government in October 2024.
4. **Finding alternative or creative ways to capture young people's experiences** could add real value to partnerships' understanding of the impact of what they are doing well and what needs to improve. The depth of experience provided in personal narratives helps us understand what worked well for care experienced young people. Every young person we met gave us valuable insights into their own unique experiences and what was important for them. Those areas that shared their aspiration to collect data differently may be encouraged to do this and to think about this in discussions with young people. It may also reduce the need for young people to repeatedly tell their story.
5. **Pathway plans.** As these are a legal requirement, local authorities may consider the value of self-evaluating pathway planning and consulting with young people about their views on their plans and how they are used. This would help to build on the quality of plans and to agree a shared understanding of their purpose.
6. As a result of this review and other strands of related national work, there is an opportunity to develop a **cohesive learning framework** for all professionals to continue to effectively support care experienced young people.
7. The importance of being led by young people's **readiness for change** jumped out during the literature review as a useful reminder of a key factor for success in moving on. This was confirmed throughout the phases of the review and highlighted the importance of not fitting young people into services

but focussing on timely interventions which have more sustainable benefits. This is worthy of more consideration with young people during their reviews and planning meetings.

8. **Data and performance management issues** make it challenging for agencies to comprehensively self-evaluate their contribution to the journeys of young people through their care experience in Scotland. When this is resolved, Scotland will be better placed to say much more about the drivers into, experiences within, and outcomes of, its care system.

Appendix 1: Practice examples

Within national survey responses, many partnerships shared examples of good practice. We have included a selection of them here under the SCLC pillars' themes. **These have not been validated as part of this review, however, are shared as ideas that may inspire others.**

The list starts with housing and accommodation in recognition of efforts that are being made in this most challenging of areas for care experienced young people's stability.

Housing and accommodation

- Intergenerational housing solution: care experienced young people housed in flats adjoined to a care home for older people to support young people to feel that they are a greater part of the community. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children have been able to share their culture with their neighbours. **(South Ayrshire)**
- Shared tenancy model for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. This enables young people arriving through the National Transfer Scheme to go into their tenancy directly, with visiting support. Dedicated support is provided by an Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children support worker. **(East Lothian)**
- Scottish Qualifications Award Accredited Tenancy Skills Award to support care experienced young people transition into their own tenancy and supported by weekly group sessions from the Champions Board. This is a collaboration between the council's housing service, the champions board, children and families' social work, and schools, learning and education. **(Stirling)**
- Use of taster properties for young people to spend up to three weeks living in, with staff support. This has helped young people prepare for independence or realise they need more support before moving on. **(Aberdeenshire)**
- Core and Cluster model and training flat used with flexible and responsive support which can provide support for young people returning to the area. The Horizon Team is also a flexible and responsive support to help care experienced young people sustain tenancies, with 'time out' support included. **(Angus)**
- The Midlothian House Project ensures that those who enter the project and complete the programme get access to a permanent home, sustaining young people in tenancies. **(Midlothian)**

- Year long, detailed, multi-agency housing needs assessment involving care experienced young people at all steps along the way to address their collective support needs.
(East Renfrewshire)

Health and wellbeing

- Secondment of a mental health nurse to the social work transitions team, supporting young people and providing training and consultation to staff. This makes links between care experience, care leavers and poor mental health and the difficulty navigating adult mental health services, recognising that care experienced young people need something different.
(Dumfries and Galloway)
- Funding of Band 7 nurses to deliver a clinical and care service to young people and better understand the barriers to young people accessing services.
(North Lanarkshire)
- Clinical practitioners' approaches to supporting care experienced young people with complex trauma, including links between children's houses and CAMHS; referral to the Birth Parent Project for pregnant care experienced young women up to age 26 years.
(Aberdeen City)

Education and training

- Pathways Advocates was introduced in the city's secondary schools, to provide care experienced young people with an opportunity to have an informed advocate based in school to advise and support in the area of choices, vocational pathways and future options.
(Aberdeen City)
- Implementation of the **Scottish Attainment Challenge** steering group to oversee care experience work, including the Raising Attainment Strategy and tracking and monitoring across secondary schools.
(West Lothian)

Rights and participation

- Art Club was established as a mechanism to promote care experienced young people to be heard through different media.
(East Ayrshire)
- Co-production of 'Keeping brothers and sisters together' policy.
(Renfrewshire)

- Young persons rights service, working with young children up to those aged 26 and linking in with other services and children's houses. Example given of Birth Parent Project and the Family Nurse Partnership accepting referrals for pregnant care experienced young women up to the age of 26.
(Aberdeen City)
- Addition of 'care experience' as a protected characteristic so the needs of care experienced young people are considered in all council decision-making processes.
(Falkirk)

