Policy guidance for leaders

EDUCATION TRAINING FOUNDATION

Supporting care-experienced learners in FE and skills

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Foreword

Every learner deserves to feel safe, valued and supported, especially those with care experience. Even stepping through the doors of a further education (FE) and skills provider can be a huge act of courage after navigating a lifetime of challenges and transitions, often alongside unmet physical and mental health needs and the ongoing impact on wellbeing.

FE and skills organisations aspire to be safe spaces, and are actively working to ensure learners are welcomed, believed in and supported from day one. No learner should be left behind, and creating belonging and opportunity is a shared responsibility for everyone in the learning community.

By putting learners first and meeting them with trust and encouragement, education becomes more than qualifications; it becomes a pathway to improved wellbeing, confidence, resilience and brighter futures.

Executive Summary

This guidance helps FE and skills providers take practical, joined-up action to support all learners. It sets out how the organisation can:

- Build a whole-organisation approach rooted in inclusion, connection, trust and trauma-informed practice.
- Ensure learners feel seen, supported and able to succeed.
- Embed relational approaches, consistency and empathy across all areas of FE and skills.

Drawing on insights from the webinar, *“Supporting care-experienced learners in FE and skills”* (December 2025), this policy document brings together lived experience, good practice and sector guidance. Success is achieved through culture: belief, belonging and human connection, not isolated interventions.

The policy guidance provides:

- Leadership clarity and staff responsibilities.
- Practical steps to strengthen wellbeing, progression and partnership working.
- Tools and templates for embedding inclusive practice.
- A framework to reflect on unconscious bias and assumptions.
- Commitments to collaboration, continuous improvement and ensuring no learner is left behind.

Core message repeated intentionally**:** *Believe in our learners before they believe in themselves.*

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Purpose and context

This policy guidance provides FE and skills providers with information and support to help create safe, fair and empowering environments where care-experienced learners feel a sense of belonging and can thrive. It reflects the understanding that learning is not just about knowledge, but also about relationships, safety and emotional connection.

Why this matters now

As a result of their experiences, care-experienced learners often face challenges linked to trauma, disrupted stability and unmet health needs. Without the right support, these challenges can affect learning, wellbeing and future opportunities.

National data shows:

- Lower educational outcomes: Average Attainment 8 score - 18.4 vs 46 nationally; care leavers are far less likely to progress to higher education or selective universities. *UK Parliament Committees*
- Higher education challenges: Over 1 in 6 care leavers drop out; entry and completion rates are significantly below peers. *University of Oxford*
- Employment and training: 39% of care leavers aged 19–21 are NEET *Home For Good*
- Mental health and wellbeing: Care-experienced young people face mental health difficulties, trauma, attachment disorders, and long-term health conditions, many of which go unrecorded *Community Care*
- Safeguarding risks: Increased vulnerability to exploitation, substance misuse and trauma-related challenges *MSI Reproductive Choices UK*

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- Transition to independence: Loss of support, housing instability and financial insecurity lead to higher risk of homelessness and poor long-term outcomes *Home For Good*.

But outcomes are not fixed:

- When learners feel safe, understood and supported, they thrive.
- Strong relationships and a sense of belonging reduce stress and build resilience.

Shared responsibility:

This policy guidance recognises that inclusion and care are not optional extras - they are the foundation of learning. At its heart, this policy is about belief, believing in our learners before they believe in themselves and ensuring every member of staff plays a role in helping them reach their potential.

Key definitions

- **Care-experienced learner:** Anyone who is currently, or has previously been, in local authority care. This includes children looked after (CLA), care leavers, those in foster care, residential care or kinship care, and previously looked-after children (PLAC).
- **Trauma-informed practice:** Recognises how trauma affects thinking, behaviour and trust; prioritises safety, consistency and empathy.
- **Cuckooing:** Exploitation where a vulnerable person's home is taken over for illegal activity.
- **Virtual School:** The local authority team responsible for promoting and championing the education of children in care and care leavers. Led by the Virtual School Head, it provides strategic oversight, advocacy and support to ensure learners' educational progress, attainment and wellbeing. Local authority team promoting the education of children in care and care leavers.
- **Personal Education Plan (PEP):** A statutory, living document that outlines the educational and wellbeing support for care-experienced learners, helping FE and skills providers, alongside local authorities, meet their legal responsibilities.

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Background: the challenge and the change

Care-experienced learners often carry the weight of significant life changes, complex relationships and emotional challenges. These experiences can affect confidence, attendance and engagement, making the journey through education more difficult - but also more remarkable.

