



Known, Included and Ambitious: Promoting the education of care-experienced learners

October 2026

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Executive summary

- 1 This report evaluated how effectively maintained schools, pupil referral units (PRUs) and local authorities promoted the education, well-being and aspirations of care-experienced learners aged 3 to 16. It considered the experiences of children who were looked after, adopted from care, living in kinship care, subject to special guardianship orders (SGO), or children who were previously looked after. Care-experienced learners can face particular challenges relating to educational stability, attendance, engagement, belonging and attainment, although their experiences and needs vary considerably. The review drew on visits to schools, pupil referral units (PRUs) and local authorities; survey evidence; engagement with learners in schools, PRUs and through third sector organisations; stakeholder evidence; a review of relevant literature, policy and guidance; and inspection evidence.
- 2 Throughout the review, leaders and staff demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting care-experienced learners. Many knew individual learners well and worked hard to help them feel safe, included and supported. The strongest providers combined positive trusting relationships and high-quality pastoral support with ambitious expectations for learning, achievement and future opportunities. However, a central finding was that providers were generally more successful in describing the support they provided than in demonstrating which approaches improved learners' educational progress, attainment and longer-term outcomes.
- 3 The review found that schools, PRUs and local authorities were generally better able to identify, monitor and support children who were currently looked after than other groups of care-experienced learners. Arrangements for adopted learners, learners in kinship or SGO arrangements and previously looked-after learners were less consistent. As a result, many providers could not evaluate the educational experiences or outcomes of these learners with the same confidence as those who were currently looked-after, limiting their ability to identify emerging needs, intervene early and evaluate the impact of support.
- 4 Strong leadership and clear accountability were important factors in improving learners' educational experiences. The strongest schools and local authorities monitored progress, attainment and destinations alongside information about learners' attendance, well-being and any exclusions from schools and PRUs. However, educational outcomes were not always given enough prominence in

monitoring and corporate parenting arrangements. Learners' attendance, behaviour and well-being were often monitored more consistently than their educational progress and achievement, limiting leaders' understanding of whether support was improving outcomes over time.

- 5 Relationships and a sense of belonging were central to learners' positive educational experiences. They consistently highlighted the importance of trusted adults who listened, understood their circumstances and provided consistent support. These relationships helped learners feel known, valued and included in their school community. They also gave learners the confidence to share their views, raise concerns and take part in decisions about their education and support. Strong relationships and regular communication with parents, carers and wider professionals also helped providers understand changing circumstances and coordinate support more effectively.
- 6 Learners were more likely to share concerns and take part in decision-making when they felt understood and confident that adults would listen and respond. While many providers sought learners' views, these did not always influence the planning of their education and support. Learners also emphasised the importance of privacy, confidentiality and careful handling of personal information, which helped maintain trust and reduced the risk of learners feeling singled out because of their care experience.
- 7 Awareness of trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice had increased across schools, PRUs and local authorities. The strongest providers embedded these approaches in relationships, behaviour and everyday practice. However, providers were generally better at showing that staff had received training than demonstrating how these approaches had improved learners' attendance, participation, progress and attainment.
- 8 Evidence from learner discussions, provider visits and wider research showed that a stable education helped reduce the impact of disruption in other areas of care-experienced learners' lives. Schools and PRUs often provided stability and continuity when other aspects of learners' lives were changing. However, placement moves, school changes and changes in the professionals who supported learners sometimes disrupted learning, relationships and support. Joint working and information-sharing were not always sufficiently consistent, particularly when learners moved between settings, services or local authority areas. Local authorities had an important responsibility to protect continuity of Welsh-medium

education when learners changed school or care placement. However, access to continued Welsh-medium education and support was not equitable across Wales.

- 9 Funding and accountability arrangements did not always support consistent provision for the wider care-experienced population. Local authorities varied in how they interpreted and used Pupil Development Grant for Children Looked After (PDG-CLA) funding, reciprocal arrangements did not always operate effectively, and national information about the experiences and outcomes of adopted learners and those in kinship or SGO arrangements remained limited.
- 10 Many providers worked hard to ensure that care-experienced learners felt included, respected and valued, without being defined by care experience. However, treating learners the same as their peers did not always address the additional barriers some faced. The strongest providers understood that treating learners fairly did not always mean treating them in the same way. They helped learners feel they belonged, maintained high expectations and ensured they had fair access to an ambitious curriculum, enrichment opportunities, qualifications and future education or employment pathways.
- 11 Overall, care-experienced learners were most likely to thrive where schools, PRUs and local authorities identified and understood their individual circumstances, maintained high expectations and coordinated support effectively. While the review identified many examples of strong practice, it also highlighted the need for a greater focus on educational progress, attainment and longer-term outcomes. This is essential to ensure that care-experienced learners are supported not only to engage in education, but also to make strong progress, achieve well and benefit from improved future opportunities.

Introduction

This report responds to a request for advice from the then Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle MS, in the remit letter to Estyn for 2025/2026. It examines how effectively maintained schools, PRUs and local authorities in Wales improve the educational experiences, well-being and aspirations of care-experienced learners aged 3 to 16.

The review considered the experiences of learners who were currently looked after, adopted from care, living in kinship or special guardianship orders or who had previously been looked after. It evaluated how effectively education services identified, supported and monitored these learners, including those whose who were no longer formally 'looked after' and whose needs could therefore be more easily overlooked.

The report is intended for Welsh Government, local authorities, school leaders, PRU leaders, governors and practitioners working with care-experienced learners. It builds on Estyn's earlier thematic report *Raising the attainment, achievement and aspiration of children who are looked after* (Estyn, 2016).

The findings are based on evidence gathered from visits to maintained schools, PRUs and local authority education services across Wales. Inspectors held discussions with leaders, practitioners, governors, local authority officers and care-experienced learners. The review also drew on engagement with care-experienced learners through participation groups and third-sector organisations outside school settings. In addition, we reviewed documentation, including personal education plans (PEPs) and case studies alongside analysis of research studies, policy and inspection evidence.

Background

This thematic report built on the following key documents, which provided the evidence base for the report:

- Estyn (2016) *Raising the attainment, achievement and aspiration of children who are looked after: a best practice report*. Cardiff: Estyn.
- Estyn (2026) *More than a last resort: Arrangements and quality of EOTAS tuition in Wales*. Cardiff: Estyn.
- Foster, R., Beninger, K., Svanaes, S. and Downing, C. (2021) *An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Lowthian, E. et al. (2025a) *Educational pathways and outcomes for care-experienced children*. Swansea: Swansea University/CASCADE/SAIL Databank.
- Lowthian, E. et al. (2025b) *Children's early care experiences and their educational attainment: A population data-linkage study in Wales*, Oxford Review of Education, pp. 1–20.
- Adoption UK (2024) *Breaking the barriers to school attendance*. London: Adoption UK.
- Welsh Government (2025c) *Written Statement: Supporting the education of care-experienced learners*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

A full list of references can be found on page 90.

What do we mean by care-experienced learners?

Care-experienced learners are not a single or uniform group. Experiences of care may include being formally looked after by a local authority, adoption from care, kinship care, special guardianship orders or returning home following a period in care. National research, inspection evidence and stakeholder feedback indicate that many care-experienced learners face challenges relating to engagement in learning, attendance, emotional well-being and stability in education (Estyn, 2016; Lowthian et al., 2025a; Senedd Research, 2024). These experiences and outcomes are influenced by a wide combination of factors, including stability of care and schooling, relationships with trusted adults, additional learning needs (ALN), poverty and the quality and continuity of support across services. Placement instability, school moves, and transitions between schools or phases of education can affect continuity in learning and support over time.

National data are most comprehensive for children who are currently looked after by local authorities and provide less consistent information about adopted learners and those living in kinship care or under an SGO.

At 31 March 2025, there were around 7,000 children looked after in Wales, a slight decrease on the previous year. Wales continued to have one of the highest rates of children looked after in the UK, with a rate equal to Scotland and higher than those in England and Northern Ireland (Welsh Government, 2026a).

Table 1: Children looked after in Wales, 2021 to 2025¹

Measure	31 March 2021	31 March 2022	31 March 2023	31 March 2024	31 March 2025
Children looked after	7,240	7,050	7,185	7,175	7,070
Rate per 10,000 children aged under 18	117	114	116	115	114
Male	54%	54%	54%	55%	55%
Female	46%	46%	46%	45%	45%
Living in foster care	70%	69%	69%	68%	68%
Placed within their home local authority	67%	6%	66%	66%	65%
Placed outside their home authority but within Wales	27%	27%	27%	27%	28%
Placed outside Wales	6%	6%	7%	7%	7%
Experienced three or more placements during the year	525 (7%)	615 (9%)	685 (10%)	630 (9%)	600 (8%)

Source: Welsh Government (2026a) and associated StatsWales datasets, including *Children looked after on 31 March by number of placements during the year* (StatsWales, 2026).

The number of children looked after and local patterns of provision vary considerably between local authorities. Most children who were looked after lived in foster care, including placements with relatives or friends. Others were placed with their parents, lived in children's homes or other residential provision. Placement patterns have changed over time, with a slightly smaller proportion of children living in foster care and within their home local authority, and a greater proportion placed outside Wales. Over a longer period, the proportion living in children's homes and other residential settings has also increased (Welsh Government, 2026a; StatsWales, 2025b). Table 2 shows the main placement types at 31 March 2025.

¹ Figures exclude children looked after exclusively through a series of short breaks. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. Placement-stability figures relate to children looked after on 31 March who experienced three or more placements during the preceding year. Historical figures may differ from those in earlier publications because Welsh Government has revised the series.

Table 2: Placement type of children looked after in Wales, 2021 to 2025

Placement type	2020–21	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24	2024–25
Foster placements	5,045	4,880	4,925	4,870	4,795
Placed with own parents or another person with parental responsibility	1,195	1,100	1,040	970	870
Placements in residential settings ²	535	590	735	880	970
Placed for adoption	245	230	205	155	135
Living independently	130	170	190	175	175
Absent from placement or other	90	80	95	125	130
Total of published rounded categories ³	7,240	7,050	7,185	7,175	7,070

Source: StatsWales (2026), *Children looked after on 31 March by placement type*.

Children cease to be looked after through a range of pathways, including returning to parents or relatives, adoption and the making of an SGO. Across the last five years, around half of those who ceased to be looked after returned to parents, relatives or another person with parental responsibility. Adoption remains an important pathway to permanence for children leaving care, although the numbers of children adopted from care has declined over the longer term (Welsh Government, 2026a).

1,953 children left care between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, a slight decrease compared to 1,979 (r) children in the previous year (which was the highest annual total since 2015 to 2016). This number has generally increased from a low of 1,673 children in 2019 to 2020. During 2024 to 2025, nearly half (or 948) of children ceasing to be looked after returned home to live with parents, relatives or other person with parental responsibility. 212 (11%) children were adopted from care during the year, a decrease of 45

² Residential settings include secure units, children's homes within and outside the child's home local authority, and hostels or other supported residential settings.

³ Figures are rounded to the nearest five. As a result, totals may differ slightly from the published unrounded number of children looked after.

(18%) children compared with the previous year. (Welsh Government (2026a); StatsWales (2026).)

Research highlights that adopted learners may continue to experience the effects of earlier adversity, trauma and disruption, including the impact of inconsistent, insecure or disrupted early relationships, long after adoption (Adoption UK, 2024; Lowthian et al., 2025a). While many adopted children thrive educationally, evidence suggests that some continue to experience challenges relating to attendance, emotional well-being, belonging and engagement in learning. Although the evidence base is less extensive, similar issues may also affect learners living in kinship care or those cared for under an SGO.

Care-experienced children may experience changes in care arrangements and living circumstances. While these do not always lead to school moves, instability can disrupt relationships, routines and continuity of learning. Unexpected placement moves continue to affect many children each year and research from Wales and across the UK has identified strong links between placement instability, school moves, lower attendance and poorer educational outcomes for care-experienced learners (Lowthian et al., 2025a).

Visibility, continuity and educational oversight

Alongside children who are currently looked after, there is a wider population of care-experienced learners, including adopted learners, those living in kinship or SGO arrangements and those who have returned home following a period in care. For these learners, being 'visible' within education services means being identified, understood and monitored so that support can be provided when needed and their educational progress can be tracked over time. Research and policy evidence suggest that many continue to experience the effects of earlier adversity, disruption and instability in their care or education, even though they are no longer formally looked after (Lowthian et al., 2025a; Adoption UK, 2024; Paine, Perra and Shelton, 2025).

National education data provides only a partial picture of this wider population. National systems are much better at identifying and monitoring children who are currently looked after than other groups of care-experienced learners. Adopted learners and many other care-experienced groups are not routinely or consistently identified within national education datasets, and local arrangements for identifying and monitoring them vary considerably. As a result, there is limited national information about their educational experiences, progress and outcomes.

The national evidence available to evaluate educational outcomes has also changed since the publication of Estyn's 2016 thematic report. National assessment arrangements have changed and changes to the collection and reporting of educational outcomes for looked after children mean that less nationally comparable attainment data is available. In

addition, there is no national outcome data for adopted learners or most learners living in kinship care. Together, these factors restrict the ability of leaders to identify patterns, monitor outcomes and evaluate support and mean that the educational experiences and outcomes of the wider care-experienced population are not well understood.

Welsh legislation and guidance provide continuing arrangements for adoption support services following adoption orders. However, there are no equivalent national education arrangements for routinely identifying, monitoring or evaluating outcomes for adopted learners or many other care-experienced learners once they are no longer formally looked after. Consequently, continuity in understanding learners' needs and providing appropriate support often depends on effective local systems, professionals understanding learners' circumstances and whether parents or carers choose to share information about a learner's care experience with education providers. Visibility, continuity and educational oversight therefore formed an important focus of the fieldwork and emerged as a consistent theme across the review. While schools generally had well-established systems for children who were currently looked after, arrangements for adopted learners and other groups of care-experienced learners were considerably more variable.

Policy, practice and inspection evidence

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 strengthened the responsibilities of local authorities as '*corporate parents*'. This means that local authorities have a collective responsibility to safeguard and promote the well-being, educational achievement and life chances of children who are looked after and care leavers. Schools and PRUs contribute to this wider corporate parenting responsibility through their work with local authorities and partner services, although they do not hold the same statutory role. Schools and PRUs are expected to identify a 'designated person' to oversee the education and support of children who are looked after and contribute to the development and review PEPs, which set out learners' educational needs and support. Local authorities also have responsibilities to monitor learners' educational progress, attendance and well-being and to support joint working across education and children's services.

The PDG-CLA is allocated to local authorities according to the number of children looked after but is intended to improve the educational outcomes of the wider care-experienced population. Welsh Government guidance expects the funding to be used to reduce barriers to learning and support care-experienced learners to achieve their potential (Welsh Government, 2026b). Local authorities are responsible for planning and coordinating its use, including through reciprocal arrangements where learners are educated outside their home authority.

Since Estyn's 2016 thematic report, Welsh Government, local authorities and education providers have increased their focus on improving outcomes and experiences for care-experienced learners through revised guidance, national policy developments and growing use of trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches. This has included professional learning and resources supported through Adoption UK Cymru, the Trauma-Informed Wales Framework, Hwb and the ACE (adverse childhood experiences) Hub Wales, alongside more recent developments such as the National Delivery Group for Care-experienced Learners and the 'Virtual School Model' pilot, which aims to strengthen oversight and support for care-experienced learners. Welsh Government's (2025a) written statement *Supporting the education of care-experienced learners* recognised that educational challenges associated with earlier adversity and disruption may continue even where learners are no longer formally looked after.

Research, policy and inspection evidence consistently highlight the importance of educational stability, trusted relationships, effective multi-agency working and ambitious expectations for learning and achievement. They also identify continuing variation in how learners are identified, supported and monitored, particularly when learners are no longer formally recognised as being looked after. These issues informed the focus of this review.

The review found many examples of committed and effective practice. The strongest providers combined trusted relationships and carefully coordinated support with ambitious expectations for educational progress and future opportunities, particularly for those learners who become less visible once they are no longer formally looked after

Recommendations

Schools and PRUs should:

R1 Evaluate the impact of support on care-experienced learners' progress, attainment, participation and longer-term outcomes, not just attendance and well-being.

R2 Ensure ambitious expectations for care-experienced learners and provide support that promotes their educational progress and participation, as well as their well-being.

R3 Improve the quality and use of Personal Education Plans so that they include clear educational targets, meaningful learner participation in planning and review, and regular evaluation of the impact of support on progress and outcomes.

R4 Ensure all care-experienced learners have fair access to a full curriculum, enrichment opportunities, qualifications and future education or employment opportunities.

R5 Ensure that trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches are applied consistently and evaluate their impact on learners' experiences, engagement and outcomes.

Local authorities should:

R6 Strengthen proportionate arrangements for identifying care-experienced learners where their circumstances are known and relevant information is available, and for monitoring their educational experiences and outcomes. This should include educational progress alongside attendance, participation, destinations and exclusion rates.

R7 Ensure that corporate parenting arrangements use this evidence to scrutinise educational progress, attainment, participation and destinations, alongside attendance, well-being and placement stability, and to hold services to account for improving outcomes.

R8 Strengthen the quality assurance of Personal Education Plans so that they are consistently used as effective tools for educational planning, review and evaluation.

R9 Strengthen joint working between education, children's services and partner agencies to maintain educational continuity during placement moves, school changes and other periods of instability, including access to Welsh-medium education, where appropriate.

R10 Evaluate the impact of support, interventions and trauma-informed approaches on

learners' educational experiences and outcomes and use the findings to inform improvement planning.

Welsh Government should:

R11 Clarify national expectations and provide guidance on proportionate approaches for identifying, monitoring and coordinating support for wider groups of care-experienced learners, while respecting learners' and families' choices about disclosure and confidentiality.

R12 Review whether existing national guidance, funding and accountability arrangements support consistent, equitable and outcome-focused provision for all care-experienced learners.

Chapter 1: Leadership and strategic oversight

Strong leadership, governance and corporate parenting arrangements all have an important role in ensuring that care-experienced learners remain visible within education systems and can access the support, opportunities and high aspirations needed to succeed.

Previous research and reviews have highlighted the importance of strong leadership, effective partnership working and robust accountability arrangements in improving outcomes for care-experienced learners (Estyn, 2016; Foster et al., 2021). They have also identified the need for educational outcomes to remain visible within corporate parenting and improvement arrangements alongside wider measures of well-being and stability.

This chapter considers how effectively schools, PRUs and local authorities provide strategic leadership for care-experienced learners. It explores how leaders identify these learners, monitor their progress, promote ambition, coordinate support, use funding and evaluate whether their work is improving educational outcomes over time.

1.1 Strategic leadership and ambition

Across nearly all schools, PRUs and local authorities visited, leaders demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting care-experienced learners. In schools and PRUs, leaders generally knew individual learners well and placed a clear emphasis on stability, trusted relationships and emotional support.

In stronger practice, this understanding of learners' relationships and experiences was combined with ambitious expectations for achievement, participation and future opportunities. Leaders recognised that care-experienced learners often required additional support to overcome barriers to learning but rejected assumptions that learners' circumstances should limit their aspirations or educational outcomes. They positioned work with these learners as a core educational responsibility rather than solely a safeguarding or well-being concern.

Where provision was most effective, responsibility for care-experienced learners was shared across the organisation. Senior leaders, designated teachers, pastoral teams and wider staff worked together to support learners' progress and well-being. This helped ensure that learners remained visible within school systems and reduced reliance on individual staff members.

In most cases, leaders understood their corporate parenting responsibilities well. However, the extent to which educational achievement remained central within corporate

parenting arrangements varied. In stronger practice, educational progress, participation and achievement formed a prominent part of discussions and reporting. In weaker practice, attention focused more heavily on day-to-day processes, attendance or well-being, with limited or no regular scrutiny of educational outcomes and longer-term progression.

In Cardiff local authority, governance was strengthened by developing governors' understanding of care-experienced learners and giving them practical ways to ask informed questions about how well learners were being supported. This included using focused questions about how learners were identified and supported, their attendance, exclusion rates and educational progress, staff training and the quality PEPs (see Appendix 1).

Overall, the strongest leaders combined support with ambition. They promoted high aspirations, maintained collective responsibility for care-experienced learners and ensured that educational achievement remained central to improvement and accountability arrangements.

1.2 Monitoring, evaluation and accountability

Strategic oversight was strongest where leaders considered assessment and progress information, attainment and destinations alongside attendance, participation, behaviour, well-being and exclusion rates. These arrangements focused on organisation-wide monitoring and oversight rather than the quality of individual planning processes, such as Personal Education Plans. In these contexts, care-experienced learners remained visible within improvement systems and leaders used information to identify barriers, challenge assumptions and intervene when concerns arose.

Nearly all providers and local authorities visited maintained detailed information about attendance, behaviour, exclusions and well-being. Many held regular multi-agency discussions to review individual learners' needs, progress and support, involving designated teachers, pastoral staff, Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCos) and senior leaders. In stronger practice, these discussions considered learners' progress, participation and future aspirations alongside wider contextual factors.

Using strategic monitoring to improve outcomes for vulnerable learners (Connah's Quay High School)

Leaders at Connah's Quay High School identified the need for earlier and more co-ordinated support for vulnerable learners, including care-experienced learners, to reduce the risk of disengagement, poor attendance and reduced access to the curriculum.

In response, they developed the Additional Intervention Monitoring (AIM) process, a structured, multi-disciplinary approach that brings together pastoral, safeguarding, attendance, curriculum and ALN staff. Through regular meetings, staff analyse attendance, behaviour, progress and wider contextual information to identify barriers to learning at an early stage. They agree targeted interventions, allocate clear responsibilities and monitor the impact of support over time.

