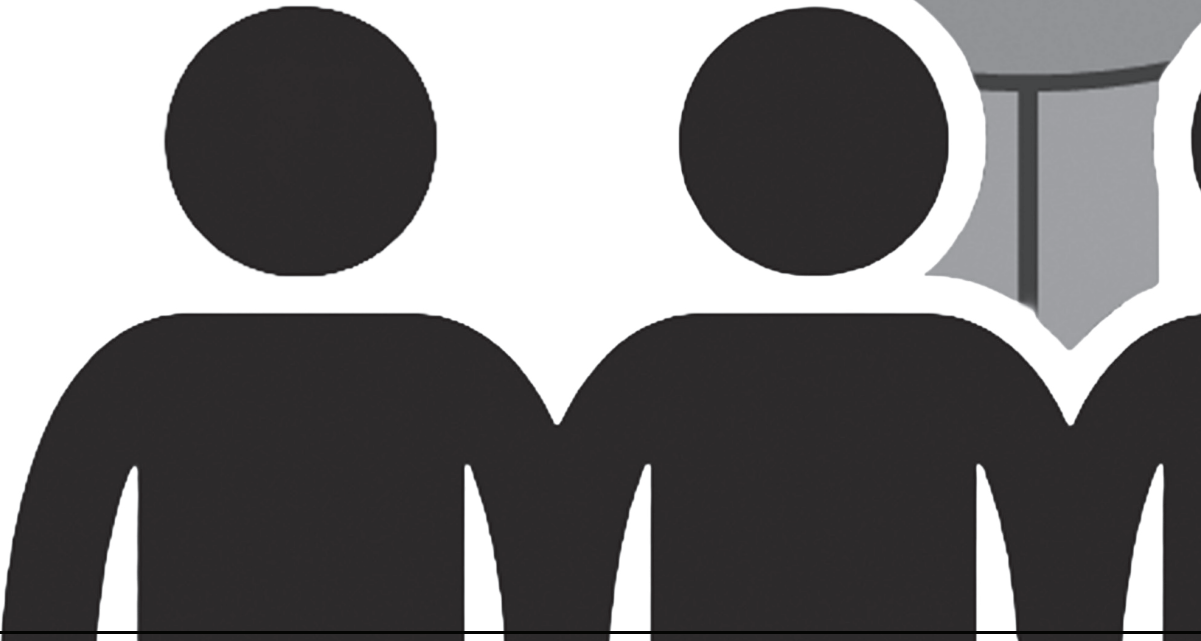
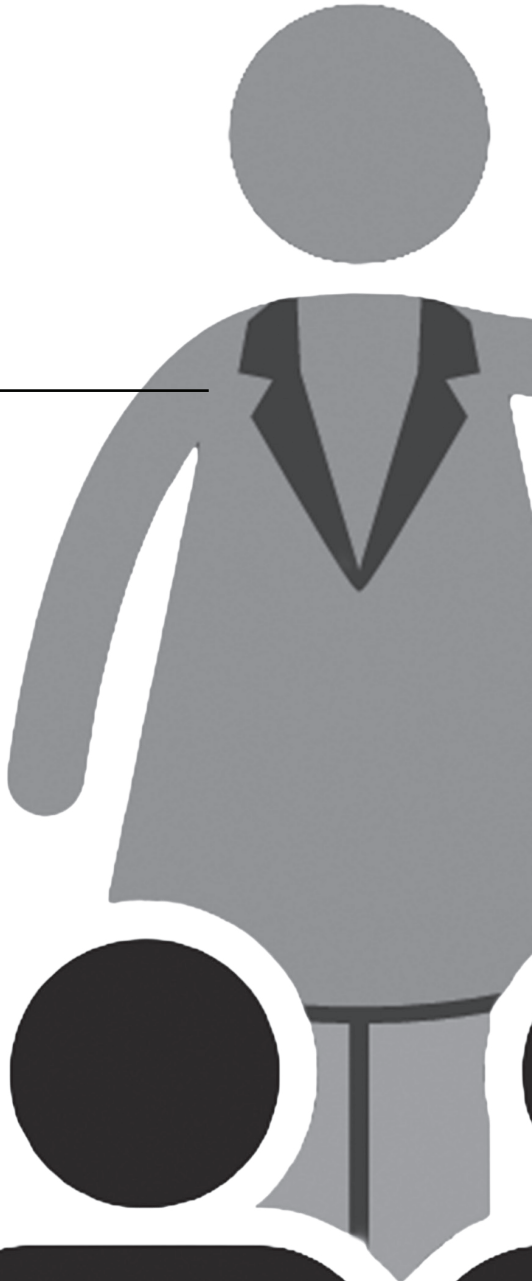