Learning thrives in environments where learners feel safe, valued and supported. When staff respond with consistency, compassion and understanding, learners are able to trust, connect and fully engage with their education.

Behaviour is often a signal of need, or a means of communicating an underlying need, not defiance. Recognising this creates opportunities for guidance, encouragement and growth.

The national picture is clear: care-experienced learners still face barriers that can limit outcomes compared to their peers. Meeting this challenge requires all of us to work together. Every member of staff, in every role, has the power to make a difference - whether through small acts of support, thoughtful guidance and policy, or simply believing in a learner's potential.

By embracing this collective responsibility, FE and skills providers can transform learning spaces into places of belonging, opportunity and hope - where every care-experienced learner can thrive.

Intersectionality and lived experience

Every learner's story is unique. Care experience can intersect with factors such as race, disability, gender and socioeconomic background.

Our approach must see the individual, challenge assumptions and focus on strengths - care-experienced learners are not "difficult" or "vulnerable," they are capable, ambitious and full of potential.

Key insights from the roundtable webinar

The December 2025 *'Supporting care-experienced learners in FE and skills'* webinar delivered by Association of Colleges (AoC), commissioned by the Education Training Foundation (ETF) on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE), highlighted that care-experienced learners thrive when they feel belonging, trust and connection, supported by consistent, informed staff. While many positive practices exist, learners can still face barriers: limited staff understanding, inconsistent approaches and poor information sharing can make engagement harder, while trauma, past instability, fear of judgment and complex home lives can affect confidence, attendance and behaviour. Cultural attitudes - such as

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viewing this work as extra workload or relying on disciplinary approaches and organisational challenges like weak multi-agency collaboration, inconsistent identification and rigid policies can further limit support.

The webinar poll asking staff: *"On a scale of 1–10, how confident do you feel engaging in conversations regarding the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced learners?"* returned an average score of **6.9**, highlighting that even experienced staff feel there is room to build confidence in supporting learners' wellbeing. Recognising these challenges helps us focus on building a whole organisation, connected approach that ensures every learner feels safe, known and able to thrive.

The webinar made clear that:

- Belonging is everyone's job - every interaction can build trust.
- Language and bias shape connection; shifting to "worth reaching" empowers learners.
- Relational mental health support and trauma-informed, neuroscience-informed practice helps staff create safe, predictable environments.
- Partnerships with Virtual Schools and local authorities strengthen stability and continuity.
- A consistent key adult offers the trust, advocacy and regular connection learners rely on.

To feel fully equipped, staff need:

- FE and skills-relevant trauma-informed training delivered regularly and accessibly.
- Practical guides and mentoring tools that build confidence in everyday relational practice.
- Strong safeguarding induction and policy clarity across all staff levels.
- Lived-experience input from young people, role-play scenarios and ongoing supervision.
- Train-the-trainer models and closer collaboration with Virtual Schools for consistent, joined-up support.

Overall, the insights are clear: creating an environment where care-experienced learners feel they belong, are trusted and can thrive is not optional - it is a shared, moral and transformational responsibility.

Learning from effective practice

At the webinar, the speakers from Kirklees College and Kirklees Virtual School shared how they worked together to better support care-experienced learners across the area. Many learners were showing signs of stress and trauma through changes in behaviour, attendance or engagement. Partners recognised these as signals of unmet needs, not lack of ability.

The Virtual School, colleges and wider agencies introduced Care Coordinators to advocate for young people, build trust and reduce exclusions. Staff were supported to create safe, welcoming environments and to use Pupil Premium Plus more effectively. By working

together with mental health and community partners, organisations helped reduce stress, improve wellbeing and strengthen engagement in education.

This joined-up approach created a positive cycle: better wellbeing led to better learning, which supported stronger long-term outcomes of attendance, progression and achievement. The story shows that when organisations collaborate and focus on relationships, care-experienced learners thrive.

Learning from effective practice includes:

- Dedicated, designated Tutor or Coordinator roles integrated with safeguarding and wellbeing.
- Pastoral mentors who act as bridge figures between learners, tutors and Virtual Schools.
- Organisation-wide CPD using case studies, roleplay and trauma-informed simulation tools.
- Peer support groups and safe spaces to build belonging.

This guide has a supporting case studies document, with in-depth details about initiatives that FE and skills providers have worked to support the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced learners:

- City of Bristol College is delivering a collaborative project with Gloucester Cricket Club, providing holistic support for care-experienced and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Newcastle College's highly personalised, trauma-informed support system for care-experienced and ESOL learners.
- Weston College's unique whole-college trauma-informed approach, known as the 5Cs, as part of their journey toward becoming a Compassionate College.

