A series of case studies for further education and skills providers

EDUCATION TRAINING FOUNDATION

Supporting care-experienced learners in FE and skills

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Introduction

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.

Further education 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.

This collection of case studies was created to accompany the policy guidance document, *"Supporting care-experienced learners in further education and skills".* The policy guidance document provides practical steps, examples and frameworks to help every organisation foster connection, belonging, allyship and community - both online and offline. The policy guidance can be accessed via this link: supporting-care-experienced-learners.pdf.

This supporting document outlines a range of initiatives delivered by further education colleges to support the mental health and wellbeing of care-experienced learners. Readers are encouraged to consider how these models could be translated or adapted to suit their FE and skills setting.

- 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.

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City of Bristol College

Background and challenges

At City of Bristol College, inclusion is not just a core value; it is the heart of their community. As a proud member of the City and College of Sanctuary networks, they are deeply committed to achieving the aims set out in their strategic plan, with one being to deliver an inclusive and equitable educational and work environment that actively addresses and eliminates barriers to learning and employment.

They are currently putting this mission into practice by supporting a significant cohort of over 200 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). While the college is dedicated to providing a safe haven for these resilient young people, the scale of this commitment presents unique leadership challenges; from coordinating complex, trauma-informed safeguarding to providing intensive ESOL and specialist learning support. For City of Bristol College, being a College of Sanctuary means ensuring that every learner, regardless of their starting point, finds a genuine sense of belonging and a clear, unobstructed path to success.

Actions taken

In 2023, City of Bristol College started running a collaborative project with Gloucester Cricket Club, providing holistic support for care-experienced and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Through weekly cricket sessions led by professional coaches, the project fosters a sense of community, promotes positive mental health, and equips learners with crucial social and team-building skills. The partnership's innovative approach extends beyond sport, aiming to improve academic engagement and provide a stable foundation for young people who have faced significant challenges.

The safe, non-traditional learning environment at the cricket club fosters emotional security and a strong sense of belonging, which are prerequisites for educational success. Through the structured team environment, learners build crucial life skills, including problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. They are empowered to have a voice and make positive choices, accelerating their transition to independent living and employment. College and club staff have engaged in trauma-informed and culturally responsive training, leading to a deeper understanding of the unique needs of vulnerable learners. This expertise is now being applied across all areas of college support.

Impact and learnings

Ultimately, City of Bristol's commitment to being a College of Sanctuary is measured by the lived experience of their learners. This scalable model demonstrates a powerful, lasting

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impact on learner well-being and progression, showcasing how a collaborative, community-based approach can truly transform lives. The mentors who work with these learners have seen a decline in mental health concerns and reduced exclusions due to poor behaviour. By delivering life-changing benefits for their care-experienced and unaccompanied asylum-seeking learners, including improved attendance, retention and achievement, they are fulfilling their strategic mission to eliminate barriers and foster genuine equity.

The real-world success of this approach is captured through their partnership cricket initiative. Kirsty Cross, Designated Lead for Children in Care and Care Leavers at City of Bristol College, reflects on the change she has seen:

“The noticeable excitement and enthusiasm on the students’ faces when they know it’s cricket day was a joy to see. They have become a team, both supportive and caring of each other, and this camaraderie has extended into the college.”

By moving beyond the classroom, the cricket group has:

- Created a safe space by facilitating integration, friendship, and confidence-building.
- Forged strong bonds - helping learners connect through a shared passion.
- Provided purpose, giving these young people a vital sense of community and belonging.

At City of Bristol College, they believe that when a learner feels they belong, they are empowered to succeed. This initiative proves that when leadership, strategy, and community come together, we do more than just educate; we provide a foundation for a new life.

Newcastle College

Background and challenges

Newcastle College's care-experienced and ESOL learners often arrive at college with difficult personal histories shaped by migration, displacement and traumatic experiences. These experiences can lead to struggles with self-esteem and confidence, which can directly affect their educational outcomes. Accessing external mental health support is another major challenge. These learners often struggle to understand how to use services, particularly if they are not from the UK, and face stigma around discussing mental health, or worry about how seeking help might affect their immigration status. As a result, trauma often goes unaddressed. Teachers frequently become the main source of emotional support, even though they may not have received trauma-informed training.

Actions taken

Newcastle College provides a robust and personalised support system for care-experienced learners, with a strong focus on mental health and wellbeing. Each learner is supported by a dedicated member of the Pastoral Support team, with access to Learning Mentors across campus who offer guidance on wellbeing, academic progress, and life skills.

Learners benefit from timely interventions, including access to the college Wellbeing team, BACP-accredited counsellors and trained mental health first aiders. A dedicated Transition Mentor supports learners through key transition points, helping them settle into college life and build confidence.