Youth and Criminal Justice

- Youth Bridges Project supports care experienced young people who have been remanded or sentenced. The project, part of the Intensive Service, engages with all young people under the age of 21 who have had their liberty restricted. They will meet with all young people within three days of being received into custody and work in partnership with prisons, health and other staff to support the young people and arrange family contact, prioritising building relationships with young people, so they have a trusted worker to support them through the transition back to the community.
(North Lanarkshire)

Appendix 2: terms we use in this report

Care experienced – for the purposes of this report 16-26

When we say, ‘care experienced’, we mean a child, young person or adult who is, or who has been, looked after at some point in their childhood. We recognise that this term is not defined in law but is increasingly used in Scotland.

Champions boards

Allows young people to have direct influence within their local area and hold their corporate parents to account. They also ensure that services are tailored and responsive to the needs of care experienced young people and are sensitive to the kinds of vulnerabilities they may have as a result of their experiences before, during and after care. Young peoples’ views, opinions and aspirations are at the forefront in this forum and are paramount to its success. Champions boards build the capacity of young people to influence change, empower them by showing confidence in their abilities and potential, and give them the platform to flourish and grow.

Continuing care

The continuing care provisions within the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 offer looked after young people the right to remain in their care setting (if they are in kinship, foster or residential care) up to their twenty-first birthday.

Corporate parenting

Corporate parents are organisations listed as corporate parents in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. Corporate parents have duties to uphold the rights and secure the wellbeing of looked after children and care leavers.

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)

National policy designed to make sure that all children and young people get the help that they need when they need it.

Housing Support Services

Services regulated by the Care Inspectorate to help people live as independently as possible.

Looked after

Legal term used to refer to a child who falls into one of the following categories:

- By living at home and being subject to a compulsory supervision order (looked after at home).
- By living in kinship care, foster care or a residential setting and subject to a compulsory supervision order (looked after away from home).
- By being accommodated by a local authority by a voluntary agreement (under S.25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. This includes children and young people who receive a series of short-term overnight breaks only).
- By being subject to permanence orders granted by a court.
- By being subject to an order, authorisation or warrant made by the relevant authorities under chapters 2, 3 or 4 of Part II of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995

Independent advocacy

A service where advocacy workers support a child or adult to express their own needs and views and to make informed decisions on matters that influence their lives. Independent advocacy is when a person providing the advocacy is not involved in providing services to the child or adult, or in any decision-making process regarding their care.

Moving on

Term used to describe the stages of moving on from care to adulthood.

The Promise Scotland

Established in 2020 to take forward the findings of the Independent Care Review. The Promise is built on the five foundations of family, voice, care, people and scaffolding. Key outcomes to be implemented by 2030 aim to ensure that Scotland's children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected, so they can realise their full potential.

Plan 24-30

Scotland's route map to #KeepThePromise by 2030.

Scottish Attainment Challenge

A framework to support schools, local authorities and others across the educational system to support educational recovery and increase progress in improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.

Scottish Care Leavers Covenant

The covenant was created by an Alliance of stakeholders to close the gap between policy and practice for care leavers. It supports corporate parents in action and practice to bring improvement and consistency to the case of these young people.

Staying Put

Term that was used in Staying Put Scotland Guidance that aims to assist local authorities and corporate parenting partners in their development and implementation of strategies to enable care leavers to remain in secure, stable care placements.

Trauma informed approaches

Being 'trauma informed' means being able to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma, collaboratively adjusting how people work to take this into account and responding in a way that supports recovery, does no harm and recognises and supports people's resilience.

Throughcare and aftercare

Refers to the support, advice and guidance provided to young people who have been looked after by the local authority. Throughcare helps prepare young people for independent living, while aftercare provides ongoing support until their 26th birthday.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Children and young people, under the age of 18, who arrive in Scotland without parents or guardians.

UNCRC

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is an international rights treaty that covers all aspects of children's lives. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2023 and from July 2024 is now part of Scottish law.

Whole system approach

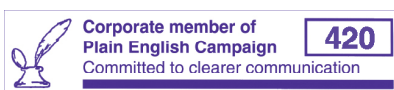
Programme for addressing the needs of young people in conflict with the law. It is underpinned by GIRFEC and prioritises the needs of children, young people and their families.

Headquarters

Care Inspectorate
Compass House
11 Riverside Drive
Dundee
DD1 4NY
Tel: 01382 207100
Fax: 01382 207289

Website: www.careinspectorate.com

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