

About

MCR Pathways is an award-winning, schools-based mentoring programme for Care Experienced Young People and others facing instability. Our vision is for all young people to experience an equality of education and skills outcomes, career opportunities and life chances. We have been operating across Scotland for almost 20 years and currently support 6454 young people, of which 1498 are Care Experienced.

The MCR Pathways school-based mentoring programme supports young people to find, grow and use their talents. We help young people build confidence, broaden their aspirations and explore their future pathways. As a result, our programme consists of several key elements:

1. **Primary School Transition Activities:** Identifying young people early and helping them and their families understand the benefits of the programme, easing the transition into secondary school.
2. **Preparation for Mentoring Group Work:** Pupils participate in group sessions to build skills, create profiles for mentor matching, and prepare for one-on-one mentoring.
3. **Personalised Relationship-Based Mentoring:** After group work, young people are matched with volunteer mentors who meet with them weekly, providing non-judgmental support and helping them discover and develop their talents. Volunteer Mentors are carefully selected based on shared interests, values, and career aspirations, and they undergo thorough training in child protection and trauma-informed practices.
4. **Pathways Coordinator (PC) Support:** PCs provide ongoing support to ensure that young people are ready to engage in mentoring and succeed in their educational, skills and personal goals.
5. **Careers, Employability, and Leaver Support:** The programme offers additional resources and support to enable young people transition to positive and sustainable post-school destinations, such as further education, apprenticeships, or employment.

Our success relies on the time and commitment of local volunteer mentors who provide just one hour a week as a consistent, caring adult which has proven to boost confidence, academic performance and open doors to a brighter future for 6454 young people across Scotland and England.

MCR Pathways measures its success by comparing outcomes for mentored young people with their peers, using data on attendance, educational attainment,

post-school destinations, and well-being. The programme is aligned with national initiatives like the Tackling Child Poverty Plan and The Promise commitment for Care Experienced Young People, aiming to close the attainment gap and prepare students for a better and brighter future.

Summary

MCR Pathways is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on a Universal Definition for Care Experience. This response has been developed with input from Care Experienced Young People who are currently part of our Young Talent Programme, as well as Young People transitioning from Care from our Young National Advisory Board (YNAB).

To ensure their voices were central to our submission, Care Experienced Young People were asked key questions in accessible formats, allowing them to express their views clearly. Creating a safe and respectful space for them to share their opinions was crucial, as their voices are often underrepresented in these types of consultations.

We facilitated this process by inviting YNAB members to our familiar office space and organising video calls with Young People across the country, supported by school staff members. Ensuring that Young People were accompanied by trusted adults helped create an environment where they felt safe, comfortable and confident sharing their experiences.

At MCR Pathways, we are driven by the needs and voices of Care Experienced Young People, and it is vital that their lived experiences and opinions shape our response. Their perspectives must be heard, and their interests accurately reflected in decisions made by the Government.

In this response, MCR Pathways is calling for:

- A broad, opt-in inclusive definition that reflects the lifelong experience of care to help foster a collective sense of identity and belonging for Care Experienced People of all ages across Scotland that can in turn support consistency across service providers and a clear, national direction to increase equity and rights.
- The inclusion of Informal Kinship Care and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children to ensure that Young People who fall under these have equal status and entitlement to support as their peers.
- National and regional initiatives that are driven by Young People to ensure that education and further awareness building is organised via an integrated

approach across the country with the aim of breaking down stereotypes and stigma in the rollout of a universal definition.

- Lifelong Rights for Care Experienced People of all ages to access all the rights they are entitled to and be able to access lifelong advocacy enshrined in future policy and legislation, including further support provided to Young People transitioning from care after their 16th and 26th Birthday that should be unique and tailored to the individual needs.
- Establishment of Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic by the Scottish Government to promote better outcomes for Care Experienced individuals and ensure that they will be protected from any discrimination.
- Ensuring consistent and respectful language is used which supports Young People to focus on their continued journey of growth and future opportunity.

Response to the consultation questions

Q1. Do you agree or disagree that there is a need for a universal definition to describe 'care experience'?

- a. Agree strongly
- b. Agree
- c. Neither agree or disagree
- d. Disagree
- e. Disagree strongly

B - Agree

Q2. What are your views on the potential advantages of developing a universal definition?