The college works closely with carers, social workers, and virtual schools to develop bespoke support plans and monitor Personal Education Plans (PEPs). As a proud partner of the Care Leaver Covenant, they also support care leavers aged 16–25 in their journey toward independence.

Newcastle College's open-access Support Hub and the strategic leadership of their Student Support Manager—who also serves as a Governor at Newcastle Virtual School—and Designated Teacher ensure that care-experienced learners are empowered to thrive both personally and academically.

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Learnings and impact

Access to college counsellors, youth mental health first aiders, and a Transition Mentor helps care-experienced learners manage anxiety, trauma, and emotional challenges.

Early intervention and personalised support reduce the risk of crisis and promote long-term wellbeing. Learner feedback *“I was just having a think to myself. I think I am ok now, and think we could bring our wellbeing sessions to a stop now, if that’s ok? I feel you have helped me and I think I’m genuinely in a lot better place. So, thank you* 😊*"*

Dedicated support colleagues creating bespoke support via 1:1 mentoring, and pre-entry visits help care-experienced learners feel safe, understood, and connected—leading to improved attendance and retention. Achievement data for 2024/25 showed outcomes for 16–18 care experience learners remain strong, with particularly high achievement in vocational programmes and Level 2 and Level 3 courses, where results are well above national rates and continuing to improve.

Managing and coordinating the Personal Education Plan (PEP) process and targeted academic support help learners set and achieve realistic goals.

Learning Mentors and SEND Advisors provide tailored support strategies that boost confidence and academic performance. The use of Inclusions Plans for learners creates a learner profile for Curriculum staff to understand a learner’s barriers and what coping strategies are required for that individual.

Learner feedback “*During the support sessions you have helped keep me focused and motivated with techniques for studying and you have also helped with my emotional well-being, because of this, it has allowed me to thrive when in college and feel more confident to independently research and reach out for support within my class”*

The Transition Mentor plays a key role in helping learners adjust to college life and prepare for progression into employment or further study. Partnership with the Care Leaver Covenant supports independent living and career readiness. All 2025/26 learners who received face-to-face transition support from the Transition Mentor, such as school visits or campus tours, successfully enrolled, with the majority remaining on course through collaborative work with care teams, curriculum and college support staff.

Having the Student Support Manager as a Governor on the board of Newcastle Virtual School ensures care-experienced voices are represented in shaping post-16 provision.

This governance role strengthens collaboration between education providers and local authorities, driving improvements in regional support systems.

External feedback from a regional virtual school “*Care experienced young people can be particularly complex, they often struggle with trauma, lower self-esteem, confidence which can have a direct impact on their education outcomes. Some Young People are*

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not deemed learner ready by some schools which can have a significant impact on them being ready for post-16 education.

Newcastle College helps eliminate barriers and offers a corporate parent approach so our young people can feel the complexities they may have are not going to impact on their pathway to post-16 education. The college helps to provide dedicated support by offering the young person their own personalised Learning Mentor to help with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) and education support. They work closely with us in the virtual school to share regular updates to help with plans, share information for reviews and are very efficient to process and complete PEPs within statutory required time frame to help the young people to achieve their goal, outcomes, progress to post-18 pathway and independence."

The Support Hub, Designated Teacher and visible presence of Learning Mentors foster a culture of openness, inclusion, and proactive wellbeing support. Learners know where to go for timely help, reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviour. Our Learner Voice (first term survey) showed satisfaction is high at 96%, slightly above the college's 95%, showing that care-experienced learners feel well supported even where barriers and challenges may persist.

Weston College

Background and challenges

In September 2024, Weston College introduced a whole-college trauma-informed approach, uniquely developed for the college, known as the 5Cs, as part of their journey toward becoming a Compassionate College. The 5Cs - Connect, Care, Challenge, Consistent, and Celebrate - form a unified framework that reflects their commitment to *high empathy, alongside high expectations*. This approach is embedded across all aspects of college life, ensuring that every member of the community understands the framework and actively applies it in practice. By placing empathy and compassion at the heart of their core principles, the 5Cs create a holistic, trauma-informed culture that promotes psychological safety, positive behaviours, emotional wellbeing, and a supportive environment in which everyone can succeed.

Weston College rolled out a trauma-informed whole-college approach to create a psychologically safe environment where all learners feel understood, supported, and able to thrive. By meeting the needs of their most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and implementing strategies designed to support them, they aimed to create an environment that benefits everyone. This approach helps to improve attendance, retention, behaviour, and outcomes by removing barriers to learning and fostering positive, trusting relationships. The college believes that a trauma-informed, high-empathy and high-expectations approach is the right thing to do to ensure equity, compassion, and opportunity for the college community.