The AIM process has strengthened communication, shared accountability and strategic oversight across the school. By bringing together information from different teams, leaders are well placed to identify emerging concerns before they escalate and ensure that support is timely, joined up and responsive to individual need. Leaders reported improved learner engagement, better attendance and greater access to the curriculum. The approach has also strengthened transition planning, helping care-experienced learners and other vulnerable young people to move successfully into further education, training or employment.

Leaders were generally more confident discussing individual learners than evaluating patterns and trends across groups of care-experienced learners. This distinction was an important feature of the review. Leaders frequently demonstrated detailed knowledge of individual learners but were less able to explain what their collective evidence told them about the educational progress and outcomes of care-experienced learners as a group. While local authorities collected a wide range of information, arrangements for analysing progress, attainment and longer-term outcomes at a strategic level across the cohort of care-experienced learners were less well developed.

Attendance, exclusions and placement stability were monitored routinely by most local authorities. Educational progress, attainment and achievement were reported less consistently through corporate parenting and governance arrangements, limiting strategic oversight of these outcomes. This reflected concerns identified in previous reviews about the need for stronger use of data and accountability arrangements to evaluate educational outcomes for children looked after (Estyn, 2016; Foster et al., 2021; Welsh Government, 2024a; Welsh Government, 2024b).

Approaches to attendance reflected a balance between understanding and ambition. The most effective leaders recognised the challenges faced by care-experienced learners while maintaining high and ambitious expectations for participation in education. In a few providers visited, attendance targets reflected learners' existing patterns of attendance rather than ambitious expectations for improvement, risking low attendance becoming accepted over time.

In stronger practice, leaders monitored participation as well as attendance and attainment. For example, they considered learners' access to enrichment activities, leadership opportunities and progression pathways, helping to identify barriers to inclusion and maintain ambitious expectations for care-experienced learners.

Oversight of the wider care-experienced population was less developed across providers. While arrangements for monitoring children who were currently looked after were generally well established, many providers did not systematically monitor wider groups of care-experienced learners. As a result, leaders often had a limited understanding of outcomes for these groups.

The strongest monitoring arrangements combined detailed knowledge of individual learners with analysis of patterns and trends across groups. For example, leaders used individual case reviews alongside analysis of attendance, progress, exclusions and participation to identify common barriers, target support and test whether particular groups were benefiting from provision. Leaders used this information to challenge assumptions, adapt support where needed and evaluate the overall impact of provision on outcomes.

1.3 Personal Education Plans and planning processes

PEPs are a statutory requirement for children who are looked after. This requirement does not extend to adopted learners, learners living in kinship or SGO arrangements or other previously looked-after learners, unless they are currently looked after by a local authority. PEPs provide the main way of planning, co-ordinating and reviewing support for children who are looked after. In stronger practice, they focused clearly on educational progress, participation, aspiration and well-being, helping to keep discussions and support centred on outcomes. While monitoring arrangements provide strategic oversight, PEPs operate at the level of the individual learner and are intended to support the planning and review of support over time.

In July 2026, the Welsh Government published revised guidance setting out expectations for the educational purpose of PEPs, learner participation, aspiration, multi-agency planning and the role of schools in promoting educational achievement. As the guidance was published after the fieldwork for this review, inspectors could not evaluate its impact on practice. (Welsh Government, 2026c; Welsh Government, 2025b). However, at the time of the fieldwork, the quality and effectiveness of PEPs varied considerably. While nearly all providers and local authorities completed PEPs in line with statutory requirements, too many described the support provided without evaluating whether it had improved educational progress, attendance, participation or aspirations. As a result, they often functioned primarily as compliance documents rather than effective tools for educational

planning and review. This reflects concerns identified in Estyn's previous review (Estyn, 2016).

In stronger examples, PEPs included clear analysis of learners' strengths and barriers, ambitious educational targets and meaningful learner participation in the development and review of the plan. Actions were specific, linked to identified needs and reviewed and adapted over time. In weaker practice, plans focused more heavily on attendance, well-being or support arrangements than on educational progress, attainment and future aspirations. Targets were often broad and did not provide a sufficiently clear basis for reviewing progress. Learners' views were included in most PEPs reviewed, although the quality of their contribution varied. In stronger practice, learners contributed meaningfully to discussions about their learning, aspirations and support, while elsewhere their views did not consistently influence planning or decision-making.

Leaders also highlighted challenges in co-ordinating PEP reviews with Individual Development Plans (IDPs), Looked After Child reviews⁴ and wider care planning processes. Where meetings were held separately, this could create duplication for learners, carers and professionals. Where processes were combined, the educational purpose of the PEP was not always sufficiently prominent and discussion of progress, attainment and educational targets could be overshadowed by wider care and support issues. Although PEPs and IDPs were generally linked where both were in place, the review found limited evidence of systematic oversight of the quality of educational targets across these plans. The strongest approaches balanced efficiency with a clear focus on achievement, aspiration and learning.

A recurring weakness was the limited evaluation of impact within plans. PEPs frequently identified support and interventions but did not include clear measures or review processes to assess whether these actions were effective. Local authority quality assurance also varied. In stronger practice, senior officers carried out systematic quality assurance of sampled plans, provided feedback and used findings to inform professional learning. In weaker practice, quality assurance focused primarily on completion and compliance.

⁴ A Looked After Child (LAC) Review is a formal statutory meeting to review the care, support and progress of a child or young person who is looked after by a local authority.

Improving the quality and impact of Personal Education Plans (Cardiff)

In Cardiff, responsibility for supporting and monitoring the education of children who are looked after sits within the local authority's Virtual School⁵. The Virtual School recognised that the quality of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) was inconsistent and that plans did not always focus sufficiently on educational progress, high aspirations or the impact of support.

To address this, the Virtual School introduced a structured quality assurance process. Officers sampled PEPs regularly and evaluated the quality of learner voice, educational targets, attendance and progress information, the use of PDG-CLA and the evaluation of support. Schools received feedback on individual plans as well as feedback highlighting common strengths and areas for improvement across the authority.

This process strengthened oversight of PEP quality and helped designated teachers develop a clearer understanding of the educational purpose of PEPs. As a result, plans increasingly focused on ambitious targets, clear actions, measurable outcomes, educational progress, participation and aspiration alongside learners' well-being.

1.4 Strategic coordination and partnership working

Effectively supporting the diverse needs of care-experienced learners requires effective collaboration between education services, children's services, health boards and third-sector partners (MacDonald et al., 2026). In most local authorities surveyed, strategic oversight was located within corporate parenting or other joint governance arrangements involving education and children's services. Most also reported having a strategy or framework for supporting care-experienced learners, although the extent to which these arrangements were implemented varied.

Survey responses indicated that collaboration between education and children's services was generally positive. In stronger arrangements, education formed a visible part of wider corporate parenting discussions and leaders maintained a shared focus on attendance, participation, progress and well-being. Leaders reported that virtual school approaches, designated leads and strengthened corporate parenting arrangements had improved strategic oversight in many areas.

⁵ A virtual school is a local authority service that coordinates support for the education of children who are looked after and, in some authorities, other care-experienced learners. It works with schools and partner agencies to promote educational progress and improve outcomes. Local authorities in Wales use a range of organisational models to provide this support and not all have established a virtual school.

Across the providers visited, leaders frequently adapted systems and support arrangements to maintain continuity for care-experienced learners during periods of wider change or uncertainty. This included responding to workforce turnover, sharing of information challenges and variations in external support. These efforts often reduced disruption for learners and reflected a strong commitment to maintaining support. However, they also highlighted the extent to which positive outcomes sometimes depended on strong local relationships and individual commitment rather than consistently effective systems across agencies.

Sharing of information remained less consistent in a few areas. While providers generally valued the support and information provided by local authority officers and social workers, they reported variability in timeliness and consistency, particularly when there were changes to personnel or learners' circumstances.

Oversight of the wider care-experienced population remained uneven. While many local authorities reported some level of oversight for wider groups of care-experienced learners' arrangements, few had clear strategies for identifying, monitoring and coordinating support for these groups.

Overall, partnership structures intended to coordinate support and maintain oversight were well established in many local authorities. However, arrangements were not always supported by sufficiently consistent systems, clear responsibility across services or evaluation of educational impact.

1.5 Strategic use of resources

Local authorities and providers used a range of funding streams to support care-experienced learners. The PDG-CLA funding, the Welsh Government grant provided to support the educational outcomes of children who are looked after, was a particularly important resource, supporting interventions to improve participation, engagement, well-being, transitions and educational progress. The PDG-CLA is allocated to local authorities on the basis of the number of children looked after but is intended to support the educational progress and well-being of the wider care-experienced population. Guidance also expects local authorities to have reciprocal arrangements in place so that care-experienced learners can benefit from support in the authority where they are educated, including when another authority is their corporate parent.

Across the local authorities surveyed, PDG-CLA was generally deployed flexibly to respond to individual needs and remove barriers to learning and participation. Although local authorities retained responsibility for overseeing the funding, much of it was allocated to schools and PRUs, which used it to provide support such as mentoring, nurture and well-being provision, help with transport and enrichment activities, transition support and

targeted educational interventions. In stronger practice, leaders linked funding decisions clearly to identified educational priorities and considered how resources could support participation, educational progress, a sense of belonging and high aspirations.

Local authorities and providers were generally more effective at monitoring how funding was spent than evaluating the difference it made. While leaders could often describe individual examples of positive outcomes, evidence of the overall contribution of funding to attendance, engagement, progress and achievement was less well developed. This reflected a wider finding across the review that support was often delivered more consistently than it was evaluated.

The review also highlighted concerns about current funding arrangements. In a few local authorities, leaders reported that supporting learners placed in their area by other authorities created additional financial pressures. Although corporate parenting responsibility remained with the placing authority, the receiving authority was often required to provide educational support from its own PDG-CLA allocation. As a result, funding did not always match local need or responsibility and, in a few cases, limited authorities' ability to plan equitable, long-term support for their own resident care-experienced populations.

A few local authorities reported uncertainty about how flexibly PDG-CLA funding could be used to support the wider care-experienced population. In practice, funding was often targeted primarily at learners who were currently looked after. Leaders felt that clearer communication and support to interpret the guidance would help them use the funding more confidently to meet the needs of adopted learners and those living in kinship care arrangements, who may experience similar barriers to learning. They also reported that reciprocal arrangements did not always operate effectively in practice.

Overall, PDG-CLA provided important opportunities to remove barriers and strengthen support for care-experienced learners. However, any future review of funding arrangements would need to be informed by stronger and more consistent evidence about the number, needs and educational outcomes of adopted learners and those living in SGO or wider kinship care arrangement.

Chapter 1 summary

Strong leadership and strategic oversight were important factors in improving the educational experiences of care-experienced learners. The strongest leaders combined ambitious expectations with effective monitoring, accountability and partnership working, ensuring that educational achievement remained central to corporate parenting and improvement arrangements.

While attendance, exclusions and well-being were generally monitored consistently, leaders were often less able to demonstrate the impact of support on educational progress and outcomes over time. This was reflected in weaknesses in the use of PEPs and evaluation of the impact of interventions and funding.

Oversight of wider groups of care-experienced learners was generally less well developed than arrangements for children who were looked after, limiting leaders' understanding of outcomes for the wider care-experienced population

Toolkit 1: Evaluating leadership and strategic oversight

This toolkit is intended to support schools, PRUs and local authorities to reflect on how effectively leadership, governance and corporate parenting arrangements improve outcomes for care-experienced learners.

Features of stronger practice

In stronger practice:

- leaders maintain ambitious expectations for participation, achievement and future opportunities
- where care experience is known, learners are understood and their progress is monitored through clear governance and improvement arrangements
- educational progress and attainment are monitored alongside attendance, exclusions and well-being
- PEPs are used as effective educational planning and review tools rather than compliance documents
- leaders understand the experiences and outcomes of the wider care-experienced population, including adopted learners and those in kinship or SGO arrangements
- partnership arrangements support coordinated action
- leaders evaluate the impact of support and funding on educational outcomes over time

Questions to support self-evaluation

- How do we know that our actions are improving educational outcomes for care-experienced learners?
- How do we know that our expectations for care-experienced learners are as ambitious as those for other learners?
- How effectively do our systems support care-experienced learners whose circumstances are known, while respecting families' choices about disclosure and confidentiality?
- What does our monitoring tell us about patterns in educational progress, participation and attainment?
- How do we know that PEPs are improving educational outcomes rather than simply recording support?
- Where might adopted learners, learners in kinship care arrangements or those subject to special guardianship orders be overlooked?
- How well do governance, corporate parenting and partnership arrangements challenge us about educational outcomes?
- What evidence demonstrates that our support, interventions and use of funding are improving educational outcomes?

Possible evidence sources

- learner progress, attainment and attendance information, alongside participation in learning, enrichment and wider school life
- PEPs and other learner planning documents
- learner, carer and staff feedback
- corporate parenting, governance and improvement reports
- partnership and multi-agency working records
- funding evaluations and impact reviews
- self-evaluation and improvement planning documentation

Chapter 2 – Supporting learning, well-being and progression

Supporting care-experienced learners requires attention to both their immediate well-being and their longer-term educational progress and aspirations. Many care-experienced learners have experienced disruption, instability or adversity that can affect their engagement with learning, relationships and participation in school. Research evidence has highlighted the complex interactions between care experience, emotional well-being, attendance, educational attainment and future outcomes (Estyn, 2016; Lowthian et al., 2025a; Lowthian et al., 2025b; Senedd Research, 2024).

Across Wales, trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches, supported by national policy and Welsh Government-funded programmes, have contributed to greater understanding of learners' needs among education professionals (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022; Welsh Government, 2025c; Welsh Government, 2025a).

This chapter explores how schools, PRUs and local authorities supported learners' well-being, educational progress and preparation for future education and training. It considers how providers balanced support with ambition, responded to individual needs and evaluated the impact of their work on learners' experiences and outcomes.

2.1 Supporting well-being and readiness to learn

Across the providers visited, leaders and staff recognised that care-experienced learners often required additional support to engage fully in learning. Many learners had experienced disruption, instability or adversity that affected their confidence, relationships and participation in education. The strongest providers viewed well-being as a foundation for learning rather than a separate priority, recognising that learners were more likely to attend, participate and make progress when they felt safe, supported and included. This included helping learners regulate their emotions, establish predictable routines, rebuild trust in adults and develop the confidence to participate in classroom activity.

Viewing well-being as a foundation for learning reflected key principles of the Welsh Government's statutory guidance, *Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being*, including its emphasis on belonging, learner voice, supportive relationships and a positive school culture (Welsh Government, 2026d).

Discussions with learners during the review reinforced the importance of understanding the wider circumstances affecting engagement with education. Young people described the impact of caring responsibilities, poverty, overcrowded housing, family difficulties,

grief and loneliness on their ability to concentrate and participate in learning. This resonates with research evidence which has highlighted the interaction between care experience, emotional well-being, instability and wider socio-economic factors in shaping learners' engagement with learning and their educational outcomes (Lowthian et al., 2025a; Senedd Research, 2024). One learner explained:

'My focus is sometimes on simple survival rather than academics. I need your [staff] support to think long-term about my future'.

Learners also emphasised the importance of safe, predictable environments and consistent relationships. They described how changes to routines, staffing and expectations could increase anxiety and make participation more difficult. Across nearly all providers visited, care-experienced learners had access to trusted adults who provided guidance, advocacy and practical support.

Ensuring every learner has a trusted adult (Carmarthenshire secondary teaching and learning centre)

Leaders at Carmarthenshire Secondary Teaching and Learning Centre recognised that many learners had experienced disrupted relationships, instability and adverse childhood experiences. To provide consistent support, they developed a 'team of five' model in which each learner was supported by a small group of trusted adults who understood their strengths, needs and circumstances.

Leaders considered attachment, relationships and learner voice carefully when allocating staff, ensuring that learners could access support from several trusted adults rather than relying on a single key worker.

The approach improved continuity when staff were absent or relationships became difficult, reduced the risk of dependency on individual adults and strengthened learners' sense of safety, belonging and support.

Many providers used nurture provision, including targeted support for learners' social and emotional needs, mentoring and practical support to help learners engage in learning and school life. In the strongest practice, these arrangements were flexible and responsive to individual needs while maintaining learners' connection to education.

Providers used a range of approaches to monitor learners' well-being, including regular check-ins, 'mood' trackers, standardised well-being measures, one-page profiles, learner voice activities and reviews of individual cases. In stronger practice, leaders considered this information alongside attendance, behaviour, participation and educational progress

and used it to adapt support. However, approaches varied and information about well-being was not always used systematically to evaluate the longer-term impact of provision.

Belonging emerged as a particularly important factor in learners' engagement with education. The strongest providers combined emotional support and positive expectations with a clear focus on attendance and learning.

The strongest practice helped learners develop independence and resilience over time. Rather than creating dependency, staff adjusted support carefully as learners became more confident and prepared for future transitions. This was most effective where support was planned as a route towards greater confidence and independence, not simply as a response to immediate need.

Preparing learners for successful transitions beyond school (Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin)

Leaders at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin recognised that, while strong relationships and emotional support were important for care-experienced learners, they also needed to prepare learners for further education, training, employment and adult life without the same level of day-to-day support available in school.

The school developed a carefully planned approach to support which combined nurture with increasing independence. Staff provided intensive support when needed but gradually encouraged learners to develop self-advocacy, problem-solving skills and confidence in managing challenges independently.

This approach helped learners become more confident in seeking support appropriately, making decisions about future pathways and managing transitions beyond school. Leaders reported that learners were better prepared for further education, training and employment while continuing to benefit from positive and supportive relationships.

In many providers, this understanding of well-being was closely linked to the development of trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice, which shaped how staff responded to learners' emotional needs and behaviour.

2.2 Trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice

Trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice had become increasingly prominent across schools, PRUs and local authorities. Professional learning, supported by national policy and Welsh Government-funded training, had increased staff awareness of trauma,

attachment and adverse childhood experiences and contributed to a broader shift in how learners' needs were understood (ACE Hub Wales and Traumatic Stress Wales, 2022; Welsh Government, 2025a).

The strongest providers viewed trauma-informed practice as a whole-school approach rather than a training programme or specialist intervention. Here, staff understood how trauma and difficulties in early relationships and attachments could influence behaviour, emotional regulation and engagement and applied this consistently in their relationships, classroom practice and behaviour responses.

Consistency was a key feature of effective practice. Leaders in stronger providers ensured shared expectations, language and responses across staff. Leaders in stronger providers ensured shared expectations, language and responses across staff. They supported this through professional learning, regular discussion of learners' needs and opportunities for reflection. In these settings, support based on strong relationships was planned deliberately, helping to create predictable environments where learners felt safe, understood and supported.

Trauma-informed practice was often most explicit and embedded in PRUs and special schools. Staff in these settings worked routinely with learners experiencing complex emotional, communication and additional learning needs.

Implementation remained variable across providers. While leaders, ALNCos and pastoral staff often demonstrated a well-developed trauma-informed understanding, this was not always reflected across the wider staff group. Learner and stakeholder evidence highlighted an important distinction between awareness and meaningful practice. Learners valued calm, consistent and understanding responses from staff who demonstrated insight through their everyday actions. In a minority of providers, approaches remained dependent on individual staff members rather than being embedded across the organisation, resulting in less consistent experiences for learners.

Providers drew on a range of professional learning opportunities and accreditation schemes to develop trauma-informed practice. Leaders highlighted practical barriers to implementation, including difficulties releasing staff for training, securing classroom cover and sustaining approaches during periods of staff turnover. In a few cases, pursuing accredited programmes created additional financial and staffing pressures that limited the scale of professional learning. These factors limited the extent to which trauma-informed practice was embedded consistently across all roles.

Consistent with existing research, stronger practice also reflected a clear understanding of the links between relationships, emotional regulation and learning (Lowthian et al., 2025a; Adoption UK, 2024). Staff recognised that behaviour often communicated unmet need or

distress and responded in ways that maintained dignity and strengthened relationships. As one learner explained:

"I'm not sad and angry, I'm just confused and stressed."

Where staff adapted responses to individual needs and prioritised trust, emotional safety and clear expectations, learners were more likely to remain engaged in learning and school life.

Embedding trauma-informed practice across the whole school (Ysgol Y Deri)

Leaders at Ysgol y Deri recognised that many care-experienced learners had experienced trauma alongside complex emotional, communication, sensory and additional learning needs. They understood that these experiences could significantly affect learners' ability to engage with education. They also recognised the importance of helping learners develop trusting relationships and regulate their emotions. As a result, they developed trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice as a whole-school approach rather than a targeted intervention for individual learners.

Leaders embedded this approach through extensive professional learning, specialist training and regular opportunities for staff to discuss and reflect on their practice. This helped staff develop a shared understanding of how trauma and difficulties in early relationships and attachments can influence learners' behaviour, emotional regulation and engagement. Trauma-informed principles now underpin teaching, pastoral support, behaviour approaches and therapeutic provision across the school, ensuring greater consistency in how learners are supported.

This whole-school approach has helped ensure that learners experienced consistent and emotionally available support throughout the school day rather than relying on individual interventions or particular staff members. Leaders reported improvements in learners' emotional regulation, relationships and engagement with learning. Care-experienced learners within the school's social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) provision also demonstrate stronger attendance than their non-care-experienced peers, reflecting the positive impact of a nurturing, trauma-informed environment.

Despite considerable investment in professional learning and implementation, evaluation of impact remained underdeveloped. Providers were generally more consistent in evidencing implementation than in evaluating the impact of these approaches on learners' participation, progress and outcomes over time.

The strongest providers used learner voice; data on attendance, behaviour and exclusions; and detailed reviews of individual cases to evaluate impact and refine practice over time.