There are a variety of potential advantages to developing a universal definition that is broad and inclusive of all Care Experience.

Firstly, MCR Pathways hopes that this definition will help create a collective identity for Care Experienced People of all ages across Scotland, built on both unique and shared lived experiences. For far too long, many Care Experienced Individuals have felt a lack of belonging and struggled to find a common identity. The term 'LAC'—'Looked After Child'—has often been the only label they feel associated with. However, for many, this term has felt impersonal and disconnected from their sense of self, failing to foster a true sense of belonging or collective identity, as we will explore further in question 5 of this consultation.

We believe that this new definition, coupled with the valuable work of The Promise and the forthcoming Promise Bill, can play a significant role in creating a sense of “identity and belonging” (as one of our YNAB members put it), strengthening equality duties, and ensuring that policies reflect the lived realities of Care Experienced People. As one YNAB member observed, this work could bring much-needed “clarity for young people” who have not previously seen themselves reflected in the term “Care Experience,” or who may have felt isolated in their experiences until now.

A universal definition will also be able to provide a collective understanding for a clear, national direction to increase rights and entitlements for Care Experienced People. This will make it easier for Care Experienced People to know what support they qualify for and how to access such support. When discussing the potential advantages of building a universal definition, one of our YNAB members stated that this could potentially provide “equal entitlement for all young Care Experienced People”. It is crucial that no Care Experienced Person is overlooked when it comes to support entitlements, and that these entitlements remain accessible throughout their lives.

Crucial to the delivery of this national direction, a widespread universal definition will be able to support consistency across service providers. Anecdotal evidence of current regional and institutional disparities around definitions can create many barriers for Care Experienced People in Scotland. By attaching statutory weight to this definition, we hope to see a reduction in these inconsistencies, encouraging more comprehensive service development, and supporting staff working with Young People across various sectors. Additionally, a universal definition could help address data gaps and improve the reliability of data on Care Experienced Individuals. Currently, the absence of a cohesive definition often leads to incomplete or inconsistent data collection, making it difficult to accurately assess and address the needs of Care Experienced People.

In relation to these points, a universal definition would also be able to help MCR Pathways to fully reach and support every Care Experience Young Person that we can in Scotland. Care Experienced Young People remain a priority for our programme as we continue to address the gap in life chances, educational and skills outcomes between Care Experienced Young People and their peers. However, our programme cannot prioritise the 180 Young People on our programme across the country who are in informal kinship care due to the administrative disparities of the ‘Looked After’ definition on the SEEMiS Database. One of our main aims as an organisation is to narrow the attainment gap between Vd Young People and their peers. However, due to the exclusion of informal kinship care from a variety of support, including our own, many in this care are at more risk of being let down due

to a lack of a cohesive, universal definition. One of our YNAB Members noted they felt there is “a lack of current support in informal kinship care” in Glasgow City Council. This just demonstrates the need for a cohesive definition across Local Authorities to prevent such disparities in support moving forward. We welcome the UK Government’s recent announcement of the Children’s Wellbeing and School Bill that aims to change the law to better protect Children and Young People. Included in this bill is the elevated status of kinship care and we hope this elevated status will be followed by the Scottish Government. All the Young People we consulted upon had various experiences of informal kinship care and believe that equal status and entitlement is vital.

A further potential advantage of building a broad, inclusive universal definition is that Scotland can become a leader amongst the other nations in the UK by implementing a universally agreed upon definition that covers the four nations. This could be key, especially considering how mobile Care Experienced Young People can be in comparison to their non-experience peers, often crossing Local Authority and on occasion, national borders. You can find out more about this from Become’s [#GoneTooFar](#) campaign to ensure Young People in care can stay close to people and areas they are familiar with.

Q3. What are your views on the potential disadvantages of developing a universal definition?

The potential disadvantages of developing a universal definition of Care Experience may be determined in the implementation and use of the definition.

Some of the consulted YNAB members and Young People were concerned that themselves and others “don’t want to be defined” or that unique experiences may not fit the finalised criteria. We must ensure that this definition is as inclusive as possible to ensure that Care Experienced people across Scotland feel their experience is reflected within the definition and that all Care Experienced people are entitled to the rights and further support they deserve. We need to ensure any and all language aligns with values of equality, inclusion, and empowerment and avoids terms that imply inferiority or “otherness,” instead focusing on terms that promote equal standing in society and emphasize rights and opportunities.