Briefing Note: Education

The Oversight Board
February 2026



**the oversight
board**
for the promise



Every child in Scotland has a right to high-quality education, yet a significant attainment gap persists for those with care experience. Recent data shows this gap is widening. These statistics reflect real children's lives and highlight that Scotland is not yet meeting its commitment to educational equality for care-experienced children.

This briefing provides a snapshot of key data on the educational outcomes for the care-experienced community, from Primary to Secondary School and into Further and Higher education.

The systematic collection of data for "Looked After Children" began in 2008/2009 following the report "We Can and Must Do Better," which highlighted the need for improved data to better support the educational outcomes of care-experienced children. The first official statistics publication specifically for educational outcomes was released in June 2011, covering the 2009/2010 cohort.

The transformational power of education

Education is considered the single most significant factor in determining whether a care-experienced child goes on to have a fulfilling adult life, and success in education is directly linked to improved life chances, better physical and mental health, and reduced long-term inequality.

- For care-experienced children who often face upheaval in their home lives, school can provide a crucial sense of continuity, secure relationships, and a safe environment for building trust; it is undoubtedly an integral part of the scaffolding of the care system in Scotland.
- Higher educational attainment at school significantly reduces the risk of future unemployment and social exclusion and facilitates entry into further and higher education.
- Care-experienced children frequently enter care due to trauma or neglect; education helps them overcome these early barriers and achieve their "enormous potential", helping to break the cycles of disadvantage.

Key Insights from Recent Educational Outcomes Data

- **Long-term Progress vs. Recent Dips:** Since 2009/10, attainment at all levels has increased, and the gap between care-experienced pupils and the general pupil population has narrowed. However, the latest Scottish Government report (2023/24) shows a slight decrease in attainment and attendance over the previous two years.



- **Attainment Gap:** A substantial gap remains, especially at higher levels of achievement. In 2023/24, only **40.8%** of care-experienced children achieved one or more qualifications at **SCQF Level 5** or better, compared to **83.5%** of all school leavers.
- **Educational achievement** across all subjects remains lower for care-experienced children than their non care experienced peers. This disparity begins as early as **Primary 1** and continues to widen throughout their schooling, resulting in a significant attainment gap by the time these students reach school-leaving age.
- **Attendance and Exclusions:**
 - The attendance rate for care-experienced children fell to **83.7%** in 2023/24, while the rate for all pupils rose slightly to **90.3%**.
 - As of 2022/23, care-experienced children were **six times more likely** to be excluded from school than the general pupil population, with the **exclusion rate rising for the first time in 12 years**.
 - Gaps in attendance at school begin as early as **Primary 1** and continue to widen throughout their schooling, resulting in significant attainment gaps.
- **School Leaving Age Post-School Destinations:**
 - The percentage of school leavers in S4 continues to remain considerably higher for care-experienced children compared to all school leavers.
 - The proportion of leavers looked after within the year achieving all SCQF qualification levels continues to be consistently lower than that of all school leavers.
 - Care-experienced young people are significantly more likely to enter **Further Education** but far less likely to enter **Higher Education** (8.3% vs. 40.8% for all leavers).
 - **Access vs. Retention:** While there continues to be an increase in the recruitment of care-experienced students in both Further and Higher Education, retention has not kept pace.