2.3 Supporting learning and achievement

Across the providers visited, leaders and practitioners demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting care-experienced learners. The most effective providers maintained a clear focus on learning and ensured that support arrangements, curriculum access and interventions were designed to help learners achieve ambitious educational outcomes. However, support for well-being and engagement remained more visible than evidence of progress and achievement.

Many schools and PRUs monitored learners' progress carefully and provided additional support where concerns emerged. Staff often knew learners well and identified changes in engagement or attainment at an early stage. In stronger practice, this knowledge was used to adapt teaching and support in ways that promoted learning, rather than focusing solely on attendance, behaviour or well-being.

In the most effective practice, this included clear identification of starting points, structured teaching approaches, timely feedback and targeted support that enabled learners to access the curriculum fully, rather than being removed from it. These providers ensured that additional support complemented classroom learning and helped learners build the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to succeed.

Despite this, too few providers evaluated systematically which approaches had the greatest impact on learners' progress and attainment. While leaders frequently described positive outcomes for individual learners, they were less consistent in drawing together evidence across cases, or, where numbers allowed, analysing patterns of progress across groups to identify which strategies were most effective over time.

Leaders recognised that care-experienced learners did not form a homogeneous group with the same experiences or needs and that barriers to learning varied considerably. The strongest providers adapted support to individual strengths, needs and circumstances while maintaining high expectations for achievement. They were careful not to allow care experience to become a reason for lowering aspirations or narrowing opportunities.

Multi-agency working often played an important role in supporting learning, particularly for learners experiencing instability, placement change or complex personal circumstances. Providers worked with carers, social workers, educational psychologists, youth workers and other professionals to minimise disruption and help learners remain engaged in education and learning.

Leaders often described positive outcomes for individual learners, including achieving qualifications and progressing successfully into further education, training or employment. However, schools and local authorities were less able to demonstrate systematically that the support they provided was improving progress, attainment and longer-term outcomes overall. This reflected a wider challenge identified in previous Welsh reviews, where attendance and well-being were often monitored more consistently than educational progress and achievement (Estyn, 2016; Foster et al., 2021).

The most effective providers viewed support as a means of enabling learners to participate fully in education and achieve their potential, rather than as an end in itself. They maintained a clear focus on helping learners overcome barriers to learning, access the curriculum and experience success, while ensuring that expectations for achievement remained consistently high.

2.4 Personalised support for learners with overlapping needs

Across the providers visited, care-experienced learners often benefited from personalised support that reflected their individual needs, strengths and circumstances. Leaders, carers and professionals recognised that learners with similar care experiences often required different forms of support. In the strongest providers, leaders avoided assumptions based on care status, adoption or diagnosis. Support was tailored to individual learners, reviewed regularly and adapted as needs changed.

Care experience was often only one of several factors affecting learners' education. Many care-experienced learners also experienced additional challenges relating to ALN, emotional well-being, placement instability, poverty, language, ethnicity or wider family circumstances. Leaders and staff needed to understand how these factors interacted and influenced learners' progress.

Additional learning needs (ALN) were one of the most common factors affecting care-experienced learners alongside their care experience. ALNCoS were often closely involved in supporting care-experienced learners, including learners who did not have identified ALN. Leaders frequently described the challenge of understanding the relationship between trauma, difficulties in early relationships and attachments, emotional well-being and ALN. Research evidence indicates that care-experienced learners are disproportionately likely to have additional learning needs and that instability and disrupted sharing of information can compound difficulties in identifying and meeting needs over time (Estyn, 2016; Lowthian et al., 2025a; Senedd Research, 2024).

The strongest providers avoided viewing these issues in isolation. They ensured that ALN, pastoral and safeguarding systems worked together effectively and recognised that difficulties in learning, behaviour or engagement could not always be attributed to a single

cause. Multi-agency working helped co-ordinate support for learners experiencing instability, placement change or complex personal circumstances.

Evidence from provider visits also highlighted the importance of recognising the needs of wider groups of care-experienced learners. While these learners were often supported effectively when their circumstances were known, they were generally less visible within monitoring and support arrangements than children who were currently looked after. At times, this limited providers' ability to identify needs and respond at an early stage.

A few local authorities adapted support for learners whose care experience intersected with other significant needs. For example, Cardiff developed additional English language and transition support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking learners arriving late in secondary education, recognising the combined impact of care experience, disrupted education and language barriers on participation and progression.

The strongest providers considered the breadth of learners' needs and circumstances. Rather than focusing on single labels or categories, they considered the factors influencing learners' lives and adapted support to help learners remain included, engaged and able to access appropriate learning opportunities. They viewed personalised support as a means of helping learners participate fully in education, develop independence and access the same opportunities for success as their peers. These providers demonstrated that ambition was reflected not simply in aspiration statements but in expectations for achievement and careful preparation for the next steps in learners' lives

2.5 Aspirations and future opportunities

Across the providers visited, leaders and staff demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting care-experienced learners to succeed in education. The strongest practice combined this commitment with ambitious expectations for achievement, participation and future opportunities. They recognised that care experience should not determine educational outcomes and actively challenged assumptions about what learners could achieve.

Aspiration emerged as an important feature of stronger practice. Leaders and staff encouraged learners to consider a wide range of future opportunities and ensured that discussions about further education, higher education, apprenticeships, employment and independent living formed a routine part of support arrangements. Learners benefited from adults who recognised their strengths, celebrated their achievements and encouraged them to think positively about their future.

Providers frequently adapted curriculum arrangements and support to meet individual needs. This included vocational pathways, alternative provision, flexible timetables and personalised programmes. These approaches often helped learners remain engaged in

education during periods of difficulty and, in stronger practice, were carefully planned, regularly reviewed and linked to ambitious long-term outcomes.

Integrating curriculum and support to improve engagement and achievement (Connah's Quay High School)

Leaders at Connah's Quay High School identified that support for vulnerable learners was too disconnected from curriculum planning and, in a minority of cases, relied heavily on pastoral approaches and alternative provision. This reduced learners' access to a broad and ambitious curriculum and limited opportunities for some learners to achieve their potential.

In response, leaders aligned responsibility for learner support, alternative provision and additional learning needs more closely with curriculum leadership. They strengthened collaboration between curriculum, inclusion and safeguarding teams to ensure that decisions about support and provision were informed by learners' educational needs and aspirations. They also expanded in-house vocational pathways to provide more flexible and engaging learning opportunities while maintaining high expectations for learners' achievement.

This approach strengthened oversight of curriculum access, learner engagement and progression. Leaders reported improved communication and shared accountability across teams, reduced reliance on external provision and earlier identification of barriers to learning. As a result, vulnerable learners were better supported to remain engaged in education and access appropriate pathways.

The review identified an important tension between meeting learners' immediate needs and maintaining ambitious educational expectations. Flexible approaches could play an important role in supporting engagement, particularly during periods of instability or emotional difficulty. However, where reduced timetables, curriculum adaptations or alternative arrangements became long-term rather than transitional, opportunities for curriculum access and progression could become increasingly limited. The most effective providers managed this tension carefully, reviewing arrangements regularly and maintaining a clear focus on extending learners' access to learning and future opportunities over time.

Overall, the strongest providers recognised that well-being, achievement and aspiration were closely connected. Rather than lowering expectations in response to learners' circumstances, they adapted support to help learners overcome barriers while maintaining access to ambitious pathways and future opportunities.

Chapter 2 summary

Supporting care-experienced learners to engage successfully in education required more than providing additional support. Across the providers visited, the strongest practice combined effective support for well-being with ambitious expectations for learning, achievement and future opportunities.

Support for well-being and readiness to learn was a strength across many schools and PRUs. Learners consistently highlighted the importance of trusted adults, positive relationships and feeling safe, included and understood. They also emphasised the importance of predictable environments and consistent support in helping them engage successfully in education.

Trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice had become increasingly prominent across schools, PRUs and local authorities. Stronger providers embedded these approaches consistently across the whole organisation and recognised that trauma-informed practice was demonstrated through everyday interactions and relationships rather than training alone.

The review found that support for well-being and engagement was often more visible than evidence of progress and achievement. Leaders frequently described positive outcomes for individual learners but were less consistent in demonstrating the impact of support on attainment and longer-term outcomes.

The strongest providers adapted support and curriculum arrangements to learners' individual needs while maintaining ambitious expectations. Personalised support, mentoring, nurture provision and multi-agency working helped many learners remain engaged during periods of difficulty or instability. These providers responded holistically to learners whose care experience intersected with additional challenges relating to ALN, emotional well-being, language, poverty or wider family circumstances.

The review identified an important tension between responding to learners' immediate needs and maintaining ambitious educational expectations. Flexible timetables, alternative provision and personalised pathways often supported engagement, but required careful review to ensure that curriculum access, participation and future opportunities did not narrow over time.

Overall, providers were most successful where support, curriculum and aspiration worked together to increase engagement, achievement and future opportunities for care-experienced learners.

Toolkit 2: Evaluating learning, well-being and progression

This toolkit is intended to support schools, PRUs and local authorities to reflect on how effectively they support care-experienced learners to engage in learning, make progress and achieve their potential.

Features of stronger practice

In stronger practice:

- learners experience safe, predictable and supportive environments that help them engage in learning
- staff maintain ambitious expectations and use trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches consistently in everyday practice
- support is tailored to learners' individual strengths, needs and circumstances, taking account of factors that may affect learning and participation
- support, curriculum planning and future pathways are aligned to educational success
- reduced timetables and personalised pathways are reviewed regularly and linked to ambitious long-term outcomes
- progress, achievement, attendance, participation in learning and wider school life are monitored and discussed together
- leaders evaluate the impact of support and interventions on educational outcomes as well as participation and well-being
- learners are supported to participate fully in school life and prepare for future education, training or employment

Questions to support self-evaluation

- How do we know that care-experienced learners feel safe, included and ready to learn?
- How consistently do trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches influence learners' day-to-day experiences?
- How do we know that our expectations for learning and achievement are as ambitious as those for other learners?
- What does our evidence tell us about learners' progress, attainment and curriculum access, alongside attendance and well-being?
- How do we know when learners are ready for support to be reduced without compromising their progress or well-being?
- How well do we understand the interaction between care experience and other factors affecting learning and participation?

- How do we know that reduced timetables, alternative provision and personalised pathways are improving engagement and educational outcomes without creating longer-term risks to curriculum access, qualifications or future opportunities?
- What evidence shows that support plans and interventions are improving educational progress rather than simply maintaining learners' involvement in education?
- How well do we prepare learners for future education, employment and training?

Possible evidence sources

- learner progress, attainment and achievement information
- attendance, exclusion and behaviour information, alongside participation in learning and wider school life
- curriculum access, qualification pathways and destination information
- PEPs and other learner support plans
- learner work, assessments and progress reviews
- intervention records and evaluations
- learner, parent/carer and staff feedback
- classroom observations, individual case-tracking and professional discussions
- professional learning and policy documentation
- self-evaluation and improvement planning documentation

Chapter 3 – Relationship, belonging and learner voice

Trusted relationships and a strong sense of belonging are central to positive educational experiences for care-experienced learners. Welsh Government guidance and wider evidence emphasise the importance of ensuring that children and young people are listened to, involved in decisions that affect them and able to influence the services they receive (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2025, Welsh Government, 2025d;). These principles are particularly relevant for care-experienced learners, whose educational experiences may be shaped by changes in relationships, care arrangements and support services.

Research and policy evidence also highlight the importance of relationships, belonging and participation in supporting engagement with education, well-being and positive outcomes for care-experienced learners (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2025; Welsh Government, 2025d). Learners in this review described trusted relationships as an important foundation for attendance, engagement and participation in learning.

This chapter explores how schools, PRUs and local authorities supported relationships, belonging and learner participation for care-experienced learners. It considers the role of trusted adults, learner voice, participation in decision-making and approaches to reducing stigma and promoting inclusion.

3.1 Trusted relationships and belonging

Trusted relationships and a sense of belonging were central to learners’ positive experiences across the review. Learners consistently emphasised the importance of adults who knew them well, understood their circumstances and provided support when needed. Across learner engagement activity, provider visits and stakeholder evidence, relationships were frequently described as a key factor in learners’ well-being, engagement and educational experiences.

Learners valued adults who were approachable, reliable and willing to listen. Similar themes were reflected in wider participation evidence from care-experienced children and young people, where relationships, listening and belonging have been repeatedly identified as central to positive experiences (Welsh Government, 2025d; Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2025). Learners often described teachers, pastoral staff, teaching assistants and other practitioners who had taken time to understand them as individuals and who provided support during difficult periods. One learner who contributed through the review’s wider participation activity reflected:

‘Your [teachers] kind words, which I don’t receive from many adults in my life, will play in my head later when I’m working towards my goals. They will push me and allow me to believe in myself; I will always remember them.’

A sense of belonging was closely linked to these relationships. Learners were more likely to engage positively in education where they felt accepted, understood and valued as members of the school community. Through engagement with learners, we found that care-experienced learners often valued schools and PRUs that provided stability, familiarity and a sense of community during periods of uncertainty elsewhere in their lives.

Learners and stakeholders also highlighted the importance of staff understanding care experience and its potential impact on education. Although nearly all providers had invested in relevant professional learning, awareness alone was not always sufficient. Learners distinguished between adults who knew about trauma-informed approaches and those who demonstrated understanding through everyday interactions.

When asked what they would like from their school, one learner simply commented:

‘To let teachers understand more.’

Although brief, this reflected a wider theme across learner engagement activity. Learners wanted staff not only to know about care experience but also to understand how it could influence relationships, behaviour, confidence and engagement.

Learners also wanted adults to look beyond behaviour and understand the experiences and circumstances influencing it. The strongest providers fostered cultures where understanding care experience shaped everyday practice, not just training or specialist support. One learner explained:

‘I want teachers to listen to people’s problems. Stop punishing people for standing up to bullies. Teachers should understand when people are acting naughty or just stressed.’

Learners valued being understood as individuals without being defined solely by their care experience. They were more positive where staff recognised their strengths, interests and aspirations rather than making assumptions based on their circumstances. In stronger practice, staff balanced awareness of care experience with high expectations and a clear focus on learners as individuals.

Confidentiality also emerged as an important factor in building trust. Learners were generally comfortable with key staff knowing about their circumstances where this supported appropriate provision but wanted information to be handled sensitively and shared only when necessary. Respectful and discreet approaches helped learners feel safe to seek support and discuss concerns.

Learners also emphasised the importance of adults following through on commitments and acting when concerns were raised. Trust was strengthened where learners felt listened to and where support was responsive and reliable. Although many learners described highly positive relationships with staff, a minority reported occasions when concerns were not followed up or when adults had not acted on what they had promised. These experiences could reduce learners' confidence that speaking up would make a difference.

Learners particularly valued adults who noticed when they were struggling, responded sensitively and remained alongside them during difficult periods. One learner reflected:

'The teachers I kick off at most often are the ones I feel safest with.'

This comment describes a wider theme across the review that trust was often built through understanding, persistence and acceptance rather than through the absence of challenge.

Learners benefited most where trusted relationships extended beyond individual staff members and were embedded across the wider school community. In these providers, care-experienced learners were more likely to feel known, valued and supported throughout their educational experience and more willing to engage in learning, seek help and take part in school life.

Supporting belonging through peer support and leadership (Ysgol Nantgwyn)

Leaders at Ysgol Nantgwyn established a voluntary group for care-experienced learners that provided opportunities to build relationships, share their views and support one another in a safe and supportive environment. Participation was carefully planned, with close attention to confidentiality, emotional well-being and learners' preferences, including whether they wished to take part and how they chose to contribute.

The school also created opportunities for care-experienced learners to take on mentoring and leadership roles. Learners supported peers who were new to the school or moving between phases, helping them become familiar with routines, build confidence and feel reassured during periods of transition.

Leaders reported that these opportunities helped learners develop confidence, strengthen relationships and feel more connected to the school community. They also helped learners develop leadership skills, increase their participation in school life and recognise the positive contribution they could make to supporting others.

3.2 Learner voice

Across the review, learners consistently emphasised the importance of being listened to and having opportunities to express their views about their education and support. Learners were most able to express their views where adults created opportunities for learners to share their experiences and used this understanding to inform support, planning and everyday practice.

Schools and PRUs created opportunities for care-experienced learners to talk with trusted adults, contribute to reviews and discuss aspects of school life that affected them. These conversations often helped staff identify concerns early, understand learners' needs more fully and adapt support accordingly.

Learners valued opportunities to share their views in ways that felt comfortable and meaningful to them. The strongest providers recognised that learners did not always wish to participate through formal meetings or structured discussions. Staff therefore used a range of approaches, including informal conversations, mentoring relationships, creative activities and written contributions, enabling learners to communicate in ways that suited them.

When asked what worked well in school, one learner explained:

‘They [staff] understand me and let me talk and they don’t assume anything which means they’ve also got to know me. They show they actually care, especially making sure action is taken place if needed.’

This reflected a wider theme across learner engagement activity. Learners were most positive where adults took time to understand their perspectives and responded thoughtfully to concerns. Where this happened, learners were more likely to seek support, contribute their views and engage positively in school life.

Learners consistently highlighted the importance of seeing action taken in response to their views. They valued situations where adults listened carefully, explained decisions and demonstrated how concerns had influenced support or practice. This helped strengthen trust and encouraged learners to continue sharing their views.

Experiences were not always consistent. While many learners described positive relationships with adults who listened and responded to their views, a minority reported occasions when concerns were not followed up or when they felt their views had not influenced decisions affecting them. This was particularly evident where learners experienced bullying related to their care status. Several learners described reacting to this behaviour and subsequently getting into trouble, feeling that staff had not listened carefully enough to the circumstances surrounding their actions.

The strongest providers viewed learner voice as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Staff regularly sought learners' views, revisited issues over time and adapted support as circumstances changed. This helped ensure that support remained relevant while learners felt actively involved in their educational experience.

3.3 Participation in planning and decision-making

Beyond opportunities to express their views, care-experienced learners also highlighted the importance of being involved in decisions affecting their education and support. Meaningful participation involved more than consultation. Learners were most positive where they understood why decisions were being made, contributed to discussions and could see that their views influenced outcomes.

Across the providers visited, learners were involved in a range of planning and review processes, including PEPs, individual support arrangements and wider discussions about school experiences. The quality of participation varied. In stronger practice, learners were active participants in discussions about their learning, aspirations and support. Elsewhere, participation was more limited and focused on providing information rather than influencing decisions.

Learners valued opportunities to discuss their goals, preferences and aspirations with adults who listened and responded constructively. Where participation was meaningful, support arrangements were often better aligned with learners' needs, circumstances and aspirations. Learners were also more likely to understand the reasons behind decisions and engage positively with agreed plans.

Participation was most effective where learners could contribute in ways that felt safe and appropriate to them. Some learners were comfortable contributing in meetings, while others preferred individual conversations, written contributions or support from trusted adults to help express their views.

Learners generally spoke positively about opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting them. However, a minority felt that decisions had already been made or were unclear how their views had been considered, reducing their confidence that participation would lead to meaningful change.

One learner reflected:

‘Adults should not make decisions about us without us.’

Meaningful participation was particularly important during periods of transition or uncertainty. Learners valued being involved in discussions about school moves, support arrangements and future pathways. Where adults took time to explain options, discuss

implications and involve learners appropriately, young people reported feeling more confident and better prepared for change.

Supporting meaningful participation and influence (Crossgates Primary School)

Leaders at Crossgates Primary School created purposeful opportunities for care-experienced learners to influence decisions at school, local authority and national levels. Learners participated in conferences, contributed to discussions with elected members (local councillors) and Welsh Government representatives and helped shape developments affecting care-experienced children and young people.

The school worked effectively with partners to remove barriers to participation and ensure that learners' views were heard, valued and acted upon. Care-experienced learners also contributed to recruitment processes for social workers and senior school leaders demonstrating the school's commitment to involving them in decisions that mattered.

Leaders reported that these opportunities helped learners develop confidence, leadership skills and a stronger sense of agency. The approach demonstrated how participation could move beyond consultation and create meaningful opportunities for learners to influence services, practice and decisions that affected their lives.

Overall, participation was most effective where learners could see a clear connection between their views and subsequent actions. In these contexts, participation strengthened learners' confidence, sense of agency and engagement with education while helping providers make better-informed decisions about support and provision.

3.4 Reducing stigma and promoting inclusion

Learners, carers and stakeholders highlighted the importance of reducing stigma associated with care experience and creating environments where learners felt included, respected and valued. For some learners, concerns about being viewed differently by peers or adults influenced how comfortable they felt participating in school life and accessing support.

Across learner engagement activity, learners generally wanted to be recognised as individuals rather than defined by their care experience. Providers were most successful where they balanced sensitive understanding of learners' experiences with consistently high expectations, ensuring that support did not inadvertently reinforce lower aspirations or dependency. Many learners spoke positively about schools where staff demonstrated understanding without drawing unnecessary attention to their circumstances. These

learners were more likely to feel comfortable accessing support and participating fully in school life.

Learners and stakeholders highlighted that stigma was not always intentional. It could arise through everyday assumptions, language, curriculum activities or approaches that viewed care-experienced learners primarily through the lens of vulnerability rather than recognising their strengths, interests and aspirations. As one learner explained:

‘Not everything that happens is down to my experience in care and there (are) always other factors.’

Stakeholder evidence also highlighted the importance of understanding how everyday aspects of school life could affect care-experienced learners. Evidence from Brown and Shelton (2024) and Adoption UK (2024) relating to adopted learners similarly highlights how identity, disclosure, family narratives and assumptions within school activities can influence belonging and engagement. Learners and third-sector organisations identified examples of curriculum activities, classroom discussions and school events that could unintentionally cause distress or reinforce feelings of difference. Examples included activities focused on family trees, genetics and family histories where alternative approaches had not been considered.