A definition may “isolate individuals who already feel left out”.

- YNAB Member

We understand that language used in the definition will have to remain sensitive to the fine balance between supporting unique, life-long Care Experience whilst also

remaining universal. In accordance with this point, we support the calls of [WhoCares? Scotland's Lifelong Rights Campaign](#) to ensure that Care Experienced People of all ages are able to access all the rights they are entitled to and be able to access lifelong advocacy. The Independent Care Review found that Care Experience Adults experienced compounding disadvantages as many were “over twice as likely to have no educational qualifications” and “over three times as likely to have not had a full time job by the age of 26” ([Follow the Money](#), 2020). A [ScotCen 2020](#) report that found 81.6% of mentored Care Experience Pupils progressed onto a positive destination (full-time employment, apprenticeship, further or higher education) in comparison to 56.3% of Young People who were not mentored.

Our relationship-based mentoring programme can reverse this trend by placing one, trusted adult into their life in the form of a volunteer mentor to fully unlock their potential. Whilst our programme is an effective and essential intervention in empowering Young People across the country, our programme alone cannot reverse this trend for Care Experienced People across Scotland and sadly, for many well into adulthood as the Independent Care Review found, these educational and life chances gaps persist. A universal definition and its impact to widen support for all Care Experienced People, regardless of age, across Scotland has the potential to be transformational to the lives of many who have felt neglected or lost for years.

Whilst we are encouraged that this consultation is happening in conjunction with The Promise and the upcoming Promise Bill, we need to ensure that this work doesn't add to further siloed work, increased bureaucracy or “distract from actual work to support Care Experience” (YNAB Member). The work that is done to establish a universal definition must result in Care Experienced People can finally relate to a collective identity that will in turn provide equal rights to adequately resourced and supportive services at any stage in their lives.

Another concern amongst our Young People is that even with the introduction of a universal definition that is inclusive, stigma will still exist. In the rollout of a new universal definition, there must be national & regional initiatives and responsibilities held to ensure that education and further awareness building is organised alongside in the aim of breaking down stereotypes and stigma. The Young People in school that we consulted with felt that the public have a lack of understanding about Care Experience and associate them with a “difficult background”. In regards to school specifically, they also believed both their peers and staff alike can often have a lack of understanding of what it is actually like to be Care Experienced and it frustrates them some may not understand how their Care Experience impacts their behaviour, leaving them feeling quite isolated:

“People don’t understand the word care experienced. Many times teachers will give me forms to take home and say ‘Give this to your mum and dad’ without realising the damage they can cause by saying this. Would be great if there could be one term to clearly explain how our lives are different”

- S3 Young Person, Perth Grammar School

Furthermore, one young person noted that they were wrongly identified as adopted in school so they would definitely like more clarity and education about different statuses. Education and awareness raising would definitely need to be co-designed with people with Care Experience as this needs to be developed with a fine balance of sensitivity as one of our Young People noted:

“We’re normal, [we] aren’t any different”

- S2 Young Person, Portlethen Academy

Q4. Do you have any views on the definition of ‘Care Leaver’?

For many, Care Experience is lifelong and this came across amongst all the Young People consulted upon when discussing the potential impact of reduced support when becoming a ‘Care Leaver’:

“Care Experience doesn’t end... many don’t comprehend [their] experience before 26”.

- YNAB Member

As noted previously, lifelong rights for Care Experienced people is vital in ensuring that all their rights are met and respected as this experience does not just cease to exist upon the age of 26. For one particular young person, they felt that being in care has permanently altered how they are and how they perceive themselves:

“If I wasn’t in care, I’d be a totally different person... [I’m] always going to remember”

- S2 Young Person, Portlethen Academy

They noted that they still get flashbacks prior to being in the care system and don’t see that changing before officially becoming a ‘Care Leaver’. These Young People were also unaware that support from the Local Authority will change on their 16th Birthday and this lack of understanding can be distressing for some Young People. There needs to be a well-communicated and just timeline for Young People so they can start to prepare for this transition.