Actions taken

To implement this approach effectively, Weston introduced compulsory training for all existing staff, delivered area by area over six weeks, to ensure consistency and meaningful engagement. The training is now embedded as a compulsory element of new staff induction, capturing colleagues as they enter the organisation. Practice is reinforced through INSET delivery and forms a core part of the ongoing CPD offer. Alongside training, they reviewed and updated key policies through a trauma-informed lens, refreshed the pastoral support offer, and revised behaviour expectations and the learner agreement to ensure they align with our compassionate, high-expectation approach.

The approach is underpinned by the psychology and basic neuroscience of trauma, helping staff to understand how trauma can impact the brain, learning, social skills and behaviour. The training provides practical, real-life examples and strategies for trauma-informed practice in both classroom and non-classroom settings. It also supports staff to reframe

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language to be trauma-informed and equips them with strategies to approach behaviour management through a lens of high empathy and high expectations, promoting understanding, accountability and positive outcomes for learners.

- Roll out of trauma-informed practice (5Cs compassionate college) to meet the needs of ALL learners and avoid traumatisation.
- Dedicated Child in Care Coordinator who oversees care experienced learners holistically and acts as a key link trusted adult outside of curriculum areas.
- Reporting on care-experienced learners in the key committee to view trends and address concerns.
- Specific learner voice for care-experienced learners, in addition to the whole college, to compare the views of care-experienced learners versus the wider cohort. This enables us to provide targeted support.
- Care-experienced learners are identified in our internal identification system to ensure they are prioritised and discussed in team meetings as a priority.
- Transition support for care-experienced learners, e.g. from school to college.
- Priority access to counselling for care-experienced learners.
- Care-experienced learner data dashboards related to attendance, retention, and achievement are reviewed biweekly.
- College senior Mental Health Lead is also Designated Teacher and Deputy Designated Safeguarding Lead, as well as overseeing behaviour to support triangulation of wider strategies for care-experienced learners.
- Mental Health Setting Audit completed by Senior Mental Health Lead (DT and Dep DSL).
- Reaccreditation of the Carnegie Mental Health award completed by the Senior Mental Health Lead (DT and Dep DSL).
- Close working relationships with the Virtual Schools.
- Close working relationships with the Local Authority supporting regional Trauma Informed pledge, including hosting a trauma-informed event for external professionals (e.g. social care, housing team, domestic violence teams, youth justice, substance services, other schools and education providers).
- Learner group for care-experienced learners engaging in enrichment activities to enable the ability for care-experienced learners to build relationships with other young people who understand their journey, to share their lived experiences and support each other, facilitated by the Child in Care Coordinator and our Student Engagement Team for care-experienced learners.
- Care-experienced celebration event hosted by the college, including all care-experienced learners and their support networks, social workers, carers, leaving care advisors, and virtual schools, where individuals are celebrated for achievements and their distance travelled.

Learnings and impact

Initial resistance can occur, reinforcing the importance of making trauma-informed training compulsory to ensure shared understanding and consistent practice. For the approach to be truly effective, it must be embedded across the whole organisation and not limited to teaching staff alone.

Although it can be difficult to quantify and confidently attribute success to this type of approach, the college has identified measurable impact through holistic indicators, including attendance, behaviour, and learner voice, which they use as key performance indicators.

Staff feedback was unanimously positive, with reported levels of understanding increasing by 26% following the training, based on pre- and post-training scores. The 5Cs framework was rated 4.5 out of 5 by staff for its ability to support learners, and the ease of embedding was rated 4.4 out of 5. This highlights that the approach is both achievable and attainable in practice.

The impact of this approach is demonstrated through a range of positive learner outcomes. 99% of learners report feeling safe, and 98% believe the college does a good job in promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion. Learner interactions with the Welfare Team have decreased by 15% overall, with mental health-related interactions down 45% year to date, suggesting that learner needs are being met more effectively across their whole college experience. This is reinforced by learner voice data showing 94% of learners feel supported with their mental health and wellbeing and 95% describe the college as welcoming and supportive. The reduction in interactions has also allowed the Welfare Team to dedicate more time and resources to learners at greater risk or experiencing crisis.

From September to December 2025, 98% of care-experienced learners have received support or accessed opportunities beyond their curriculum area. 97% of care experienced learners said they would recommend the college. Retention rates for care-experienced learners stand at 99%, compared to 98% for non care experienced learners, highlighting the positive and inclusive impact of this approach. In October 2025, the college was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation for its outstanding support of care-experienced learners and its collaboration with Virtual Schools, formally recognised by the Director of Children’s Services from the local authority.

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Our partner

ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES

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