The strongest providers anticipated these issues and reflected carefully on activities relating to family relationships, personal histories and identity. They adapted approaches where appropriate and provided alternative ways for learners to participate without feeling excluded, ensuring that all learners could engage meaningfully in learning.

Many providers promoted inclusive approaches that sought to minimise unnecessary distinctions between care-experienced learners and their peers. In stronger practice, leaders balanced this with targeted support, recognising that treating learners in exactly the same way could sometimes overlook additional barriers or needs.

Learners and carers also described occasions where assumptions were made about care-experienced children and young people. A minority reported feeling labelled because of their circumstances or treated differently from their peers. One learner commented:

‘People just assume things about you when they find out you're in care.’

Stakeholders highlighted that low expectations, deficit-based language and misunderstanding of care experience could undermine learners' confidence, participation and sense of belonging.

Decisions about whether to share information about a learner's care experience with members of staff were often complex. While many learners recognised the benefits of key

staff understanding their circumstances, they wanted greater control over how personal information was shared and who knew about their care experience. Learners valued approaches that respected privacy, handled information sensitively and avoided drawing unnecessary attention to support arrangements.

Learners raised concerns about occasions when they were asked, in front of peers, to attend meetings or leave lessons for support such as therapy, which could inadvertently disclose personal information. This highlighted the importance of discretion and sensitivity in everyday practice and the need to avoid unintended stigma. One learner commented:

‘Keep tricky subjects confidential instead of yelling them across the classroom.’

Several learners also described experiences of bullying or negative comments linked to their care status. One learner explained:

‘I wish school would stop boys picking on me for being in foster care.’

These experiences could affect learners’ confidence, attendance and engagement with education. Learners valued staff who responded quickly and effectively when concerns arose and who challenged stereotypes or discriminatory behaviour.

Learners also highlighted that stigma was not limited to children who were currently looked after. A number of adopted learners described experiences of bullying and derogatory comments relating to their adoption status, both in school and on social media. These experiences often centred on assumptions about family relationships and identity and could reinforce feelings of difference, exclusion and vulnerability. In a small number of cases, these experiences contributed to learners withdrawing, disengaging from education or reacting in ways that led to behavioural difficulties and disciplinary issues in school.

These findings align with recently updated Welsh Government (2026e) guidance on challenging bullying and harassment, which recognises care experience as an aspect of identity that can lead to prejudice-based bullying. The guidance also highlights the vulnerability of care-experienced learners to stigma, particularly during periods of change and transition.

In stronger practice, staff recognised that reducing stigma involved more than responding to individual incidents. They fostered inclusive cultures where care-experienced learners felt respected, understood and able to participate fully in learning and wider school life. In these settings, learners were more likely to feel that they belonged and engage confidently in education.

Chapter 3 summary

Relationships, belonging and learner voice emerged as central features of positive educational experiences for care-experienced learners. Learners consistently highlighted the importance of trusted adults who listened, understood their circumstances and provided reliable support. These relationships helped learners feel known, valued and included within their school community.

Trusted relationships were the foundation for meaningful learner voice and participation. Learners were more likely to share concerns, seek support and contribute to decisions where they felt understood and confident that adults would listen and respond. Meaningful participation was strongest where learners could see that their views influenced support, planning and decisions.

A strong sense of belonging was closely linked to learners' engagement with education. Learners were most positive where staff demonstrated understanding, maintained high expectations and helped them feel accepted as individuals rather than defined by their care experience.

The review also highlighted the continuing impact of stigma, prejudice and assumptions about care experience. Learners described the importance of respectful approaches to confidentiality, sensitive handling of personal information and swift responses to bullying or discriminatory behaviour. Adopted learners and other care-experienced groups also reported stigma linked to family circumstances and identity.

Overall, providers were most effective where relationships, belonging and learner voice were understood as integral to learners' engagement and success in education.

Toolkit 3: Evaluating relationships, belonging and learner voice

This toolkit is intended to support schools, PRUs and local authorities to reflect on how effectively they build trusted relationships with care-experienced learners and ensure that learners' views, experiences and aspirations influence support and decision-making.

Features of stronger practice

In stronger practice:

- learners have access to trusted adults who understand their experiences, strengths and aspirations
- learners feel safe, respected and valued and experience a strong sense of belonging
- staff demonstrate understanding of care experience through everyday interactions and responses
- learners are able to share their views through regular conversations and meaningful relationships, not just through formal processes
- learners' views influence decisions about their support, learning and future plans
- learners understand how their views have influenced decisions and actions
- schools, PRUs and local authorities respond sensitively to issues relating to identity, stigma, confidentiality and care experience
- leaders evaluate how effectively relationships, belonging and learner voice support learners' engagement and educational experiences

Questions to support self-evaluation

- How do we know that care-experienced learners have trusted adults they can turn to?
- What evidence tells us that learners feel safe, respected and that they belong?
- How do we know that staff understand learners' experiences and respond appropriately in their everyday practice?
- How do we know that learners have regular and meaningful opportunities to share their views, rather than being consulted only through formal meetings?
- What evidence shows that learners influence decisions about their learning, support and future plans?
- How effectively do we identify and respond to issues relating to identity, stigma, confidentiality and care experience?
- What evidence demonstrates that relationships, belonging and learner voice are improving learners' engagement and educational experiences?

Possible evidence sources

- learner, parent and carer and staff feedback

- learner participation in PEP reviews and support planning
- examples of learner voice informing support, planning and decision-making
- attendance, participation and engagement information
- case tracking and learner reviews
- records of learner participation groups or forums
- evidence of changes made in response to learner feedback
- self-evaluation and improvement planning documentation

Chapter 4 – Transitions and continuity

Educational stability and continuity help care-experienced learners remain engaged in learning, sustain positive relationships and make progress over time. Placement stability and educational stability are closely related, but they are not the same. A change in living arrangements does not always lead to a school move and learners may still experience disruption to learning, relationships or support even when they remain in the same school.

Research evidence using linked administrative data in Wales has highlighted the relationships between care experience, school instability, attendance, exclusions and educational outcomes, reinforcing the importance of maintaining stability and continuity wherever possible (Lowthian et al., 2025a; Lowthian et al., 2025b).

This chapter explores how schools, PRUs and local authorities maintained educational continuity for care-experienced learners during periods of change. It considers placement changes, transitions between phases of education, information sharing, multi-agency working and continuity of Welsh-medium education.

4.1 Educational continuity through periods of instability

Educational continuity emerged as one of the most important factors in helping care-experienced learners remain engaged and make progress. Evidence from provider visits, local authorities, survey responses and stakeholders associated greater continuity with improved well-being, stronger relationships and better opportunities to learn.

Welsh Government data provides important national context. On 31 March 2025, 601 children looked after, or 8%, had experienced three or more placements during the year. While this proportion has remained relatively stable in recent years, the proportion of children placed outside their home local authority and outside Wales has increased (Welsh Government, 2026a). This highlights the importance of maintaining educational continuity when learners experience changes in placement, location or support.

Inspectors found that the most effective providers and local authorities recognised that educational stability and placement stability were closely related but not the same. Changes in living arrangements did not always result in disruption to education and, conversely, learners could experience disruption to learning, relationships or support even when they remained in the same school. Leaders recognised that interruptions to learning, repeated changes in relationships and instability in support arrangements could have a cumulative impact on learners' sense of belonging, well-being and success in learning.

Educational continuity also needed to be considered when learners moved towards permanent care arrangements, including adoption, special guardianship or reunification with their birth family. These changes could affect relationships, emotional well-being, support arrangements and engagement in learning, even where the learner remained in the same school.

Placement changes nevertheless remained a significant risk to educational continuity. Leaders, practitioners and stakeholders consistently highlighted their potential impact on learners' relationships, engagement and progress, particularly where changes disrupted schooling or resulted in the loss of trusted adults.

Across the review, schools and PRUs frequently acted as an important source of continuity when other aspects of learners' lives were changing. Staff often knew learners well and provided stability and reassurance during periods of uncertainty. In one secondary school visited, learners described the school as '*their constant*', highlighting the role that educational settings could play in providing continuity during wider instability.

Learner evidence reinforced this message. In a poem shared for this review (Appendix 2), a former Ysgol Nantgwyn learner reflected:

'My school gave me stability, something my life has always lacked.'

The strongest local authorities and providers worked proactively to minimise unnecessary disruption when learners experienced placement changes or changes in family circumstances. Education remained an important consideration in wider planning and professionals recognised the value of preserving school placements, trusted relationships and established support arrangements wherever possible.

Maintaining continuity was not always straightforward. Local authorities highlighted challenges relating to placement availability, transport, geographical distance and access to suitable provision. In some circumstances, school moves were unavoidable or necessary for safeguarding, specialist support or family reasons. Where disruption could not be avoided, stronger practice focused on maintaining continuity of learning, relationships and support through careful planning and effective communication.

The review highlighted that continuity involved more than remaining in the same school. Providers and local authorities were most effective where they acted deliberately to protect learners' access to learning, support and opportunities during periods of change.

4.2 Supporting continuity during transition

Transitions between phases of education represented an important point of vulnerability for many care-experienced learners. Moving between schools or settings could disrupt

established relationships, routines and support arrangements, creating uncertainty at a time when stability was particularly important.

Across the providers visited, transition arrangements for care-experienced learners were generally well developed. The strongest practice focused on helping learners maintain continuity of relationships, support and understanding before, during and after transition. Early planning, collaboration between providers and opportunities for learners to influence arrangements helped reduce uncertainty and enabled staff to respond to learners' individual circumstances and needs.

Using personalised transition materials to reduce anxiety (St Julian's School)

Leaders at St Julian's School recognised that transition into secondary school could be particularly challenging for care-experienced learners, especially those who had experienced instability disrupted education or anxiety about change.

For a minority of learners, staff developed personalised transition booklets containing photographs of key areas of the school and information about routines, expectations and sources of support. These were used alongside additional visits and opportunities to meet trusted adults before transition helping learners become familiar with their new environment at their own pace.

Leaders reported that these arrangements helped reduce anxiety and enabled learners to settle more confidently into secondary school life. Staff noted that these learners engaged more readily with adults, routines and support following transition helping them make a more positive and successful start to secondary education.

The strongest transition arrangements extended beyond simply sharing information. Receiving staff developed an understanding of learners' strengths, needs and circumstances before they joined a new setting, reducing the need for learners to repeatedly explain their experiences. Learners benefited where providers identified trusted adults who could provide continuity and ensure that support was available from the outset.

Learners highlighted the importance of being listened to during transition periods. They valued opportunities to discuss concerns, influence arrangements and build relationships before moving. Where learners were involved in planning, they were generally more positive about the transition.

Learners described how transitions could feel uncertain and emotionally challenging without appropriate support:

‘When I start somewhere new, I need people to understand I might feel lost or confused - not just ‘new’.’

‘Please be patient with me - I might not feel safe yet.’

Discussions with learners also highlighted the importance of early relationships and continuity of support:

‘Just knowing there’s someone I can talk to every day makes a difference.’

‘My behaviour might be different because my life is different - I need understanding, not punishment.’

Responses to the local authority survey showed that many local authorities had arrangements in place to support transitions for care-experienced learners, although these were not always formalised or applied consistently. Practice was strongest where support was flexible and responsive to individual circumstances rather than relying only on standard transition arrangements or timescales.

Despite these strengths, practice remained variable. In a minority of cases, transition arrangements relied heavily on individual staff members or informal relationships between providers. Where planning was less effective, information was not always shared promptly and learners occasionally experienced delays in accessing support within their new setting. These weaknesses reduced continuity at a point when learners were often most vulnerable to disengagement or anxiety.

Providers that were most successful viewed transition as an ongoing process rather than a single event. Support continued after learners moved settings, and staff monitored engagement, attendance and well-being during the early stages. This helped identify concerns quickly and maintain support as learners settled into their new environment.

4.3 Sharing information and coordinated support

Effective sharing of information and multi-agency working played an important role in maintaining continuity for care-experienced learners. Across the providers and local authorities visited, stronger practice was characterised by timely communication, clear responsibilities and a shared understanding of learners’ circumstances and needs. These arrangements helped ensure that educational considerations remained central during periods of change.

Day-to-day working relationships between education and children’s services were often a strength. Where communication was effective, providers were better able to understand learners’ circumstances, respond quickly to emerging concerns and maintain continuity of support when learners experienced placement changes, school moves or other

disruptions. Timely sharing of information also reduced the need for learners to repeatedly explain personal experiences to different professionals.

The strongest local authorities recognised that effective sharing of information involved more than transferring information between services. Shared planning, joint oversight and regular professional dialogue helped ensure learners remained visible within education services and kept support coordinated when circumstances changed.

Strengthening continuity and communication through integrated working (Denbighshire)

Leaders in Denbighshire local authority have established strong joint working arrangements between education and children's services through shared planning, joint management structures, integrated information systems and regular operational meetings. These arrangements help ensure that educational considerations remain visible within wider care planning and decision-making.

A key feature of this approach is the close collaboration between the children looked after (CLA) Education Liaison Officer, inclusion managers, schools and social care teams. Regular professional discussions enable services to identify concerns early, share information effectively and coordinate support for learners experiencing placement instability, disengagement or other vulnerabilities.

Leaders reported that these arrangements had improved communication, clarified roles and responsibilities and strengthened continuity of support during periods of transition and change. The approach had also helped maintain a clearer focus on educational outcomes within corporate parenting responsibilities and supported earlier, more coordinated intervention when concerns arose.

Practice was less consistent where communication relied heavily on individual professional relationships rather than shared systems and processes. A minority of local authorities reported challenges relating to data-sharing, workforce changes and communication across organisational boundaries. These issues sometimes delayed support or reduced continuity when learners moved between settings or local authority areas.

Changes in key professionals could also affect continuity. Learners and providers highlighted the impact of frequent changes in social workers and other professionals, particularly where new relationships needed to be established quickly. Although workforce changes were often unavoidable, they sometimes reduced continuity and

created additional uncertainty for learners who had already experienced significant disruption in other aspects of their lives.

Overall, where communication was timely, responsibilities were clear and support was coordinated, learners were more likely to remain visible and sustain engagement with learning during periods of change.

4.4 Welsh-medium continuity

For care-experienced learners educated through the medium of Welsh, continuity of language and educational provision was an important part of educational stability, identity and belonging. Local authorities had a responsibility to take learners' language needs into account and to work proactively to maintain continuity of Welsh-medium education when care placements, schools or support arrangements changed.

Practice was not equitable across Wales. Where local authorities understood Welsh-medium continuity as an entitlement and incorporated it into education and care planning from the outset, they worked proactively to maintain learners' existing language of education. This included arranging transport, challenging proposed changes of school or language medium, coordinating provision across local authority boundaries and securing additional Welsh-medium support, where necessary.

In other areas, learners' access to continued Welsh-medium education was constrained by the availability and location of care placements, geographical distance, transport arrangements and limited access to suitable Welsh-medium provision. These difficulties were particularly evident when learners moved across local authority boundaries or were placed outside Wales.

Where continuity could not be maintained, this generally reflected wider system constraints rather than decisions by individual schools. Nevertheless, local authorities had a responsibility to plan proactively, through placement planning and sufficiency arrangements, to minimise this inequity wherever possible.

Continuity extended beyond the language of classroom teaching. The availability of Welsh-speaking professionals affected whether PEP and ALN processes, review meetings, therapeutic support and wider services could be provided through the learner's preferred language. Where this was not available, learners could experience discontinuity in communication, planning and support even when they remained in a Welsh-medium school.

Overall, the most effective local authorities treated Welsh-medium continuity as an integral part of educational and care planning rather than as an additional consideration. However, learners did not have equitable access to this continuity across Wales.

Chapter 4 summary

Educational continuity emerged as one of the most important factors in helping care-experienced learners remain engaged in education during periods of change. Learners, practitioners and leaders highlighted the value of continuity in learning, relationships, support and belonging.

Schools and PRUs often acted as an important source of stability when other aspects of learners' lives were changing. In the most effective providers, this involved more than maintaining a school placement. Staff worked proactively to preserve trusted relationships, sustain engagement in learning and ensure that support remained available.

Placement changes, transitions between phases of education and changes in professional support all presented risks to continuity. Practice was strongest where planning was proactive, learners were involved in decision-making and support remained flexible and responsive to individual circumstances. Where arrangements relied too heavily on individual members of staff or informal relationships, continuity was more vulnerable to disruption.

Effective sharing of information and multi-agency working helped ensure that learners remained known, understood and supported. Stronger local authorities and providers used shared systems, clear responsibilities and regular communication to keep educational considerations central during periods of change.

Continuity of Welsh-medium education was an important part of educational stability, identity and belonging for learners following this pathway. Although effective local authorities worked proactively to protect this continuity, access was not equitable across Wales.

Overall, providers and local authorities were most effective where they treated educational continuity as a priority and worked collaboratively to protect learners' access to learning, relationships and support during periods of change.

Toolkit 4: Evaluating transitions and continuity

This toolkit is intended to support schools, PRUs and local authorities to reflect on how effectively they promote educational continuity and support care-experienced learners during periods of transition and change.

Features of stronger practice

In stronger practice:

- schools, PRUs and local authorities recognise educational continuity as essential to helping care-experienced learners remain engaged in learning during periods of change
- planning for transitions and changes begins early and reflects learners' individual circumstances and needs
- information is shared promptly and appropriately to support continuity and reduce the need for learners to repeat personal information
- arrangements minimise disruption to learning, engagement and support when circumstances change
- learners remain known, understood and supported when they move between providers or access alternative provision
- local authorities and providers plan proactively to protect continuity of Welsh-medium education and access to Welsh-language support where this is the learner's existing or chosen language pathway
- providers work collaboratively to maintain continuity of learning, relationships and support during placement moves, school changes, transitions to permanent care arrangements and other periods of instability
- leaders evaluate the impact of transition and continuity arrangements on learners' experiences, engagement and progress

Questions to support self-evaluation

- How do we know that educational continuity is maintained during placement moves, school changes and other periods of instability?
- What evidence demonstrates that transition planning begins early enough and reflects learners' individual needs?
- How effectively do our information-sharing arrangements reduce disruption to learning and support?
- How well do schools, PRUs, local authorities and other agencies work together to maintain continuity?
- How do we know that learners remain visible and continue to receive appropriate support when they move between providers or access alternative provision?

- How effectively do we protect learners' continuity of Welsh-medium education and access to Welsh-language support when their school, care placement or support arrangements change?
- How do we know that our transition arrangements improve learners' engagement, progress and educational experiences?

Possible evidence sources

- transition plans, reviews and learner support plans
- learner, parent/carer and staff feedback
- attendance, engagement and progress information before and after transitions
- records of placement moves and school changes
- information-sharing and multi-agency working records
- case tracking and learner reviews
- destination and progression information
- Welsh-medium continuity arrangements
- self-evaluation and improvement planning documentation

Chapter 5 – Equity and opportunity

Care-experienced learners should have equitable access to learning, enrichment and future opportunities, regardless of their individual circumstances or care experience. Effective providers recognise that fairness is achieved not by treating every learner in exactly the same way, but by understanding and removing barriers that may prevent learners from accessing the same opportunities and outcomes as their peers. This includes equitable access to Welsh-medium education and Welsh-language support for learners who wished to continue through this language pathway.

Research and policy evidence suggest that some groups of care-experienced learners may become less visible within education systems once they are no longer formally looked after. However, many continue to experience the effects of earlier adversity, disrupted early relationships and changes in care or education (Adoption UK, 2024; Lowthian et al., 2025a; Paine, Perra and Shelton, 2025).

This chapter considers how schools, PRUs and local authorities promoted inclusion and removed barriers to participation. It explores how they maintained ambitious expectations, ensured equitable access to learning, enrichment, qualifications and personal development and supported progression to further education, training and employment.

5.1 Visibility and identification

Ensuring that care-experienced learners remained visible within the education system emerged as one of the most important themes in the review. Schools, PRUs and local authorities were generally well placed to support learners whose circumstances were known to them. Where care experience was understood, leaders were better able to identify barriers, monitor participation and outcomes and provide appropriate support.

This review does not advocate routine or mandatory identification of all care-experienced learners. Rather, it highlights the importance of creating environments in which learners and families feel able to share information voluntarily where this will help schools understand their circumstances and provide appropriate support. Where information is shared, it should be handled sensitively, confidentially and only for the purpose of improving learners' educational experiences and outcomes.

Visibility was strongest for children looked after. Established statutory processes, monitoring arrangements and reporting requirements helped schools, PRUs and local authorities maintain oversight of learners' attendance, well-being, participation and

educational progress. As a result, providers were often able to identify patterns, respond to concerns and evaluate outcomes for this group.

Experiences were less consistent for other groups of care-experienced learners, including those who were adopted, living in kinship care arrangements, subject to special guardianship orders or previously looked after. Although many providers recognised that these learners could experience challenges linked to early adversity, disrupted relationships, loss, family change and difficulties building trusting relationships, they were not routinely identified or included within existing monitoring arrangements. As a result, leaders often had less information about their educational experiences, engagement and outcomes.

A key challenge related to privacy and disclosure. Many providers were understandably cautious about asking families to disclose adoption status or other personal circumstances. Families and learners have a right to privacy and may not wish to share information about their experiences. At the same time, learner and stakeholder evidence suggested that a lack of visibility could limit opportunities for schools to understand learners' experiences and respond effectively when difficulties arise.

Learners and families frequently highlighted the importance of having control over who knew about their circumstances and how information was shared. Many did not want their care experience to define them but valued having key adults who understood their background and could respond sensitively when needed. For example, adopted learners who contributed to the review commented:

'Teachers should know I am adopted.'

'I want my school to know I am adopted.'

These views reflected a wider finding that learners often wanted understanding rather than secrecy, alongside confidence that personal information would be handled sensitively and confidentially.