These case studies demonstrate how consistency, communication and cultural ownership drive change. The case studies can be viewed via this link: case-studies-supporting-care-experienced-learners.pdf

Practical tools and supports

Transition and induction

- Work with Virtual Schools, local authorities and community services before enrolment to find out about the learners, and to make early and personalised contact to identify areas of support required.
- Assign each learner a named key person for ongoing support.
- Offer clear, welcoming inductions, taster and experiences days, and safe spaces.

Personalised support

- Provide mentoring and wellbeing check-ins regularly.
- Access to bursaries and hardship funds.
- Support for attendance and engagement through supportive, relationship focused rather than penalising approaches.
- Use consistency, empathy and high expectations in attendance, deadlines and communication to promote learners' sense of safety.

Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health is part of every learner's journey - not a separate issue. FE and skills providers already do excellent work in supporting learner wellbeing and this policy builds on those efforts to strengthen support at every stage of learning.

Organisations should:

- Promote wellbeing openly through visible campaigns, workshops and ongoing conversations.
- Provide access to support, including counselling, mentoring and wellbeing services.
- Empower staff to recognise early signs of distress and respond with kindness and calm.
- Create safe spaces where learners can take a break or talk when things feel overwhelming.
- Normalise mental health support, ensuring that asking for help is seen as a strength, not a weakness.

By embedding mental health and wellbeing across all aspects of learning, FE and skills providers can continue to create environments where care-experienced learners - and all learners; feel supported, confident and able to thrive.

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Building a whole organisation approach

FE and skills providers already do great work creating inclusive and supportive environments. This guide offers ideas and approaches to help strengthen that culture further. Leadership and organisational culture are central to fostering belonging and trust. Leaders might reflect with questions such as:

- “What might be happening for this learner?”
- “How can our organisation better support this learner’s sense of belonging and wellbeing?”
- “What steps can we take to ensure all staff are equipped to respond with empathy and understanding?”

These questions help shift the focus from “What’s wrong with the learner?” to understanding, connection and supportive action.

Inclusion and wellbeing can be visible priorities in many aspects of the organisation, from resource planning to curriculum design, helping learners feel supported at every level. Senior leaders can champion inclusion by modelling empathy in their interactions and ensuring that policies are not just written but actively experienced across daily practice.

The idea of *“believe in our learners before they believe in themselves”* can guide leadership tone, communication and expectations, helping create a culture where every learner feels valued, seen and able to thrive.

Leadership commitment
Leaders across the sector are encouraged to:

1. Foster a trauma-informed culture across their settings, so every interaction supports understanding and trust.
2. Allocate resources and responsibility to ensure care-experienced learners receive consistent and meaningful support.
3. Believe in learners before they believe in themselves, creating encouraging and motivating environments.
4. Listen to and act on learner voice, so learners know their experiences and ideas help shape decisions.
5. Encourage staff reflection on bias and promote language that builds confidence and connection rather than labels.
6. Treat wellbeing as a shared responsibility, embedding care across all areas rather than as a separate service.
7. Ensure no learner is left behind due to care experience, giving every learner the opportunity to succeed.

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Staff confidence and capability

Staff play a vital role in supporting care-experienced learners and are already doing remarkable work. This guide offers ways to build on that strength, helping staff feel confident, supported and able to respond with curiosity and understanding.

Effective approaches can include:

- Training in trauma-informed and inclusive practice to understand learners' experiences and practical ways to support engagement and wellbeing.
- Reflective practice on language, assumptions and expectations, to communicate thoughtfully and build trusting relationships. *Example 1:* After a challenging interaction, staff can ask: "What might be happening for this learner?" instead of "What's wrong with them?" or keep a short reflective journal to note what went well, what could be different and how learner responses informed their approach. *Example 2:* During planning or after sessions, staff can review: "Which of my approaches helped this learner feel included or supported? What small changes could I make next time to strengthen engagement or understanding?" This encourages ongoing adjustment and empathy in practice.
- Creating predictable and supportive environments, where routines and clear expectations help learners feel secure and ready to learn.
- Coaching and mentoring, which can provide personalised support, encourage professional growth and help staff put learning into practice.

This guide supports FE and skills providers to help all learners - especially care-experienced learners, feel supported from the very start. Individual needs are considered during admissions, enrolment and induction, so learners have the right support in place as they begin their learning journey.