Furthermore, some of our YNAB spoke of specific calls to extend mental health support for Care Experienced People so they are able to access this whenever they may need it despite age and further extensions of current support such as the Care Experience Bursary extending to support people wanting to study for a postgraduate degree or diploma. There were also calls from some of our Young People to ensure that there is more autonomy and rights as a 'Care Leaver' to decide whether or not they should visit their biological family. One young person felt "annoyed" that they didn't have this right prior to their 16th Birthday. Overall, all of the Young People participating in the consultation felt that support that is provided to someone either after their 16th or 26th birthday should be unique and tailored to their needs given how individual and lifelong each experience is.

Q5. Do you have any views on the statutory definition of 'Looked After'?

The statutory definition of 'Looked After' has inherent stigma attached to it as it often places the emphasis on those taking care of people rather than the Care Experienced Person themselves which is why, as an organisation, we used the term 'Care Experienced Young Person' to place emphasis on the young person themselves. The acronym that is also used for this definition, 'LAC', has a lot of criticism with how it is used and how it often makes Care Experienced people feel:

"[It] feels like you aren't a human being at meetings"

- YNAB Member

There was agreement across all the Young People consulted on this consultation that the term 'LAC' is perceived negatively amongst those it is used to describe. They would prefer a more human term, and as we note later in the consultation, changing such reviews to 'My Meeting's' for example. Whilst it is encouraging that some local authorities ensure that Young People have input in their 'LAC Reviews', the Young People that participated in this consultation didn't find them helpful at all. Some of the Young People were quite happy that these would cease to exist when they become a Care Leaver.

Q6. What experience of care would you expect to be covered?

- **Looked After at Home**
- **Kinship Care (looked after children who have been placed with kinship carers by the local authority)**
- **Kinship Care (non-looked after children who live with a kinship carer, these children may be subject to an order under Section 11 of the**

Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or may be living in a completely private arrangement with extended family, with no local authority involvement)

- **Foster Care**
- **Residential Care**
- **Residential Special School**
- **Supported Accommodation**
- **Secure Care**
- **Adoption**
- **Other - please provide details**

Similarly to other calls in the sector, MCR and all the Young People involved in this consultation response believe that everything detailed on this list including informal kinship care and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. Some of our YNAB members stated that this definition should include “anything without biological parents or the need for ‘intervention’”. We need to make sure that this definition is as inclusive as possible to ensure that Care Experienced People across the country begin to feel a sense of belonging and collective identity that has ceased to exist for many up until now.

Q7. Do you have any other comments about a proposed universal definition?

Some of our members from the YNAB were concerned about the timing of this consultation and its overall aims. Some felt that this may not be supported with the resources and funding needed to simultaneously move away from stigma. Ensuring Local Authorities have the capacity to provide both the resources and training to move away from the stigma of being Care Experienced, more ‘LAC’ is essential. The new ‘Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy’s’ driver of change regarding ‘Improving Capacity’ may be able to support with this.

Q8. Do you have any comments on the existing language of care?

Similar to previous points, the existing language of care, such as ‘LAC’, contributes to the already added stigma many of the Care Experienced population in Scotland face, especially when it is still the dominant term used to categorise Care Experienced Young People and care leavers on several databases; for example SEEMiS. One of our YNAB members noted: “Stigma will come with whatever”. Language can be extremely fluid and others may identify with certain terms that they feel is connected to their identity whilst others may not. For example, one of our Young People in school stated that “Looked After annoys me” compared to another who didn’t really have any strong feelings towards the term. Our YNAB

members felt this could cause a barrier to creating an accepted universal definition as to them it felt “impossible” to find one that would truly reflect unique experiences and was fully inclusive. Therefore, in developing a definition and understanding the support needed by Care Experienced People in Scotland, there must be an individualised approach to ensure that every unique, individual experience is counted. The narrative around Care Experience needs to be owned by Young People as it is their story.

Referring to our response to questions 4 & 5, several of our Young People highlighted negative connotations to the phrases ‘Looked After’ and ‘Care Leaver’. For many Care Experienced Young People, they can feel like inherently negative terms, raising feelings of anxiety for example as some of our Young People in schools immediately associated ‘Care Leaver’ with forcibly having to leave their foster carers that they feel comfortable and supported by. Furthermore, some also felt that every young person is technically ‘looked after’ by someone so it doesn’t accurately reflect their unique experiences of care and the term itself “has a lot of stigma behind it” (S3 Young Person, Perth Grammar). Within this universal definition, we suggest implementing phrases such as ‘Young People Transitioning from Care’ or ‘Young People with Experience of Care’ in place of ‘Looked After’ and ‘Care Leaver’. Both of which highlight the process of moving forward as opposed to leaving something behind. We feel this would help Care Experienced Young People focus on their continued journey of growth and future opportunities.