Where practice was strongest, staff and leaders created safe and voluntary opportunities for learners and families to share information that might support education. They created a positive culture in which learners and families felt safe to disclose care experience, confident that information would be handled sensitively and used to provide appropriate support without creating stigma. Leaders recognised that identification was not about labelling learners or lowering expectations. Instead, it enabled providers to understand individual circumstances, identify potential barriers and ensure that support could be accessed when needed. Information about care experience was considered alongside other factors such as ALN, attendance, emotional well-being, language and family circumstances to build a fuller understanding of learners' experiences.

The review highlighted that visibility is not simply an administrative issue. It is closely linked to educational equity and opportunity. Learners are more likely to access appropriate support, participate fully in education and benefit from timely intervention when their circumstances are understood. In the most effective providers, visibility was a means of ensuring that learners received appropriate support and remained included in education.

5.2 Equity, belonging and inclusion

The review identified an important distinction between equality and equity. Many leaders and practitioners rightly wanted care-experienced learners to be treated in the same way as their peers. This reflected positive intentions and a desire to avoid stigma or singling learners out. However, treating learners in the same way did not always result in equitable experiences or outcomes.

The strongest providers recognised that fairness did not always mean treating learners in the same way. Instead, they sought to understand and remove barriers that might limit participation, learning or well-being. These barriers varied considerably and could relate to instability, emotional well-being, poverty, family circumstances, attendance, confidence or previous educational experiences. Providers were most effective where support was tailored to need while maintaining high expectations for participation, achievement and future success.

The review found that a strong sense of belonging was an important feature of equitable practice. Learners were most likely to engage fully in learning and wider school life where they felt accepted, understood and included within their school or PRU community. Belonging was closely linked to confidence, engagement and aspiration.

Using PDG-CLA funding to strengthen belonging and participation (Ceredigion)

Information from the local authority highlighted how leaders in Ysgol Penglais used PDG-CLA funding to support a creative project exploring the theme of belonging with care-experienced learners and a local artist.

Learners reflected on what belonging meant to them in relation to family, school and the wider community. Their ideas informed a series of large-scale artworks displayed throughout the school providing meaningful opportunities for learners to explore their identity, express their experiences and make a valued contribution to the school environment.

Staff reported that the project strengthened learners' sense of belonging, confidence and connection to the school community. Learners described the Penglais community

as “another family”, illustrating the positive impact the project had in helping them feel included and valued within school life.



Learners and stakeholders highlighted the importance of reducing stigma. Inclusive practice was strongest where care-experienced learners could access support without feeling defined by their circumstances and remained full members of the wider school community.

This was particularly important for adopted learners, learners living in kinship care arrangements and others whose experiences were not always visible within formal systems. Stakeholders reported that needs could sometimes be overlooked when providers assumed that the absence of formal care status meant the absence of vulnerability. Stronger providers focused on understanding learners' circumstances rather than relying solely on legal definitions or eligibility criteria.

Equity was also reflected in the extent to which providers removed practical barriers to participation. Leaders recognised that learners could not benefit fully from education if financial, social or emotional barriers prevented them from accessing the same opportunities as their peers. Rather than assuming that equal access automatically resulted in equitable involvement, stronger providers considered what additional support might be required to enable learners to participate confidently and successfully.

Reducing barriers to inclusion through community and family engagement (Cwmbran High School)

Leaders at Cwmbran High School recognised that financial and social barriers limited some learners' participation in wider school life. In response, they adopted a proactive approach to ensuring that care-experienced learners and other vulnerable groups could access the same opportunities as their peers and participate fully in the life of the school.

Led by the Family and Community Engagement (FACE) officer, the school identified and addressed practical barriers to participation. This included developing inclusive whole-school activities, such as '*Branfest*', to provide enriching experiences that all learners could access regardless of financial circumstances. Alongside this, the school provided targeted support where individual learners faced additional barriers to participation, helping to ensure that no learner was excluded from opportunities because of their personal circumstances.

The school complemented this work through family support activities, flexible opportunities for parental involvement and close collaboration with external agencies. Leaders reported that these approaches strengthened relationships with families and increased participation, helping more learners access enrichment opportunities and develop a stronger sense of belonging.

Across the review, the strongest providers understood that visibility alone was insufficient. They focused on understanding individual circumstances and removing barriers that might prevent learners from participating, achieving and thriving alongside their peers.

5.3 Participation, opportunity and aspiration

Educational equity extended beyond attendance and access to support. Care-experienced learners were most likely to thrive where they could participate fully in learning, enrichment activities and wider school life. Providers that were most successful recognised that equitable experiences required more than removing immediate barriers. They ensured that learners could access the same opportunities to develop confidence, relationships, skills and aspirations as their peers.

Participation emerged as an important indicator of inclusion. Learners frequently spoke positively about opportunities to take part in educational visits, clubs, sports, creative activities and leadership roles. These experiences often helped learners develop confidence, experience success and strengthen their sense of belonging. Leaders also

recognised that participation in wider school life could contribute to well-being, engagement with learning and future opportunities.

Providers frequently worked to remove barriers that limited participation. This included support with transport, cost, equipment, attendance and confidence, as well as practical assistance to access educational visits, extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities. Inspectors found that the most effective providers monitored participation carefully and acted where learners were underrepresented in wider school experiences.

Care-experienced learners formed a notable proportion of the population in the PRUs visited and also accessed internal, specialist or other provision outside their usual mainstream classes in a minority of the mainstream schools visited. Although this review did not examine referral pathways in sufficient depth to establish the reasons for this pattern, it highlights the importance of local authorities and schools reviewing learners' pathways into provision outside their usual mainstream classes, the support provided before placement and the extent to which placements improve engagement, learning and longer-term outcomes.

Curriculum access was equally important. Stronger providers recognised that reduced timetables, alternative provision and personalised pathways could play an important role in maintaining engagement during periods of difficulty. However, these approaches required regular review to ensure that learners continued to access a broad curriculum and appropriate qualifications, while keeping future opportunities open. In a minority of providers, this level of evaluation was lacking. As a result, arrangements intended to support learners in the short term sometimes risked limiting opportunities over time.

Educational equity also involved ensuring that learners could participate fully in curriculum activities without feeling excluded or defined by their circumstances. Learner and stakeholder evidence highlighted that activities based on assumptions about traditional family structures, such as family trees, baby photographs, inherited characteristics or family history, could be difficult for some care-experienced learners. This approach was most effective where staff anticipated these issues and adapted activities sensitively so that all learners could participate meaningfully. This supported both inclusion and equitable access to learning.

The review also highlighted the importance of maintaining ambitious expectations for care-experienced learners. The strongest providers rejected assumptions that care experience should limit educational achievement or future opportunities. They combined understanding and support with high expectations for participation, learning and progression, while actively promoting a wide range of future pathways, including further education, higher education, apprenticeships and employment.

Learners frequently highlighted the importance of adults who believed in them, recognised their strengths and encouraged them to consider opportunities they might not previously have viewed as achievable. One learner reflected:

‘If I leave without qualifications, this will reinforce negative self-belief about me and the trajectory of my life.’

Promoting participation and opportunity (Newbridge School)

Leaders at Newbridge School maintained high expectations for care-experienced learners’ participation in wider school life. They monitored involvement in trips, clubs, leadership activities and celebration events, identifying and addressing financial, social or personal barriers that might prevent learners from taking part. Care-experienced learners took part in a broad range of enrichment opportunities, including sports teams, drama productions, residential experiences and overseas visits. The school also provided practical support where needed, including help with the costs of educational visits and events such as the school prom.

Leaders recognised that these experiences strengthened learners’ confidence, relationships, belonging and aspirations. They also helped ensure that care-experienced learners benefited from the same opportunities as their peers, reinforcing the school's commitment to inclusion, high expectations and equity.

Across the review, high expectations were most powerful when they were reflected in everyday decisions and actions. The strongest providers translated ambition into practice by maintaining high expectations, removing barriers to learning and ensuring that care-experienced learners had equitable access to the curriculum, qualifications and future opportunities. In these settings, staff understood that supporting care-experienced learners meant that they were better placed to participate fully in education, make strong progress, achieve their potential and realise their aspirations.

Chapter 5 summary

Visibility, equity and opportunity were closely connected. Providers were best placed to support care-experienced learners when they understood learners’ circumstances, identified potential barriers and tailored support appropriately.

Visibility was strongest for children looked after and less consistent for wider groups of care-experienced learners and those who had previously been looked after. This limited providers’ ability to understand experiences, identify barriers and monitor outcomes. The strongest providers created safe and voluntary opportunities for learners and families to

share information that could support education, while handling personal information sensitively and respectfully.

The review identified an important distinction between equality and equity. Successful providers recognised that fairness did not always mean treating learners in the same way. Instead, they sought to understand and remove barriers that could limit engagement, learning and well-being.

Educational equity extended beyond access to support. The strongest providers ensured that care-experienced learners could participate fully in learning, enrichment activities, leadership opportunities and wider school life. They monitored participation, removed practical barriers and maintained ambitious expectations for achievement and future opportunities.

High expectations were most effective where they were translated into action through equitable access to the curriculum, qualifications, enrichment and progression pathways.

Overall, care-experienced learners were most likely to thrive where they were known and understood as individuals and where providers combined strong relationships, ambitious expectations, effective partnership working and systematic evaluation of educational outcomes.

Toolkit 5: Evaluating equity and opportunity

This toolkit is intended to support schools, PRUs and local authorities to reflect on how effectively they identify, understand and respond to the needs of care-experienced learners, while promoting belonging, participation and equitable outcomes.

Features of stronger practice

In stronger practice:

- care-experienced learners are known and understood within the school or local authority, without being stigmatised or defined by their circumstances
- schools, PRUs and local authorities create safe opportunities for learners and families to share information voluntarily and use this sensitively to inform support and planning
- staff understand the difference between equality and equity and recognise that learners may require different support to access the same opportunities and outcomes as their peers
- learners experience a strong sense of belonging and are included fully in learning and wider school life
- support is tailored to learners' individual strengths, needs and circumstances and takes account of factors affecting learning and engagement
- leaders identify and remove practical, financial and social barriers to participation
- learners have equitable access to learning, enrichment activities, support services and next steps in learning, training or employment
- leaders and staff maintain ambitious expectations and monitor whether provision is reducing barriers and improving outcomes

Questions to support self-evaluation

- How do we know that all groups of care-experienced learners are identified and understood within our systems?
- Where might adopted learners or learners in kinship care or SGO arrangements be less visible?
- How effectively do we create a culture in which learners and families feel safe to share information about care experience, confident that their wishes about confidentiality will be respected and that the information will be used sensitively to provide appropriate support?
- How do we know that the curriculum is inclusive of care-experienced learners and that activities, content and teaching approaches do not unintentionally exclude, stigmatise or disadvantage them?
- What evidence shows that care-experienced learners feel they belong and can participate fully in school life?

- How do we know that barriers to learning, participation and achievement are being identified and removed?
- What evidence tells us that care-experienced learners have equitable access to learning, enrichment activities and progression opportunities?
- How do we know that our expectations are as ambitious for care-experienced learners as they are for other learners?
- What evidence demonstrates that our provision is improving outcomes and reducing inequalities over time?

Possible evidence sources

- learner, carer and staff feedback
- attendance, engagement, progress and outcome information
- curriculum access, qualification pathways and involvement in enrichment and wider school life
- destination and progression data
- records relating to identification and monitoring of care-experienced learners
- participation in educational visits, enrichment activities, learner leadership opportunities and wider school experiences
- ALN, attendance and well-being information
- Welsh-medium continuity and transition information
- self-evaluation and improvement planning documentation
- corporate parenting and local authority monitoring reports
- equality, diversity and inclusion reviews
- case tracking and learner support reviews

Appendix 1: Reflective questions for governors

Adapted from governor training materials developed by Cardiff Virtual School

These questions are intended to help governors in evaluating how effectively their school promotes the education, well-being and aspirations of care-experienced learners and fulfils its corporate parenting responsibilities.

Visibility and strategic oversight

- How many care-experienced learners attend the school, including those who may no longer be formally looked after?
- How does the governing body assure itself that the school creates a safe and respectful environment in which learners, families and carers feel able to share information about care experience voluntarily?
- How does the governing body assure itself that learners whose circumstances are known are understood and considered appropriately within school improvement and self-evaluation?
- Is there a designated teacher and link governor for care-experienced learners?
- How does the governing body monitor the experiences, well-being, attendance, progress and outcomes of all care-experienced learners?

Belonging, relationships and participation

- How do leaders know whether care-experienced learners feel safe, included and that they belong in the school community?
- What opportunities do care-experienced learners have to contribute their views and influence decisions?
- How do leaders monitor participation in enrichment activities, trips, leadership opportunities and wider school life?
- How does the school celebrate and recognise learners' achievements and successes?

Staff understanding and support

- What professional learning have staff undertaken relating to care experience, attachment and trauma-informed practice?
- How do leaders know that this learning is influencing day-to-day practice?
- How effectively are Personal Education Plans (PEPs) used to support learning, participation and aspiration?
- How effectively are ALN and care experience considered together when planning support?

Ambition, expectations and outcomes

- How well are care-experienced learners progressing from their starting points?
- How do leaders monitor educational progress alongside attendance and well-being?
- How do governors know that expectations for care-experienced learners are sufficiently ambitious?
- What evidence is there that learners are achieving their potential and moving successfully into further education, training or employment?

Transitions and continuity

- How does the school support learners joining mid-year or moving between phases?
- How is continuity maintained during placement changes or changes in professional support?
- How effectively does the school support progression into further education, employment or training?

Reflecting on your corporate parenting role

- How does the school contribute to its role as part of the corporate family?
- Would we be satisfied if this support was being provided to our own children?
- What are the school's strengths in supporting care-experienced learners?
- What remains a priority for improvement?

Appendix 2: Learner Voice – “My School”

My School.

Where to start?

Well, if I had to use one word to describe it, I would use - 'Home'.

Am I crazy?

yes.

Am I delusional?

yes.

Am I right?

Obviously.

My school gave me stability,

Something my life has always lacked.

My school gave me friends,

Something that was taken from me before this school.

My school gave me a chance,

A genuine chance,

No strings attached.

A chance to:

Live,

Learn,

Explore,

Grow,

Evolve.

Live as myself, without the fear that used to follow me.

Learn about the world and the possibilities I could reach.

Explore my identity, my talents, to better work towards success.

Grow past my history, expand my worldview and mature.

Evolve to who I want to be, what I want to be - Happy.

Thanks to this community, I am able to be the person I needed six years ago.

I know my rights.

I know my limits.

I know the path I need to take.

I wouldn't know that without this school,
I wouldn't know that without these people,
This family.

These people taught me to dream.
I don't know where I'd be without that.

They taught me humour, to laugh, to relax.
They taught me care, that not every feeling requires words to be heard.
They taught me simplicity, not every story needs a thousand words to make sense.
They taught me vocalization; nobody can read minds - talk.
They taught me recognition; sometimes there's a storm underneath the calm facade.

These people taught me, these people guided me and these people supported me when nobody else would. That is what being a teacher is about. Not just teaching, but building a relationship, getting to know your pupil and guiding them. These teachers have performed this feat effortlessly. These teachers are legends. I will never forget what these people have done for me.

What my school has done for me.

Everyone has a different experience in school. That was mine.

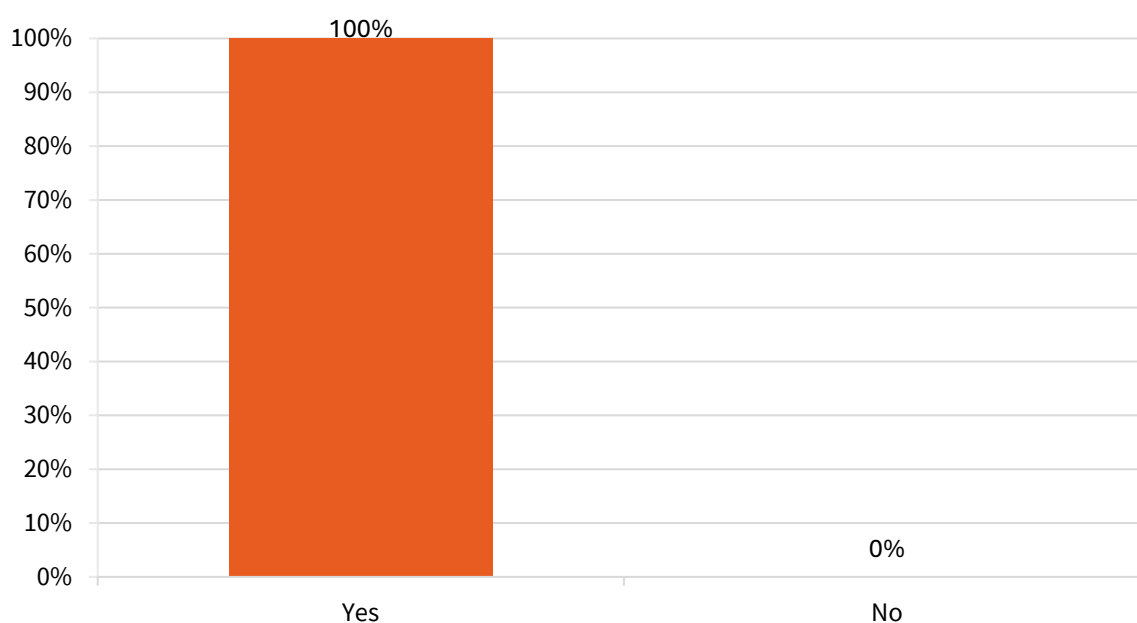
Former Ysgol Nantgwyn learner

Appendix 3: Responses from Local Government Education Services Survey

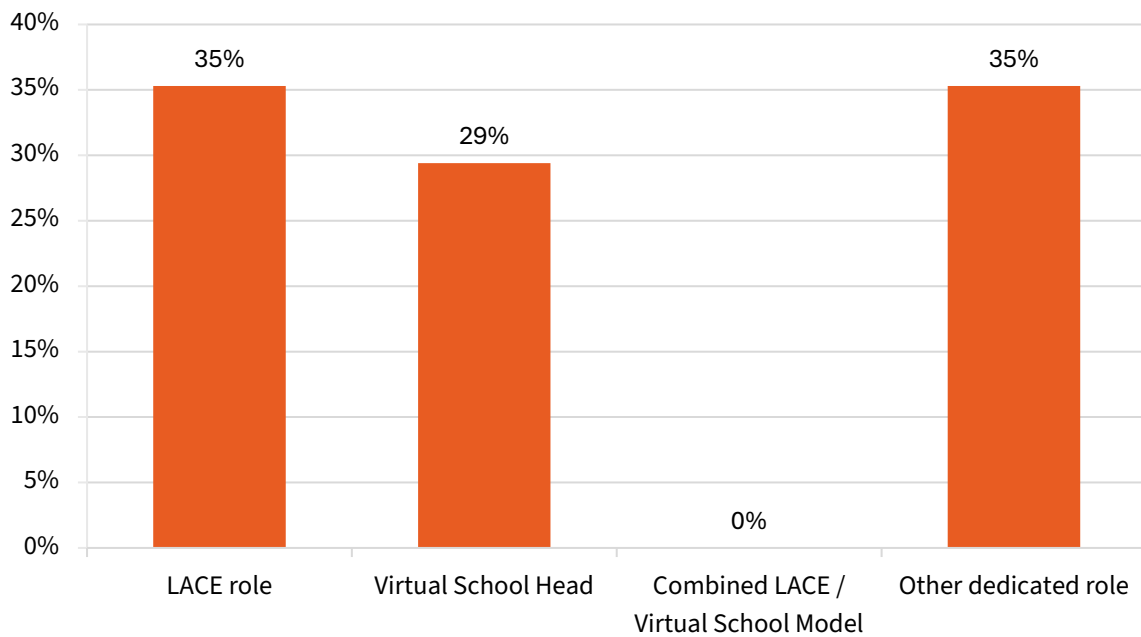
This appendix provides a summary of responses to the survey on local authority arrangements for promoting the education of care-experienced learners. Seventeen out of the twenty-two local authorities responded.

The summary focuses mainly on responses to closed or structured survey questions, where patterns across authorities can be presented clearly. It draws on open-text responses where these helped to explain or contextualise the main findings but does not attempt to reproduce the full range of qualitative comments or provide a detailed account of each authority's individual arrangements.

Figures 1 and 2. Responses to “Does the authority have a designated lead function for the education of care-experienced learners?” and “If yes, please indicate who holds this role”:

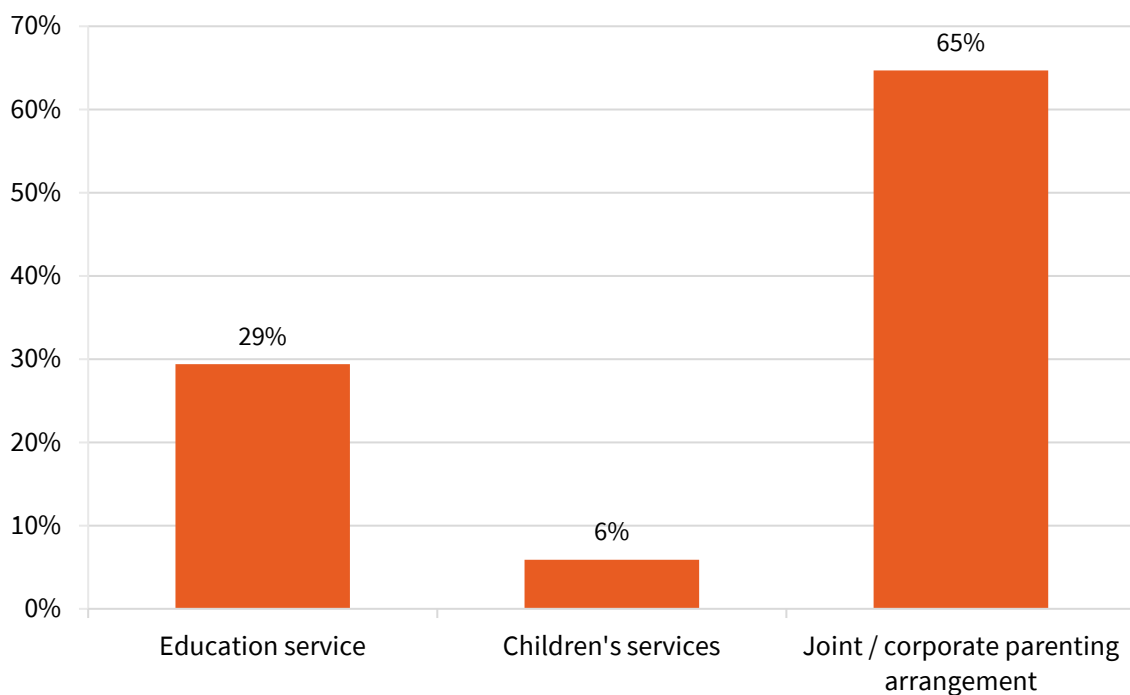


Based on 17 responses.