Curriculum and learner voice

Learners should be active partners in shaping their learning and experience, not just the focus of policy. It is the responsibility of each provider to consider effective practices and approaches to engaging learners. Their voices are essential in creating an environment where everyone feels seen, heard and valued. Safe, supportive spaces allow learners to share experiences, contribute ideas and influence improvements, knowing their feedback will be genuinely considered and acted upon. Representation within the curriculum - through stories, examples and role models, helps all learners feel a sense of belonging and connection.

- Learners help shape support and enrichment activities, ensuring these meet their real needs and interests.
- Celebrate care experience through positive storytelling and visible role models, highlighting strengths, resilience and achievement.
- Provide safe spaces for learners to express feedback and ideas, fostering trust, confidence and a sense of ownership over their learning journey.

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Community and collaboration

Strong partnerships with Virtual Schools, social workers, carers and employers are essential to create a joined-up support network that learners can rely on. When organisations work together, including supporting apprentices in the workplace - learners experience a community that believes in them, values their potential and reinforces their sense of belonging and trust. Consistent communication and shared approaches ensure support is timely, effective and responsive to each learner's individual needs.

- Foster collaboration with Virtual Schools, carers and employers to enhance support, continuity and meaningful learning experiences.
- Work with employers to understand and accommodate learners' individual needs, including mentoring, flexible approaches and progress monitoring.
- Share effective practice across the sector to drive consistency, strengthen approaches and improve outcomes for care-experienced learners.

Measuring impact

Effective evaluation goes beyond academic results to capture the whole learner experience, including belonging, trust, emotional safety and personal growth. Many organisations are already doing excellent work and sharing these approaches can strengthen practice across the sector.

Key areas to track include:

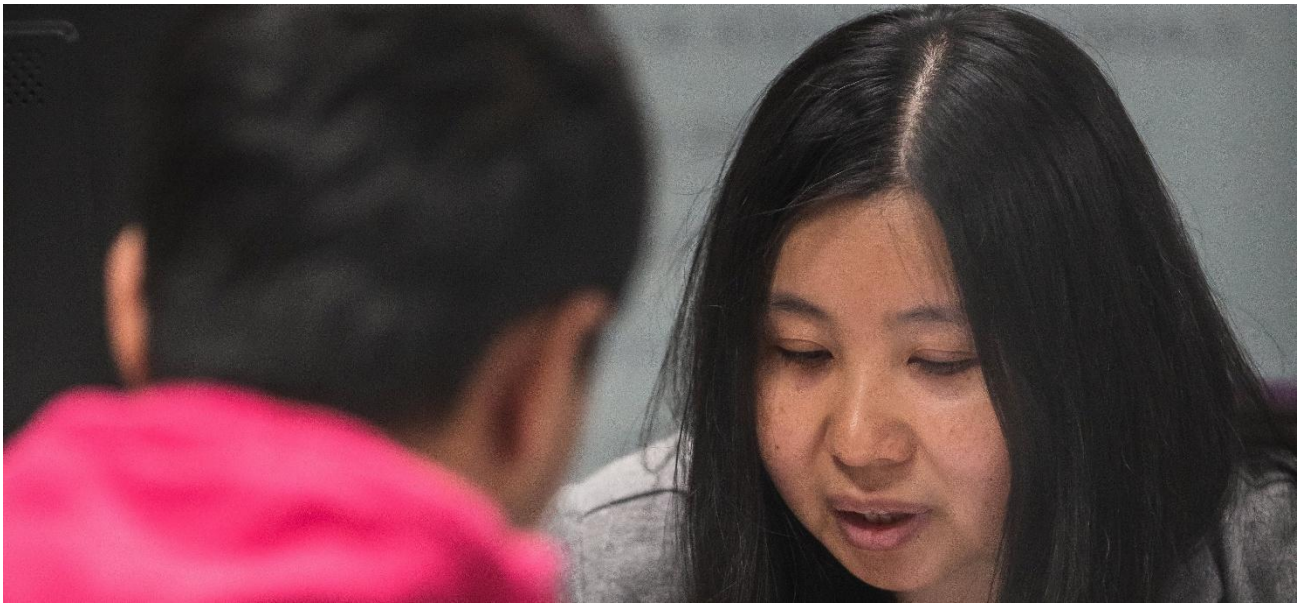
- Retention, achievement and progression – monitor academic growth.
- Learner's sense of belonging and emotional safety – understand their experience.
- Staff confidence and reflective practice – assess training and support.

- Wellbeing referrals and outcomes – ensure emotional needs are met.
- Learner voice – through surveys and forums to inform improvements.