Higher degrees: separate UK research indicates that care-experienced graduates who complete an undergraduate degree are significantly more likely to progress to postgraduate study compared to their non-care-experienced peers. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1994922>. This highlights a critical “cliff-edge” in support for care-experienced learners. While undergraduate support such as the Care Experienced Bursary has improved, financial support for postgraduate studies remains largely non-existent, inconsistent, or competitive rather than guaranteed.



- **Outcomes by placement types:**

- Outcomes vary starkly by care setting. Care-experienced children looked after at home with parents consistently show the lowest attainment and attendance levels across all groups.

Progress has been made, but there is still much to do

Let us be clear that there has been progress in improving outcomes, particularly since the early 2010s. There is excellent work going on right across Scotland to improve things such as the introduction of the Care Experienced Student Bursary, the Guaranteed Offer and more. However, this data insight serves as a stark reminder that we are still badly failing care-experienced children; it is a striking and accurate reflection of the “care ceiling” in education. The figures show in clear terms once again how far there is to go for Scotland to create the conditions and experiences that allow children in its care to achieve their potential. Would you accept these educational outcomes for your children?

Let us remind you that these children are your children.

The Independent Care Review – and the resulting commitment – the promise – has attempted to bring ‘the system’ around a vision for change and set a direction that ensures that this change can take place, and some change there has been, though there must be great care that the drive for progress is not lost.

Calls to Action

To address the widening educational attainment gap for care-experienced children, the following calls for action are proposed for **The Oversight Board** in February 2026. These align with **the National Improvement Framework (NIF) 2026** and the outcomes of **Plan 24-30**, Scotland’s plan to keep the promise.

1. Strengthening Relational Scaffolding

- **Mandate “Trusted Adult” Roles:** Use **Pupil Equity Funding (PEF)** to recruit additional staff specifically to act as mentors and advocates, ensuring every care-experienced child has a stable, consistent relationship within the school.
- **Expand Trauma-Informed Training:** Accelerate the rollout of mandatory trauma-informed practice training for all school staff to foster a culture of “dignity and respect” and reduce punitive responses to trauma-related behaviours.



2. Ending Formal and Informal Exclusions

- **National Ban on Care-Experienced Exclusions:** Following the rise in exclusion rates for those with care experience, “**Exclusion as a Last Resort**”, requiring local authorities to provide immediate alternative therapeutic support instead of removal from the classroom.
- **Monitor “Soft” Exclusions:** Implement more rigorous tracking of informal exclusions (e.g. sent home early without a formal record) through **the new HMIE inspection framework**.

3. Targeted Academic Support

- **Prioritise High-Quality 1-to-1 Tutoring:** Scale up evidence-based interventions like one-to-one tuition and **peer tutoring**, which have been shown to be the most effective ways to close the gap in literacy and numeracy.
- **Stabilising Transitions:** Establish a dedicated **Transitions Fund** to support care-experienced leavers during the “cliff-edge” move into further or higher education, targeting the current drop in positive destinations.
- **Extend financial support:** Extend the Care Experienced Student Bursary to Post Graduate Study.

4. Data and Accountability

- **Real-Time Data Integration:** Standardise the use of **Scottish Candidate Numbers (SCN)** across all local authorities to ensure 100% of care-experienced children are accurately tracked, particularly those in residential care or “looked after at home” who currently show the lowest outcomes.
- **Local Authority Stretch Aims:** Require every local authority to set specific, measurable “stretch aims” for care-experienced children (distinct from general poverty-related gaps).

5. Holistic Family and Mental Health Support

- **Whole Family Wellbeing:** Understand the impact of this fund specifically on care experienced children, young people and their families. Use this learning to ensure future funding reaches this group, especially those “looked after at home,” as this cohort remains the most educationally disadvantaged.
- **School-Based Mental Health Services:** Increase investment in school-based counselling and therapeutic outreach teams to address the significant mental health barriers that often precede disengagement from education.