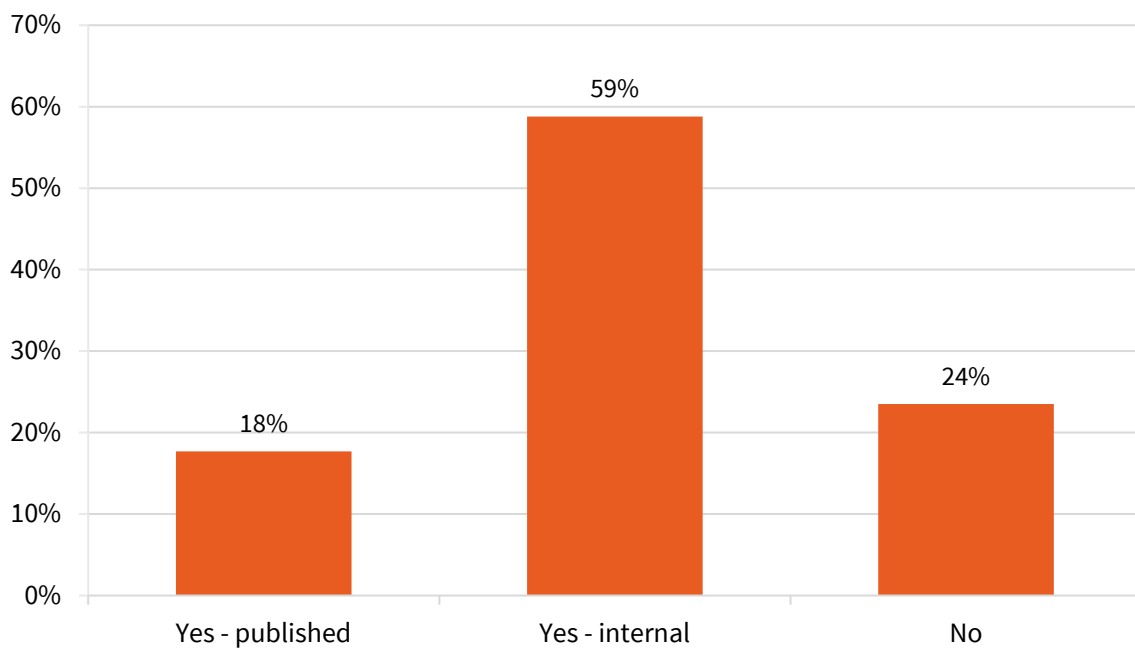
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 3. Responses to “In which service does overall strategic responsibility sit within the local authority for care-experienced learners?”:



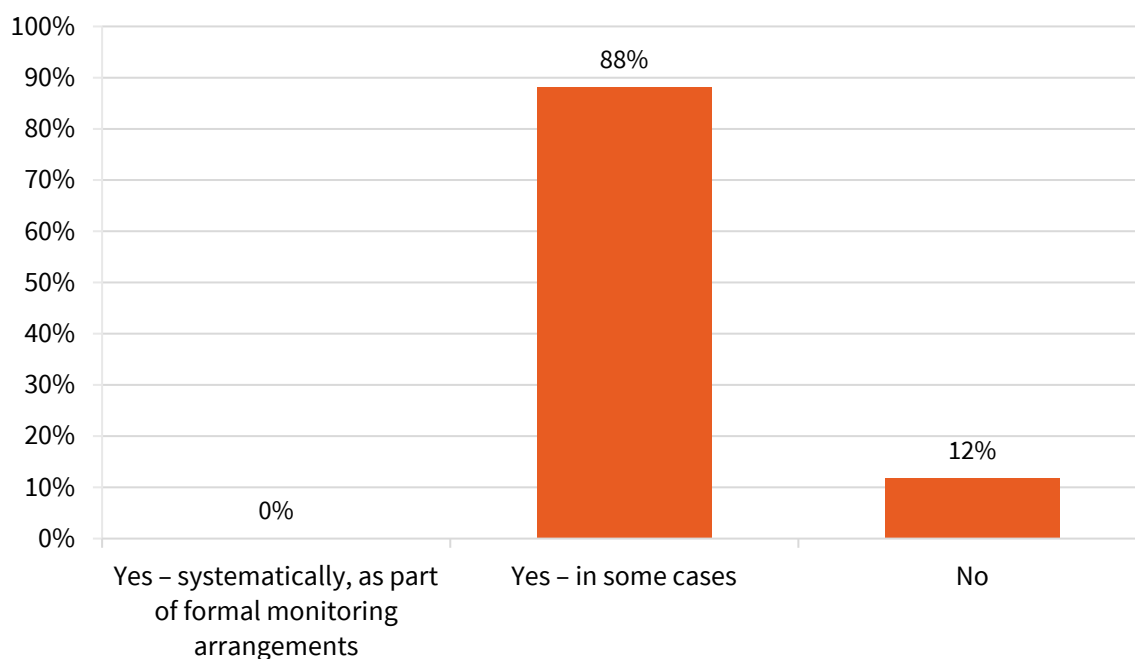
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 4. Responses to “Does the authority have a written strategy or framework for care-experienced learners (aged 3–16)?”:



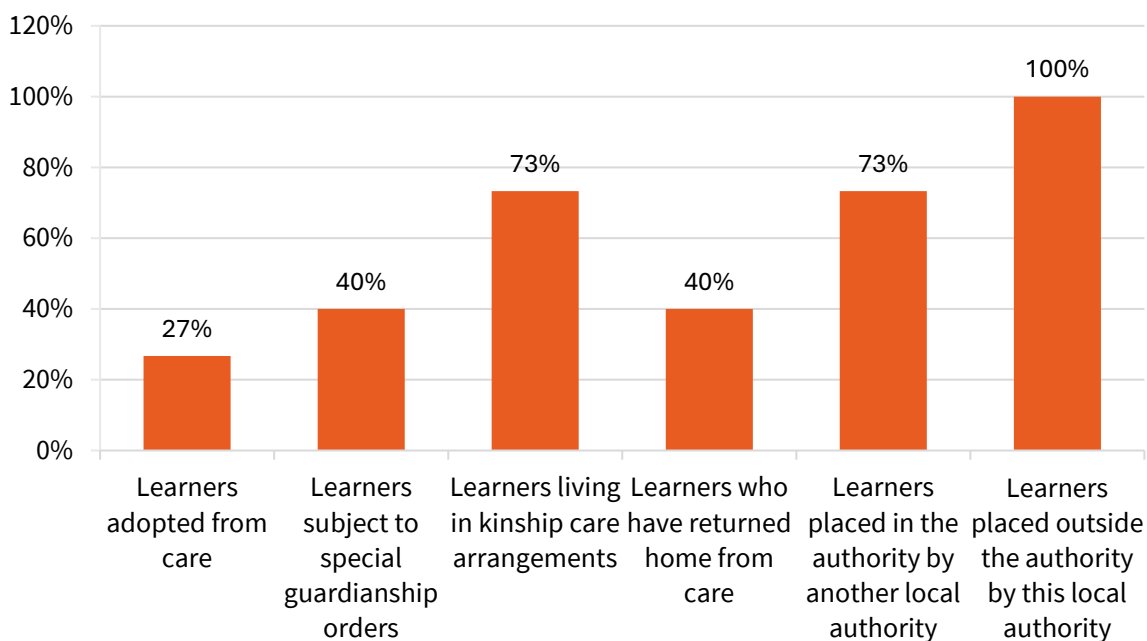
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 5. Responses to “Does the authority actively maintain oversight within education systems of learners beyond those currently looked after (e.g. adopted, special guardianship, kinship, returned home)?”:



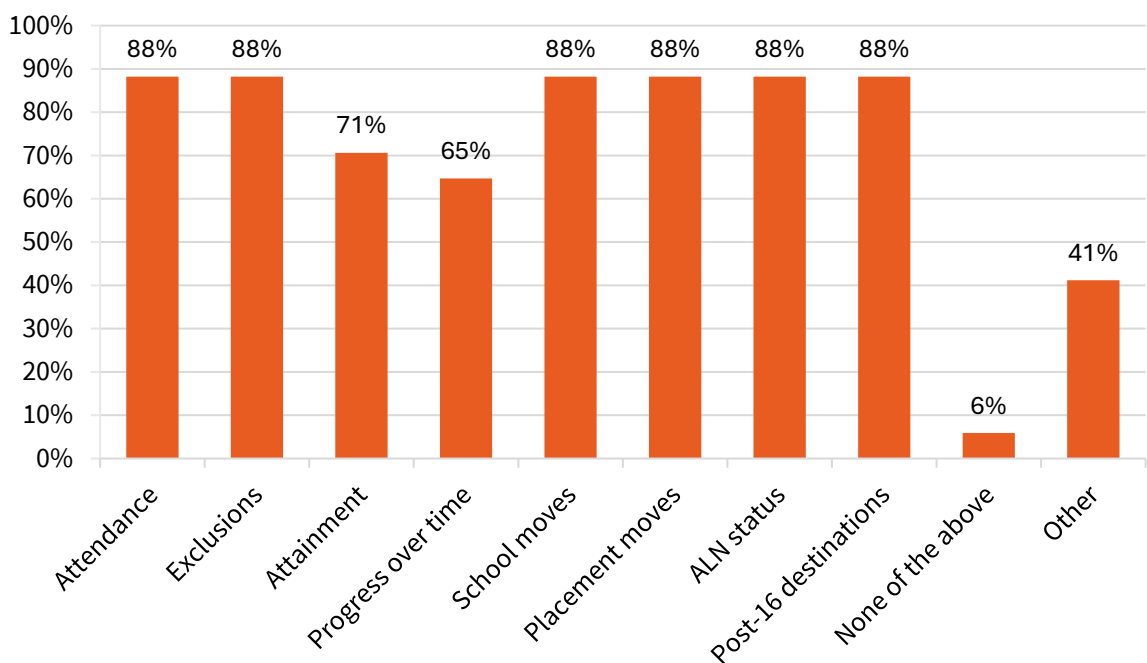
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 6. Responses to “Which other groups of learners are included within the local authority’s education oversight or monitoring arrangements for care-experienced learners? (Select all that apply)”



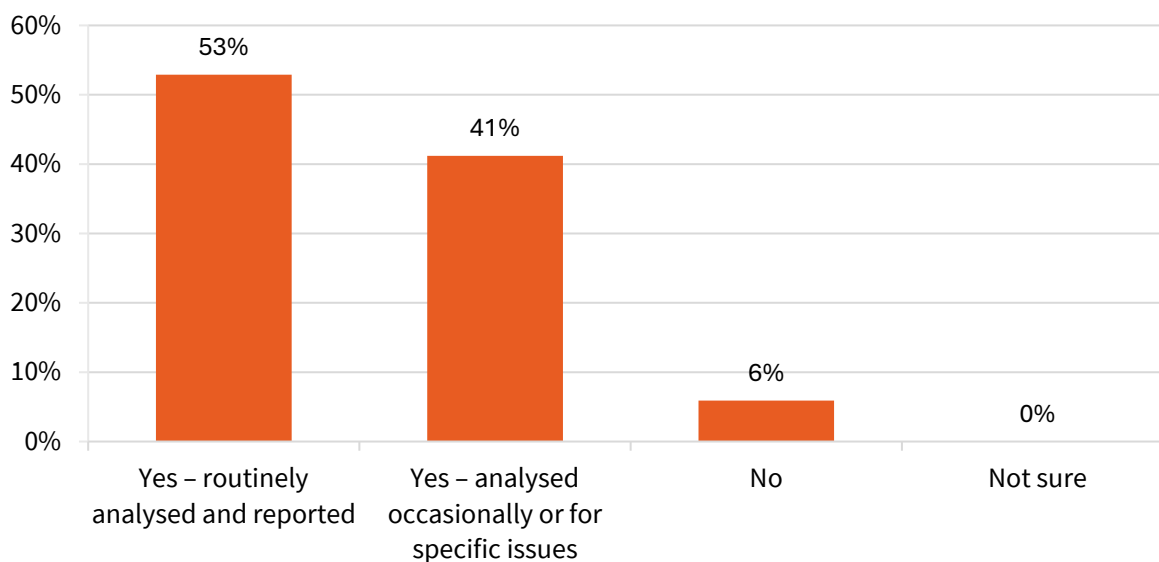
Based on 15 responses, 2 skipped.

Figure 7. Responses to “Which of the following information about care-experienced learners is routinely tracked or monitored centrally by the local authority? (Select all that apply)”



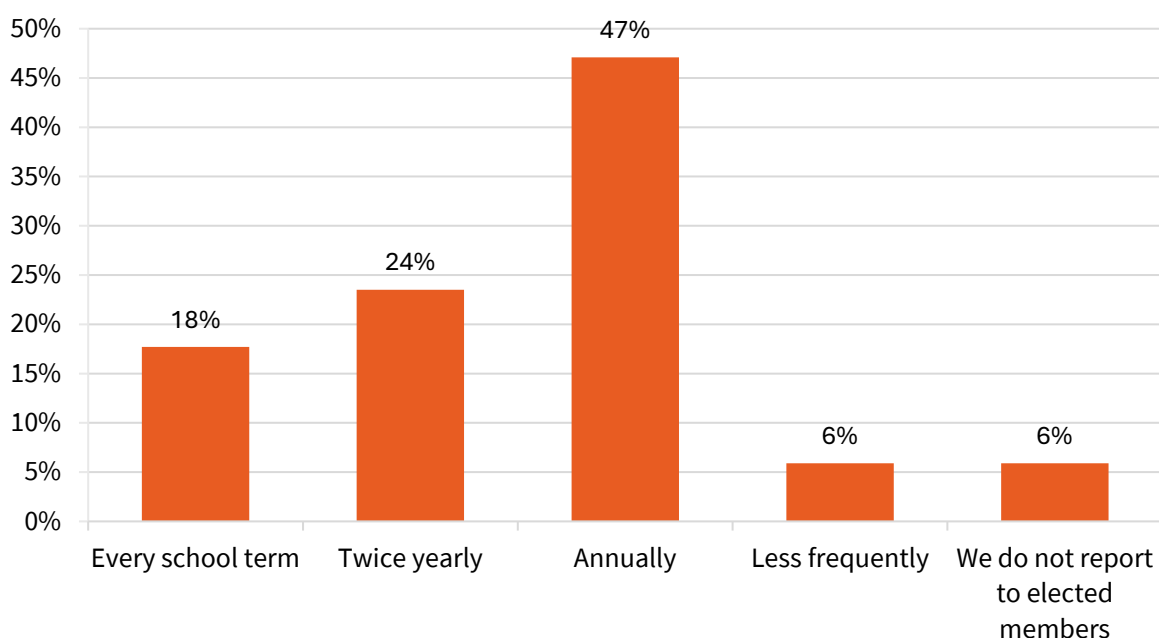
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 8. Responses to “Does the authority analyse trends or patterns over time in outcomes for care-experienced learners (for example attendance, progress, attainment or exclusions) to inform planning and improvement (e.g. by placement type, ALN status or stability)?”



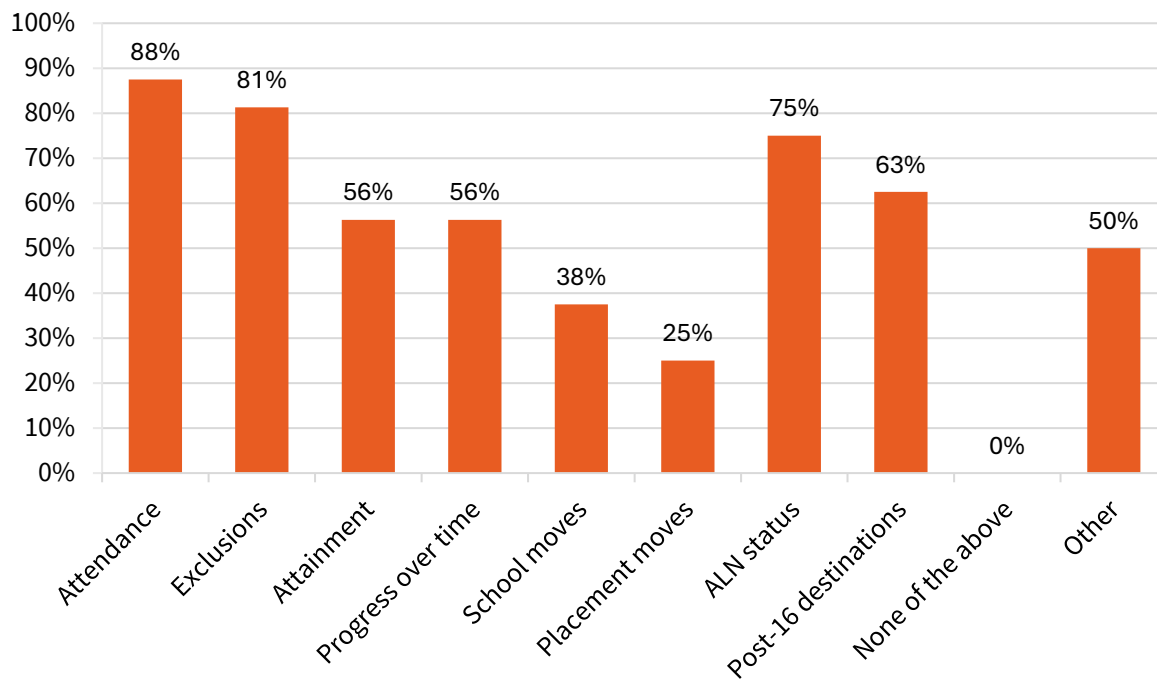
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 9. Responses to “How frequently does the local authority report to elected members on the educational outcomes of care-experienced learners?”



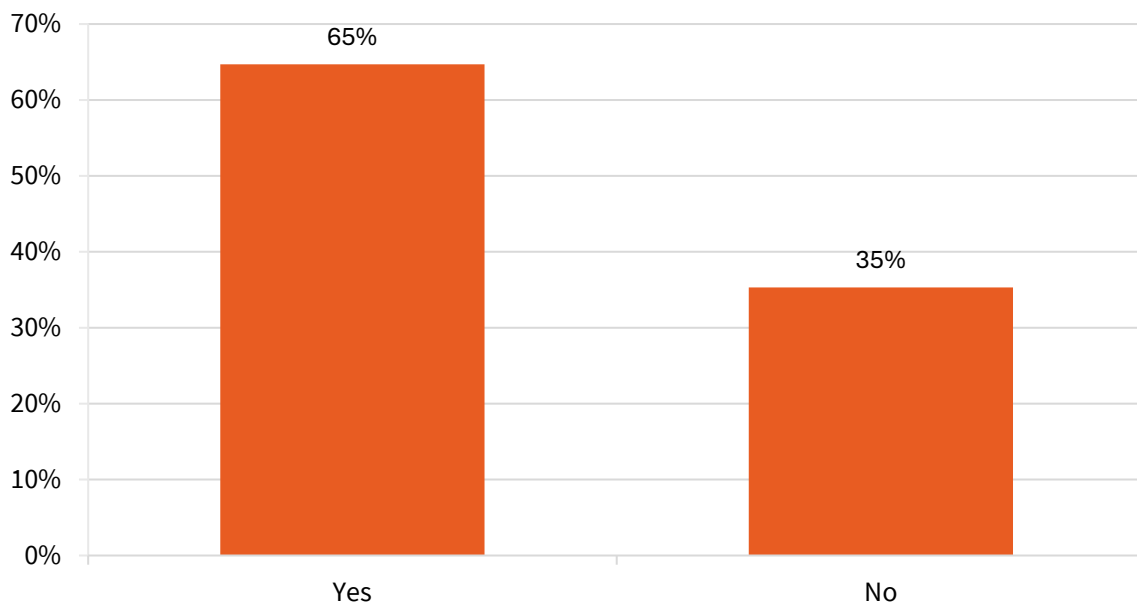
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 10. Responses to “Which outcomes for care experienced learners are typically included in reports to elected members?”



Based on 16 responses, 1 skipped.

Figure 11. Responses to “Are reports on the educational outcomes of care-experienced learners shared in the public domain (for example through scrutiny committees or published reports)?”



Based on 17 responses.

Figure 12. Responses to “Is continuity of Welsh-medium or bilingual education monitored where placement or school moves occur for care-experienced learners?”