Findings should be shared with senior leaders, governors, and relevant stakeholders as appropriate across the sector to promote accountability, celebrate successes and foster a culture where all learners feel valued, safe and supported.

This table helps track key areas of support for care-experienced learners, including apprentices and adult learners - to ensure their progress, wellbeing and voices are actively supported through effective partnerships.

Area to measure	What to measure/indicators	How to measure	Frequency/timing	Purpose/notes
Staying on track with progress	Retention, achievement, progression	Learner records, attendance, grades	At each progress review	To track learning outcomes and identify trends or gaps
Sense of belonging	Learners feel safe, included, respected	Learner surveys, focus groups, one-to-one check-ins	Start and end of programme/term	To assess emotional and relational engagement
Emotional safety and wellbeing	Learners feel supported, can access help	Wellbeing referrals, counselling notes, wellbeing surveys	Ongoing	To ensure emotional needs are met and support is effective
Learner voice	Opportunities to give feedback, shape decisions	Surveys, forums, suggestion boxes, learner committees	Quarterly/termly/ annually	To empower learners and embed co-creation in practice
Staff confidence and practice	Staff feel equipped to support care-experienced learners	Staff surveys, reflective logs, CPD completion,	Quarterly/Termly	To monitor training effectiveness and support reflective practice
Partnership effectiveness	Collaboration with carers, social workers, employers, Virtual Schools	Meeting notes, communication logs, shared action plans	Ongoing	To ensure joined-up support and consistency across agencies



Policy commitments

FE and skills organisations supporting care-experienced learners should embed **humanistic principles** across leadership, curriculum and learner support, recognising how early experiences shape thought, behaviour and trust. These commitments create environments where learners feel **safe, valued and empowered**.

Key commitments:

- Adopt a whole-organisation approach to inclusion and wellbeing, with everyone from those responsible for leadership and governance to frontline staff fostering belonging.
- Assign each learner a consistent, trusted adult for guidance, support and direction.
- Provide trauma-informed and bias-awareness training for all staff.
- Review progress regularly and report to leadership or governing bodies to maintain accountability and improvement.
- Maintain strong partnerships with Virtual Schools, care leaver services and other agencies to ensure joined-up, consistent support.
- For Apprenticeships, ensure workplace mentors and supervisors foster a sense of belonging and provide consistent guidance, support and progress monitoring, so apprentices feel valued and supported across both learning and workplace environments.

Additional actions:

- Embed inclusion and wellbeing as a shared, everyday responsibility.
- Model compassion, consistency and visible commitment in all interactions.
- Ensure no vulnerable learner is left behind by providing the support they need to succeed.

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- Sustain commitment with honesty, persistence and shared belief, even when challenges arise.
- Review policies and processes through a trauma-informed lens to ensure all practices actively support learners' emotional safety, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Outcome: These commitments provide a clear framework to create inclusive, compassionate and high-support environments, helping care-experienced learners flourish academically, socially and emotionally.

Action plan example template

This template offers a practical and adaptable starting point for organisations, helping them track progress, celebrate successes and identify areas for growth.

Objective	Action	Lead	Timeline	Evidence of impact
Improve learner belonging	Give each learner a consistent, trusted staff member who checks in regularly	Designated Safeguarding Lead	Term/ quarter one	Learner feedback
Strengthen staff understanding	Provide trauma-informed and inclusive practice training; optional one-to-one coaching	HR and SLT	Term/quarter two	Staff survey /reflections
Support wellbeing	Run regular wellbeing and mental health drop-ins	Safeguarding	Ongoing	Attendance/ engagement data
Challenge bias	Review staff language and behaviour; provide guidance to promote inclusivity	Quality Team	Annual	Staff reflections
Build partnerships	Hold quarterly meetings with Virtual Schools, social workers and care leaver services	Designated Lead	Ongoing	Meeting notes/action points

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Appendices and references

FE and skills sector-focused resources

- AoC – mental health and wellbeing resources Mental health and wellbeing | Association of Colleges
- ETF – mental health and wellbeing support for leaders Mental Health and Wellbeing support for leaders | Education Training Foundation
- guidance Education Sector Engagement - Care Leaver Covenant
- Natspec – supporting learners with additional needs in FE https://natspec.org.uk/resources.

Additional free resources for trauma-informed practice

- UK Trauma Council / Anna Freud Centre – https://uktraumacouncil.org
- NICE Guidance – Supporting looked-after children – https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng26
- NSPCC Learning – Safeguarding and trauma – https://learning.nspcc.org.uk.

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