Q9. Do you have any suggestions on potential ways to change and improve the language of care?

As previously stated, MCR would be encouraged to input into plans to contribute to educational and awareness resources & implementation. Some of the Young People noted that even just talking about it more will help to improve the language of care and as a result, breaking down unjust stereotypes and assumptions:

“Talk about it more and not jumping to conclusions. Change the wording to some things and treat us like young adults instead of troubled teenager”

- S3 Young Person, Perth Grammar

We are deeply encouraged, alongside others in the voluntary and third sector, that there is much more investment and resources by Government and corporate parents to ensure that Care Experienced People are able to access their rights. However, we still have a long way to go to ensure all Care Experienced People feel truly supported, represented, and respected by an individualised approach to their unique circumstances.

A way in which this could be achieved is by making Care Experience a protected characteristic. We know many corporate parents and Local Authorities who have already chosen to treat Care Experienced as a protected characteristic such as the Scottish Funding Council, Police Scotland and our partners, Skills Development Scotland; and Edinburgh City Council through its employment and housing policies and North Ayrshire Council through its equality policy. This would ensure that Care Experienced People will be protected from any discrimination due to their identity throughout their whole life, which in turn a universal definition will provide Care Experienced People an equal choice to identify with this support. Another of MCR's partner organisations, Scottish Power, in their capacity as a corporate partner in social responsibility, have been engaging in corporate parenting initiatives by providing work placements, internships, and career development opportunities specifically targeted at Care Experienced Young People. They have recognised Care Experienced as a characteristic that requires targeted intervention to address barriers in accessing employment. They have taken steps to ensure that they offer opportunities in line with the principles of equality, recognising Care Experienced individuals' unique challenges. Also the Wheatley Group, another MCR partner organisation, has policies designed to ensure Care Experienced Young People have priority access to housing and related support services, recognising that they face unique challenges in securing stable housing. Seeing the opportunities several organisations across Scotland have been providing Care Experienced Young People, shows that most of the groundwork of having Care Experienced as a Protected Characteristic is there, the Scottish Government just need to start moving towards the legislative process to secure this.

We would also be supportive of seeing more language around intersectionality introduced with a universal definition of Care Experience. Care Experienced individuals may face multiple forms of discrimination due to other aspects of their identity; for example, due to ethnicity, gender, disability etc. Language within a universal definition of Care Experience should reflect and account for this intersectionality. We need to acknowledge the intersectional nature of Care Experience by ensuring that language is flexible enough to account for other aspects of an individual's identity and experience.

MCR's overall hope is to ensure language aligns with values of equality, inclusion, and empowerment; avoids terms that imply inferiority or "otherness," and instead focuses on terms that promote equal standing in society and emphasise rights and opportunities, building on the aims of The Promise to move away from 'system language'.

Q10. Are you aware of good practice to change and improve the language of care?

Some Local Authorities, including Glasgow City Council, are now trialling 'My Meetings' when discussing residential care, placing more autonomy for the actual meetings and also removing any potential emotive or stereotypical language. One of the Young People currently on our programme in school believed that they would definitely prefer 'My Meetings' to their current 'LAC' review. Other Local Authorities, for example Fife Council, have been offering regular staff training on how the use of language can affect the self-esteem and wellbeing of their Young People. We have noted throughout this response how several of the Young People we spoke to discussed how language has affected them, both in positive and negative ways throughout their care journey. We would, therefore, encourage the use of an individualised and person-centred approach when engaging with Care Experienced People due to individual preferences to terms. MCR is also aware of the work that Scottish Adoption have been involved in, in creating more inclusive language around Care Experience. They emphasise the need for person-centered language when working with adopted children and Care Experienced individuals. They actively work with Local Authorities and other agencies/organisations to ensure that Care Experienced children and Young People are seen holistically, rather than being defined by the care system alone.

If you wish to get in touch to discuss this response with us, please contact:
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