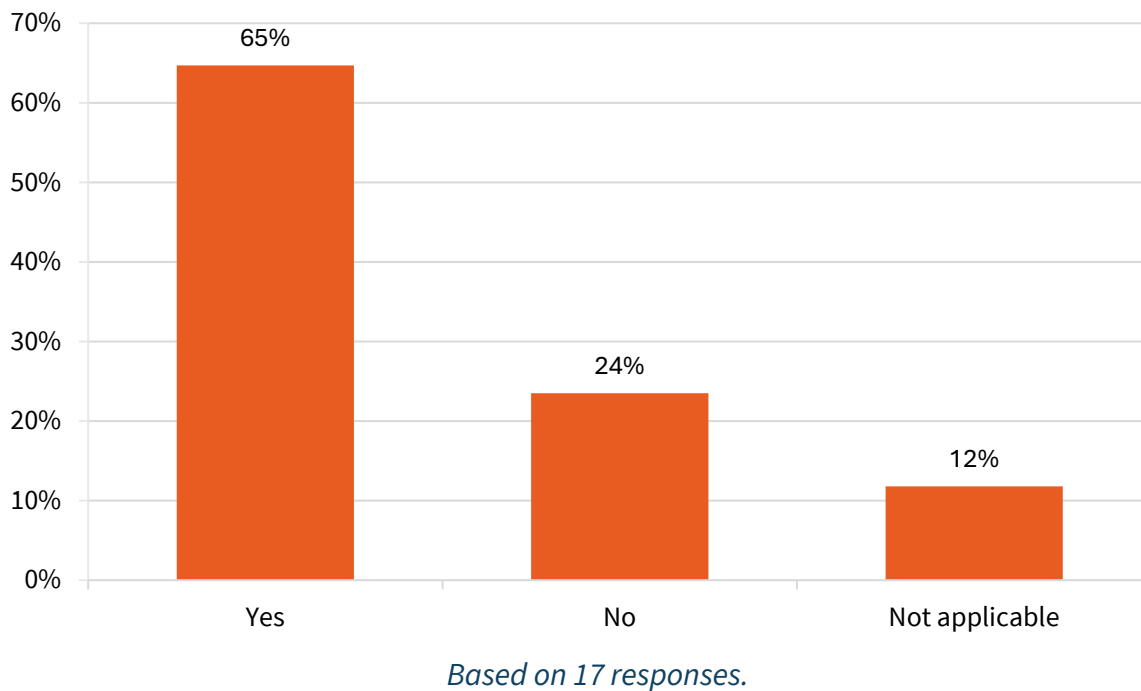


Figure 13. Responses to “At local authority level, who has primary responsibility for quality assuring Personal Education Plans (PEPs)?”

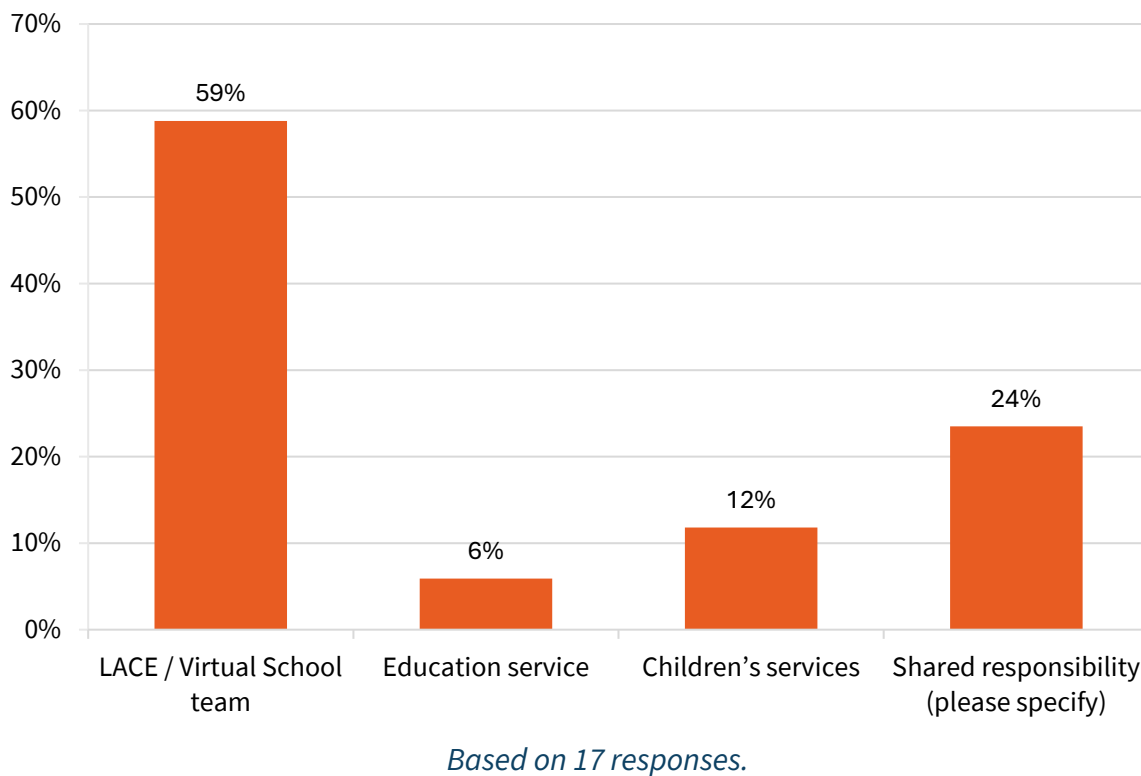
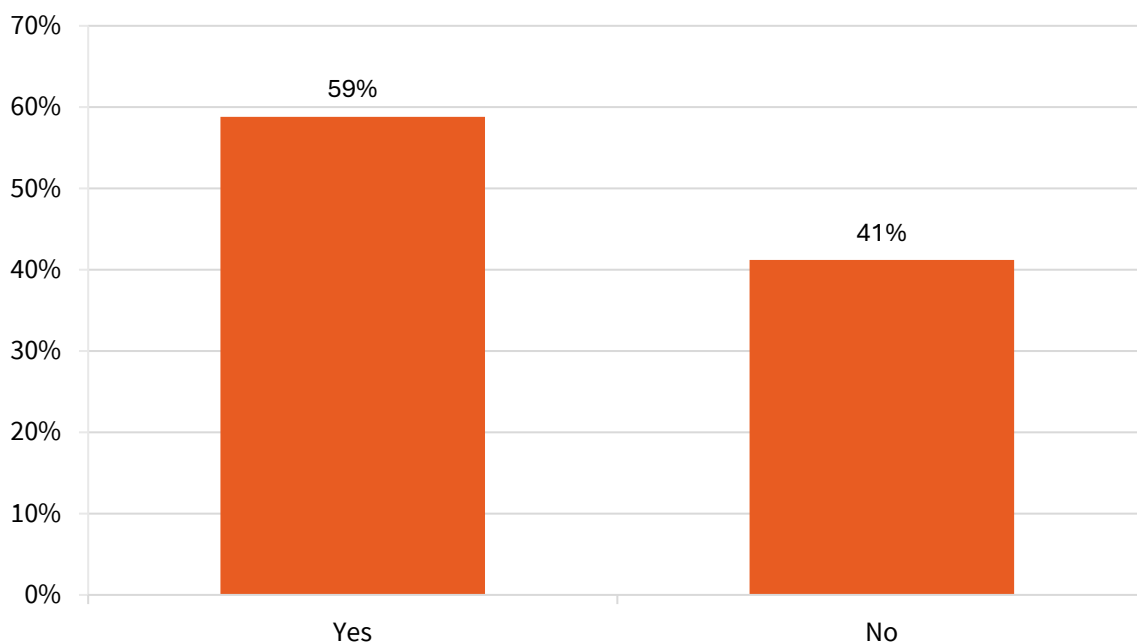
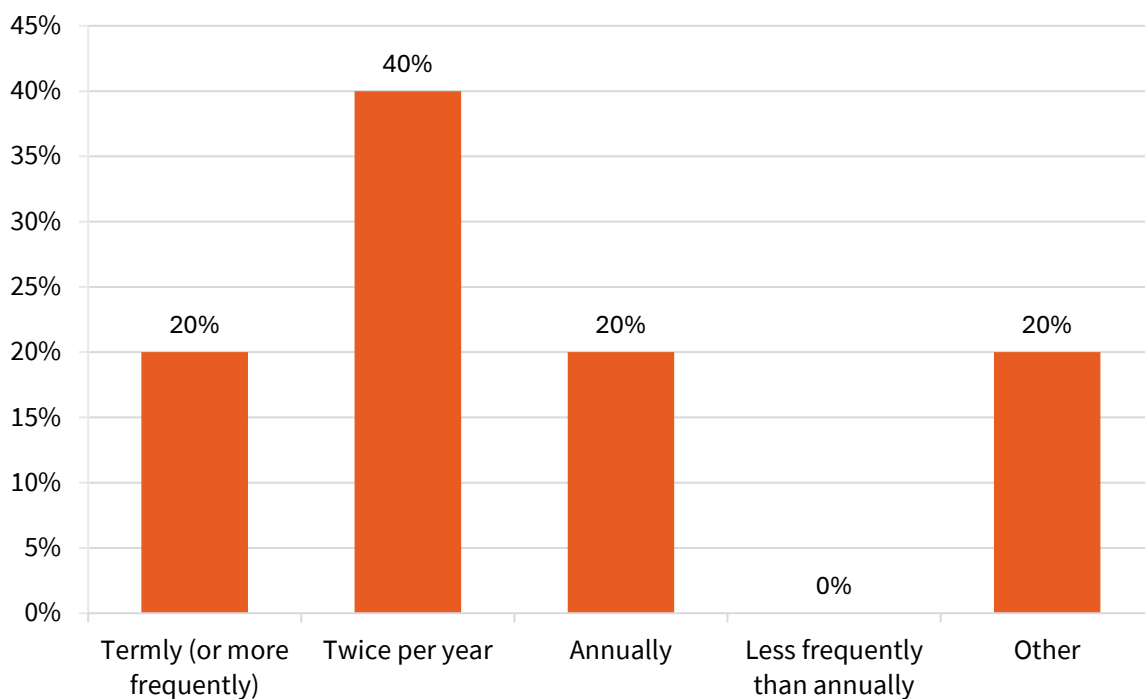


Figure 14. Responses to “Does the authority carry out audits or quality assurance reviews of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) at authority level (for example reviewing their focus on progress, well-being or transition planning)?”



Based on 17 responses.

Figure 15. Responses to “How frequently are PEPs audited or reviewed at authority level?”



Based on 10 responses, 7 skipped.

Figure 16. Responses to “Since 2022, has the authority commissioned or promoted trauma-informed or attachment-aware training for schools?”

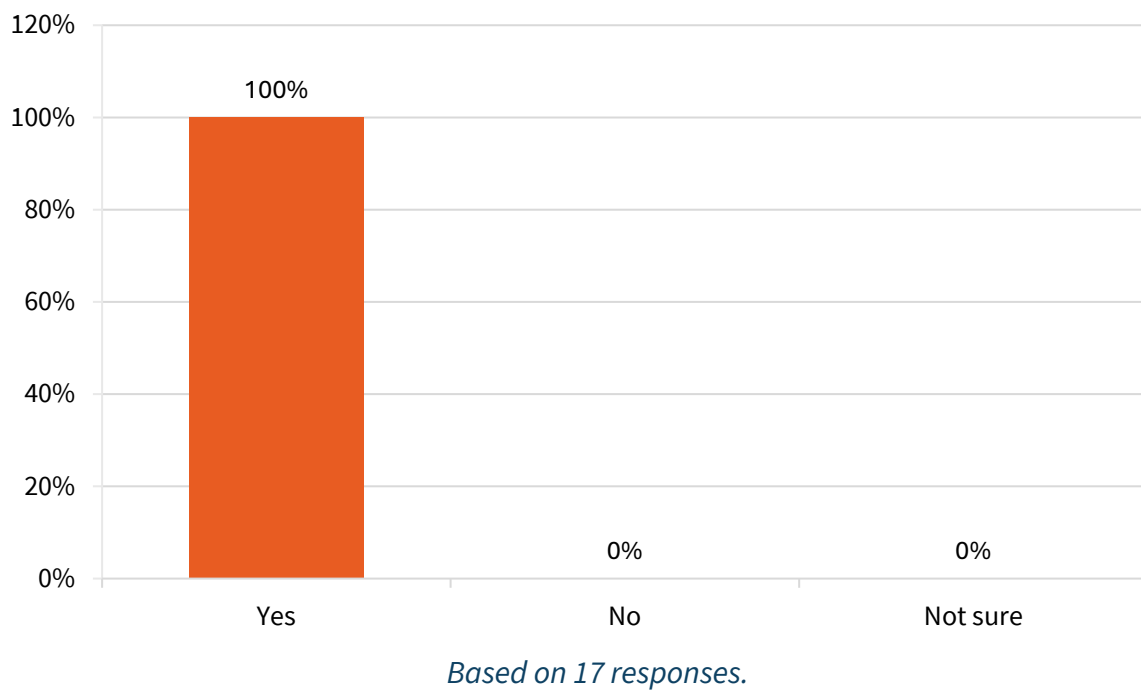


Figure 17. Responses to “Does the authority maintain records of which schools or PRUs have accessed trauma-informed or attachment-aware training?”

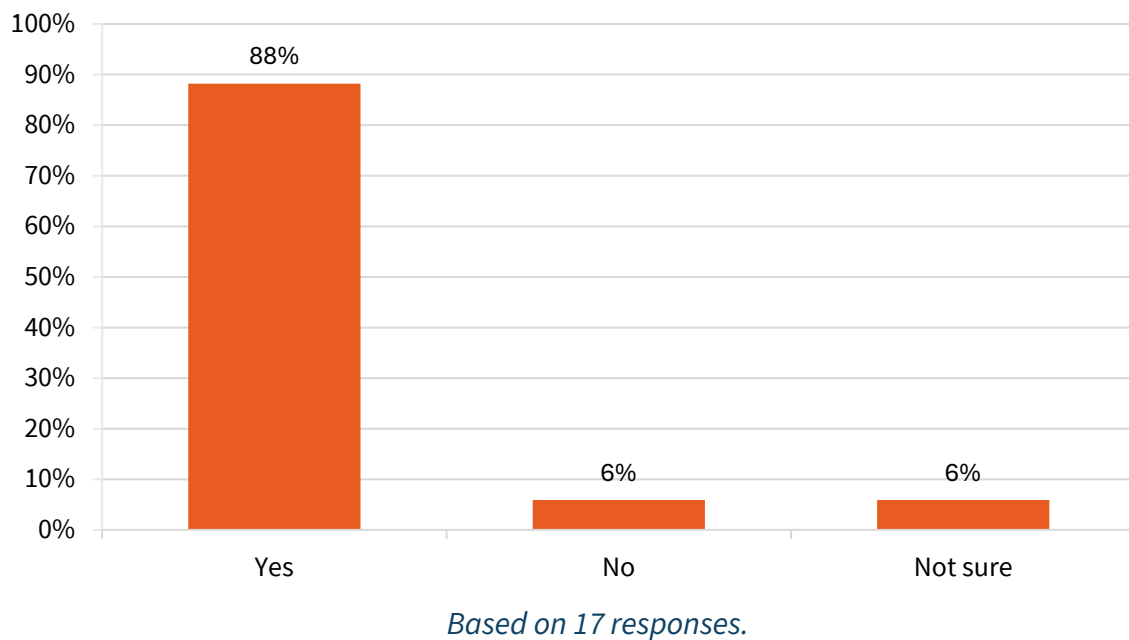
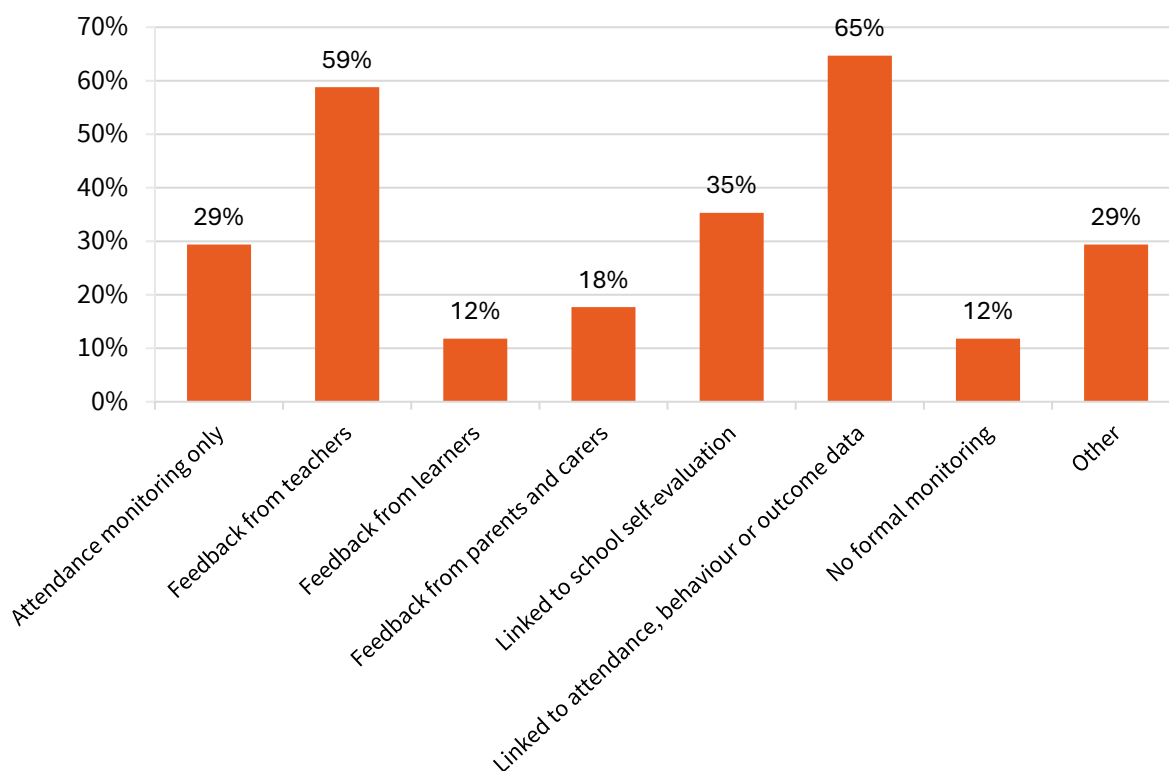
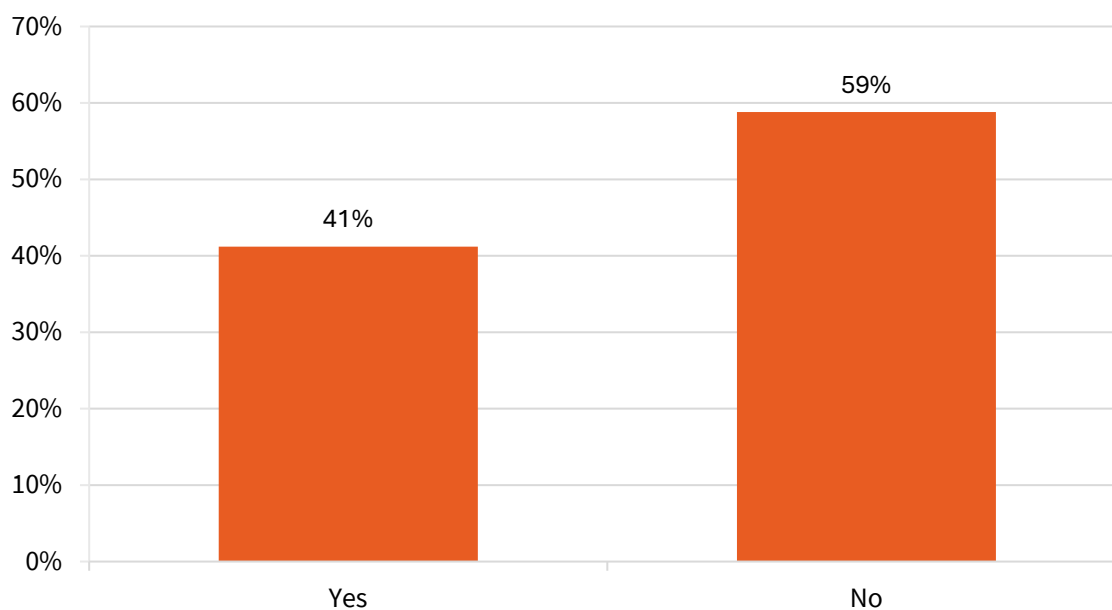


Figure 18. Responses to “How does the authority evaluate implementation or impact of this training? (Select all that apply)”



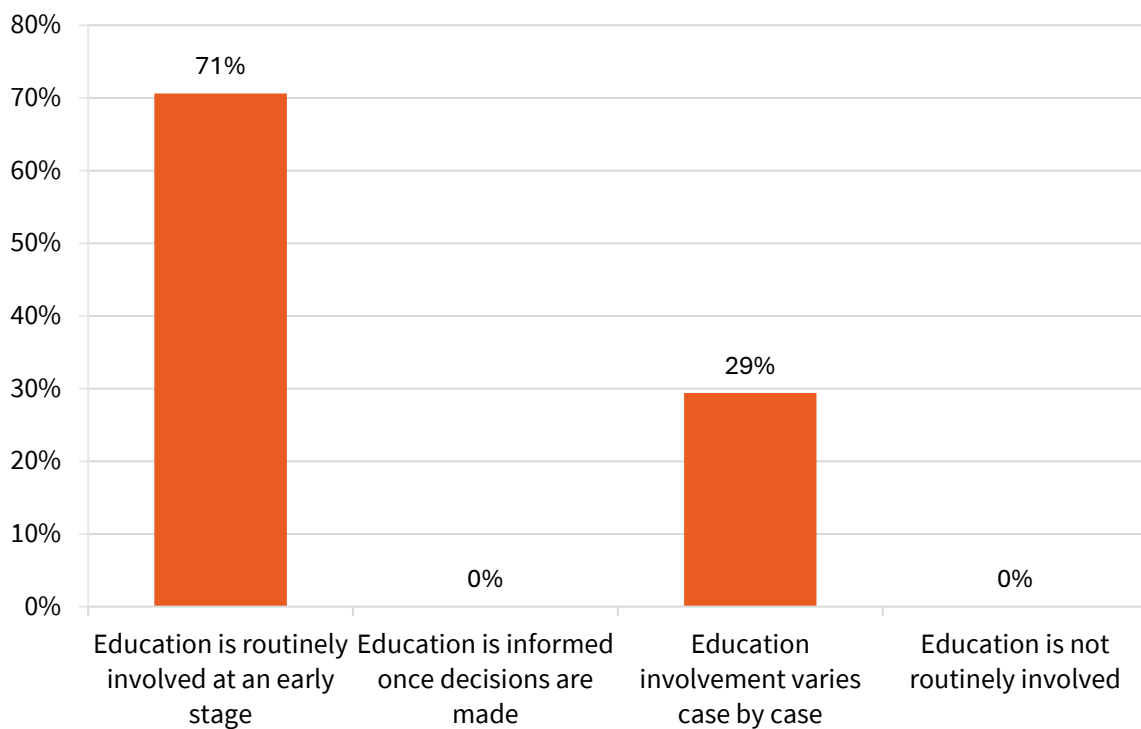
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 19. Responses to “Does the authority have a formal protocol to minimise unnecessary school moves for care-experienced learners?”



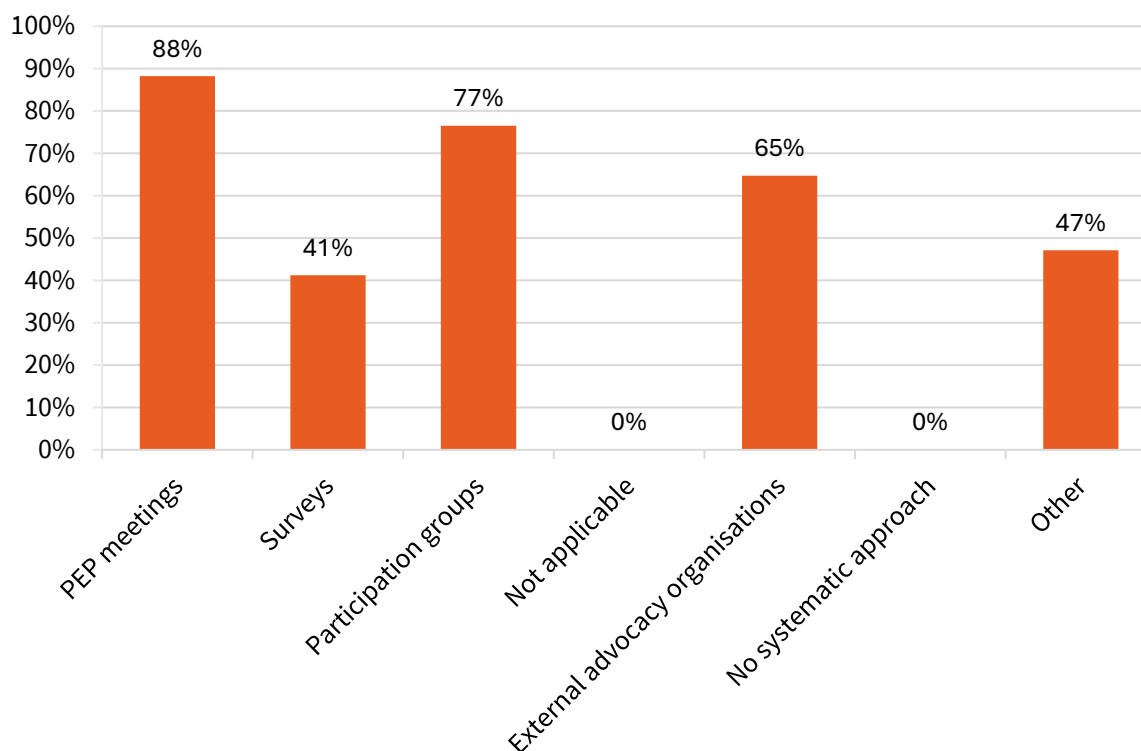
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 20. Responses to “When placement changes are being considered that may affect schooling, how is the education team involved in planning for educational continuity?”



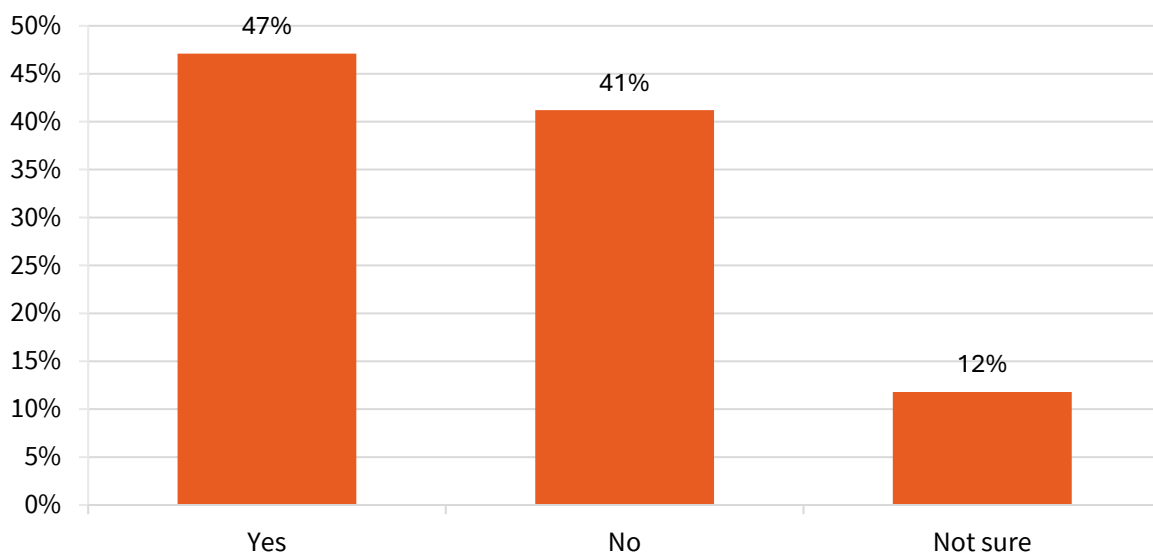
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 21. Responses to “When placement changes are being considered that may affect schooling, how is the education team involved in planning for educational continuity?”



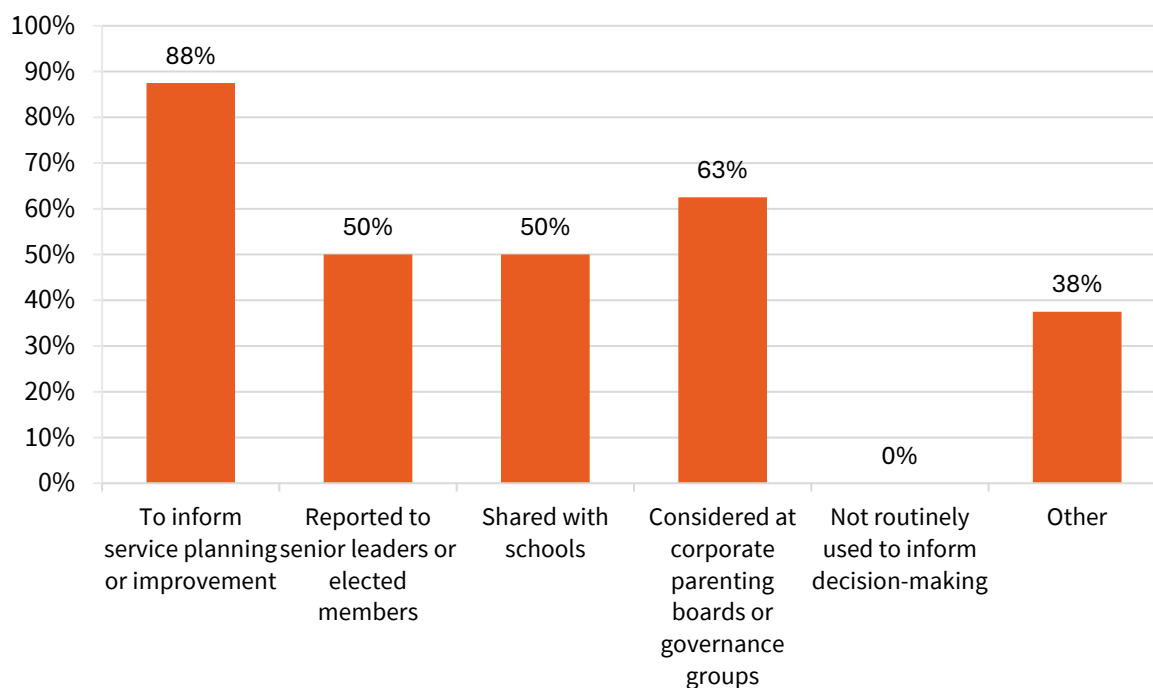
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 22. Responses to “Does the authority actively gather feedback from parents, carers or guardians of care-experienced learners about their experiences of education? (For example, through surveys, consultation or other structured engagement)”



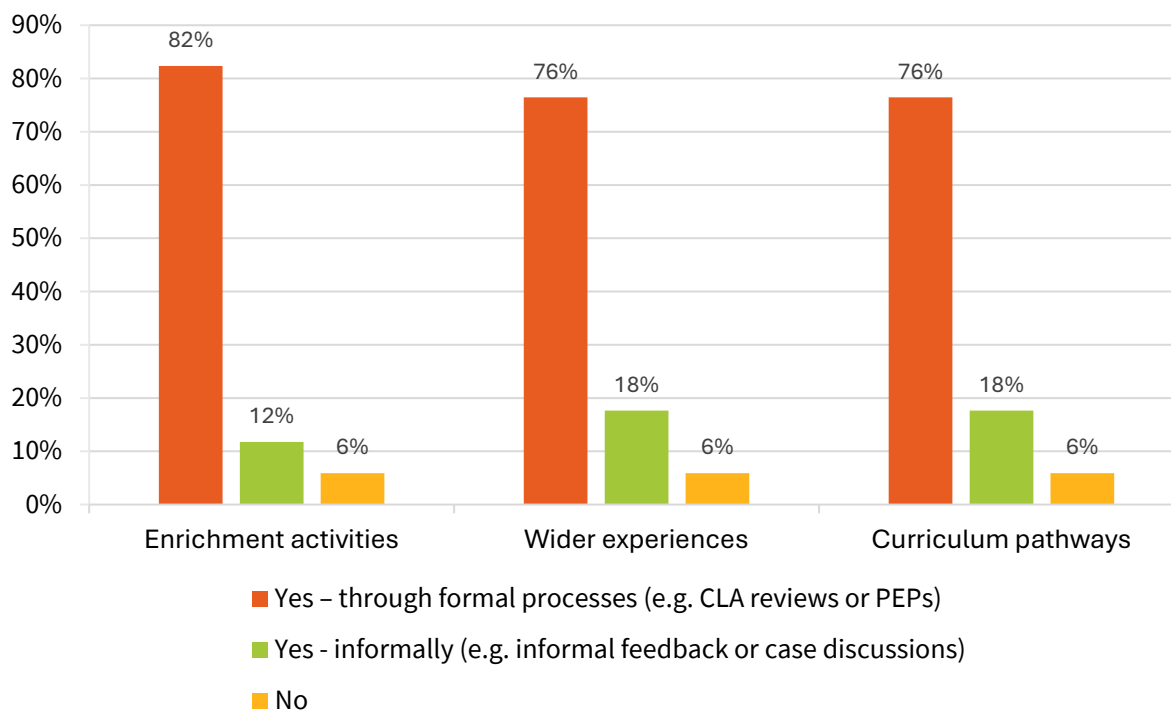
Based on 17 responses.

Figure 23. Responses to “How is this feedback typically used? (Select all that apply)”



Based on 9 responses, 9 skipped.

Figure 24. Responses to “Does the authority monitor access of care-experienced learners to enrichment activities, wider experiences or curriculum pathways?”



Based on 17 responses.

Methods and evidence base

This review adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a quantitative survey, qualitative fieldwork, documentary analysis and direct engagement with stakeholders and learners. The review was guided by a common set of research questions and lines of enquiry exploring leadership, support, educational stability, participation, inclusion and outcomes for care-experienced learners. Evidence from different sources was triangulated to produce robust, evidence-informed findings on how effectively education services, schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) support care-experienced learners across Wales.

Local authority engagement

We sent a survey to all 22 local authority education services in Wales to gather information on current arrangements for supporting care-experienced learners. The survey covered leadership and governance, monitoring arrangements, Personal Education Plans (PEPs), trauma-informed practice, transitions and learner support. We received responses from 17 local authorities, a response rate of approximately 77%. A summary of responses is included in Appendix 3.

To explore these issues in greater depth, we held face-to-face discussions with three local authorities selected to reflect a range of contexts across Wales. Discussions focused on strategic leadership, governance, partnership working, professional learning, monitoring arrangements and practical challenges relating to support for care-experienced learners.

We also reviewed a range of local authority documentation, including corporate parenting strategies, care-experienced learner strategies, monitoring reports, PEP guidance, self-evaluation evidence and published information relating to educational outcomes and support.

Visits to schools and pupil referral units

We visited 19 education providers across Wales, including primary, secondary, all-age and special schools and PRUs. Visits enabled us to evaluate how effectively providers support care-experienced learners' engagement, well-being, educational continuity and progress.

Providers were purposively selected to reflect a range of provider types, linguistic contexts, geographical locations and socio-economic circumstances. The sample included English-medium, Welsh-medium and bilingual providers from urban, rural and valleys communities across Wales.

During visits, we met with leaders, teachers, support staff, ALNCos, designated teachers, local authority officers and care-experienced learners. We also undertook learning walks

and reviewed documentation and evidence relating to attendance, behaviour, progress, exclusions, transitions, curriculum pathways and professional learning.

Engagement with care-experienced learners and stakeholders

We engaged with care-experienced learners through participation groups, local authority engagement activities and third-sector organisations outside the school setting. These discussions provided valuable insight into learners' experiences of relationships, belonging, transitions and educational support, including the experiences of learners who may be less visible within school systems, such as adopted learners and those living in kinship care arrangements or subject to special guardianship orders.

Participation in these activities was voluntary and many learners were already engaged in participation work or confident in sharing their views. As a result, their experiences may not fully reflect those of all care-experienced learners, particularly those who are less engaged with services or less comfortable contributing in group settings.

We also considered written evidence submitted by local authorities, third-sector organisations and learner participation groups. Consistent with the scope of the review, evidence gathering considered the experiences of the wider group of care-experienced learners, including adopted learners, learners living in kinship care arrangements, those subject to special guardianship orders and learners who were previously looked after.

Wider evidence base

The review drew on evidence from inspection evidence, including inspection findings relating to care-experienced learners, children who are looked after, adopted learners and trauma-informed practice. We also considered Welsh Government policy and guidance, national data published by StatsWales and Welsh Government and a range of published research and stakeholder evidence.

This included Estyn's earlier thematic report *Raising the attainment, achievement and aspiration of children who are looked after* (Estyn, 2016), Welsh Government research and evaluations and recent academic studies relating to educational outcomes, placement stability, well-being, belonging, trauma-informed practice and care experience. We also considered findings from recent Estyn thematic work where relevant to the educational experiences of care-experienced learners, including *More than a last resort: Arrangements and quality of EOTAS tuition in Wales* (Estyn, 2026).

Analysis and triangulation

Evidence from surveys, provider visits, learner engagement activities, stakeholder discussions and documentary analysis was reviewed against the review's lines of enquiry and emerging themes. Findings from each aspect of the review were tested for

triangulation across the different evidence sources, provider types and stakeholder groups to identify areas of consistency and divergence.

Themes were considered robust where they were supported by multiple sources of evidence across schools, PRUs, local authorities, stakeholders and learners. Particular care was taken when interpreting evidence from voluntary learner participation groups, recognising that these views may not be representative of all care-experienced learners.

Scope and limitations

The review focused primarily on the effectiveness of education services in supporting care-experienced learners of compulsory school age in maintained schools and PRUs in Wales, while also considering progression to post-16 education, training and employment, where relevant. It did not evaluate social care provision directly, except where this interfaced with education and influenced learners' experiences, engagement or outcomes. Learner contributions provided valuable qualitative insight, although the limited number involved means these findings should not be treated as representative.

Estyn would like to thank the following for their participation in this thematic inspection:

Provider	Local Authority
Canolfan Bro Tywi	Carmarthenshire
Cardiff LGES	Cardiff
Carmarthenshire Teaching and Learning Centre	Carmarthenshire
Ceredigion LGES	Ceredigion
Connah's Quay High School	Flintshire
Crossgates CP School	Powys
Cwmbran High School	Torfaen
Denbighshire LGES	Denbighshire
Ferndale	Rhondda Cynon Taf
Newbridge School	Caerphilly
Pencoed Comprehensive School	Bridgend
Pencoed Primary School	Bridgend
Rhayader C.I.W. School	Powys
Rhws Primary School	The Vale of Glamorgan
Sea View Community Primary	Swansea
St Julian's School	Newport
Trimsaran CP School	Carmarthenshire
Ysgol Bryn Clwyd	Denbighshire
Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin	Carmarthenshire
Ysgol Nantgwyn	Rhondda Cynon Taf

Ysgol Pendalar	Gwynedd
Ysgol y Deri	The Vale of Glamorgan

Estyn would also like to thank Adoption UK Cymru, Denbighshire Children's Services, The Fostering Network and Neath Port Talbot Children in Care Youth Council for their valuable contribution to this work.

Glossary

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Potentially traumatic events occurring in childhood (e.g. abuse, neglect, household dysfunction) that can have lasting effects on health, well-being and learning.
Additional Learning Needs (ALN)	A learner has additional learning needs if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for additional learning provision (ALP). This terminology is set out within the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and replaces the term special educational needs (SEN) in Wales.
Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo)	The member of staff in a school responsible for coordinating provision for learners with additional learning needs, including overseeing Individual Development Plans (IDPs).
Alternative provision	Education arranged outside mainstream school, often on a temporary or part-time basis, to meet learners' needs.
Attachment-aware practice	Approaches that recognise the impact of early attachment experiences on children's development, relationships and behaviour and adapt support and responses accordingly.
Belonging	A learner's sense of being accepted, included and valued within their school or educational community.
Care-experienced learner	A broad term used to describe learners who are currently looked after, previously looked after, adopted from care or living within kinship care or special guardianship arrangements.
Care leaver	A young person who has previously been looked after by a local authority and is entitled to ongoing support under leaving care legislation.
Child / children looked after (CLA)	Statutory term used to describe a child who is in the care of a local authority or provided with accommodation by a local authority social services department for a continuous period of more than 24 hours. This includes children subject to care orders and those accommodated voluntarily.
Corporate parenting	The collective responsibility of local authorities and partner agencies to safeguard and promote the well-being, educational achievement and life chances of children who are looked after and care leavers.
Designated teacher	The member of staff in a school with responsibility for

Education other than at school (EOTAS)	promoting the educational achievement of children looked after and supporting Personal Education Plans (PEPs). Educational provision arranged by a local authority for learners who cannot attend mainstream school full time because of exclusion, illness, additional needs or other circumstances.
Foster care	A placement where a child looked after lives with approved foster carers who provide care on behalf of the local authority.
Individual Development Plan (IDP)	A statutory plan in Wales for learners with additional learning needs, setting out their needs, outcomes and the additional learning provision required.
Kinship care	Arrangements where children are cared for by relatives, friends or connected persons instead of their birth parents. These arrangements may be formal or informal.
Looked After Children Education Co-ordinator (LACE)	A local authority officer responsible for supporting and monitoring the educational experiences and outcomes of children looked after and care-experienced learners. In some local authorities this role may now sit within Virtual School arrangements or wider inclusion services.
Out of county placement	A care placement where a child or young person is placed to live outside the geographical area of the local authority that holds corporate parenting responsibility for them.
Personal Education Plan (PEP)	A statutory plan for children looked after that records educational needs, support, targets, progress and aspirations. PEPs are intended to coordinate educational planning and review progress over time.
Placement instability	Repeated changes in care placements or living arrangements that may disrupt relationships, emotional well-being and continuity of education.
Pupil Development Grant – Children Looked After (PDG-CLA)	The PDG-CLA is a Welsh Government grant allocated on the basis of the number of children looked after but intended to support the educational progress and well-being of the wider care-experienced population.
Pupil Development Grant (PDG)	Welsh Government grant funding intended to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners and reduce the impact of poverty on educational attainment and well-being.
Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)	A type of education provision maintained by a local authority for learners who cannot attend mainstream

Special Guardianship Order (SGO)	school because of exclusion, health needs or other circumstances. A legal order made under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 that gives a special guardian parental responsibility for a child while preserving the child's legal relationship with their birth parents.
Stigma	Negative assumptions, stereotypes or judgements associated with a person's circumstances, experiences or identity.
Trauma-informed practice	Approaches that recognise the potential impact of trauma on children and young people and seek to create environments, relationships and responses that support safety, trust and emotional well-being.
Trusted adult	An adult whom a learner knows well and feels able to approach for support, advice or help.
Virtual School	A local authority service that promotes and supports the education of children looked after and care-experienced learners by working with schools, carers and other services. Local authorities in Wales use a range of organisational models to provide this support and not all have established a virtual school.
Welsh-medium education	Education delivered mainly through the medium of Welsh. Continuity of Welsh-medium provision can be affected where learners experience placement or school changes.

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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