Evidence review:

Supporting access and student success for learners with experience of children's social care

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Contents

Executive Summary

- This report summarises the findings from a research project assessing the evidence base on activities designed to support access and success in post-secondary education for learners who have had experience of children's social care. A literature review was supplemented by interviews with staff and experts across the non-profit, post-secondary education, and education policy sectors.

- Our literature review found that few studies have robustly evaluated the efficacy of activities targeted at individuals with experience of children's social care (CSC-experienced learners)[1] in the UK.

- From the 57 studies under review, about half focused on the evaluation of actual support activities while the other half explored potential barriers and facilitators affecting the target group's trajectory into post-secondary education.

- Of the evaluations on the effectiveness of interventions, the majority were classified as 'developing' or 'best' evidence according to the Office for Students' (OfS) Standards of Evidence, while a minority were classified as 'weak' evidence.[2]

- However, small sample sizes and gaps in data coverage hinder the development of robust causal studies. Within the entire sample, we only found one UK-based study investigating the causal impact of activities designed to boost higher education (HE) access and success for this group.

- The lack of consistent definitions and data linkage between local authorities, schools and HE providers currently prevents researchers and practitioners from evaluating and understanding the longitudinal impact of interventions to address the needs of the target group.

- The overarching theme across the empirical and narrative studies was the intersectional and complex needs of this group of learners and the nuanced, context-specific approaches that are therefore required to support them.

- Early interventions that leverage close collaborations between children's social care services, educational providers and pastoral/social networks have been identified as areas with limited but promising evidence to support CSC-experienced learners and the staff supporting them.

- For example, there is promising correlational evidence to support Go Higher West Yorkshire's innovative training programme, co-developed with virtual schools and designed to equip key influencers to support young people's informed decision-making (Aldridge, 2020).

- Themes from subsequent stakeholder interviews were consistent with the issues highlighted by the literature review, particularly on the availability and validity of data. While there has been progress – for example, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has introduced a self-disclosure field for care leavers in their application form – these small improvements are far from sufficient to capture the varied experience of CSC-experienced individuals.

- Interviewees reiterated problems around accurately defining groups of learners that do not meet the narrow requirements of being classified as a care leaver and the subsequent problems of other CSC-experienced learners remaining unidentified and unsupported.

- Interviewees also highlighted that those with CSC experience are less likely to enter HE at 18,[3] and therefore encounter intersecting barriers experienced by mature learners. Understanding the intersectional dynamics within the group is key to helping providers understand and tackle the diverse needs of CSC-experienced learners.

- A promising approach to overcoming limitations relating to data and definitions includes close collaboration between organisations and stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and evidence gaps detailed above we identify the following priorities for future research:

- To ensure effective allocation of support for CSC-experienced learners more causal studies investigating the actual efficacy of the interventions on the aspirations, enrolment and success of CSC-experienced learners is needed. Encouraging closer collaboration between institutions on similar interventions may be an opportunity for providers to increase the number of eligible participants to strengthen the robustness of arising findings.

- There is a need for more robust research on the impact of virtual schools on CSC-experienced learners' aspirations, progression and success in HE. Research in this area should include a strong emphasis on implementation and process elements to tease out facilitators and barriers to success across the virtual schools.

- Both strands of this report highlighted the need for HE providers to work more closely with external staff in local authorities and virtual schools to facilitate closer channels of communication and to upskill involved parties on synergies and potential areas for collaboration in their respective work.

- CSC-experienced students are more likely to enter HE as mature learners and not have standard entry qualifications. HE providers should ensure that staff and activities that support mature learners are better linked up with staff and activities that support CSC-experienced learners, and vice-versa, and evaluate these efforts where possible.

- More research on the effectiveness of designated members of staff within HE providers and their impact on the retention and success rates of CSC-experienced learners should be carried out. Robust monitoring and evaluation should be built into their work from the start.

- More research is also needed on the link between CSC experience and mental health, and its impact on access and success in HE.

- The lack of easily available, consistent data and data definitions is a major barrier to robust impact evaluation of the effect of WP activities on CSC-experienced learners. The Department for Education and its delivery bodies must place a greater emphasis on facilitating an inclusive understanding of definitions and a more consistent and easily-available tracking of CSC-experienced individuals and their outcomes over time and between the school, college and the higher education sectors.

- To ensure the most effective targeting, monitoring and supporting of relevant sub-groups, the inclusion of CSC-experienced learners' voices in the conception, dissemination and interpretation of research projects is strongly recommended.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this evidence review was to understand the existing evidence around widening participation activities targeted at learners with experience of children's social care (CSC), and how best to support their progression to, transition through, and success in, higher education.

The overarching research was guided by the following research questions:

- What kind of interventions aimed at learners with experience of CSC have been studied in the literature and how do key stakeholders assess and use this evidence?

- What evidence underpins the impact of these interventions on CSC-experienced learners?

- Are there gaps in the evidence that need to be filled?

To capture relevant expertise within the sector, this project was divided into two strands: a desk-based evidence review, followed by semi-structured interviews with stakeholders. The first part of this report summarises the former strand – the literature review – which was undertaken from July to September 2020. The literature review outlines our findings from a variety of sources which include:

- peer-reviewed academic publications

- 'grey' literature published by organisations involved in supporting CSC-experienced learners

- findings submitted as part of a call for evidence run by TASO from June to August 2020

Following completion of the literature review, we scheduled subsequent interviews with key stakeholders across the sector from October to November 2020 to supplement and contextualise our findings from the literature.

The following sections provide an overview of the scope of the evidence review and how we defined the group of CSC-experienced learners, before providing detailed insights into the findings of our literature review and subsequent interview synthesis.

Conceptualising experience of children's social care

The conceptualisation of experience of CSC is ill-defined, and categories of different types of care experience are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive (see Harrison, 2019). For the purpose of this report, we align with the Office for Students' (OfS, 2020) approach, and that of What Works for Children's Social Care, and recognise that any experience a learner has had with the children's social care system may impact their educational outlook and outcomes.

Our evidence review, therefore, uses the terms 'experience of children's social care', or 'CSC-experienced' to include all those who have or have had experience with children's social care at some point before they turned 18. Our scope includes those learners who have or have had a Child in Need Plan or a Child Protection Plan, as well as those who are or have been in care ('care-experienced' or 'care leavers').[4] However, we exclude learners who had a Child in Need plan solely as a result of having a disability, as we consider this a separate group with separate experiences and support needs. Aligning to good practice outlined by UCAS, the use of a more inclusive conceptualisation covers those with earlier or shorter experiences of care and those who do not receive ongoing support from the local authority, such as those who left care through adoption and those above the age limits for statutory support.

Generally, in this report, we use the term 'CSC-experienced', to reflect the full scope of our review. However, in specific cases, where the research was on care-experienced young people or care leavers, we will use these terms to reflect accurately the group covered by the research. Interviewees used a range of terms, including 'care-experienced', 'care leavers', and 'children with experience of social care'. In direct quotes we have preserved their usage, even where it is not consistent with how we have defined our terms above.

Scope of the evidence review and inclusion/exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before the search process and were developed to focus on the characteristics of interest in terms of population, interventions, outcomes, study design and time frame. The full inclusion and exclusion criteria are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	• Young people with experience of social care; including 'care leavers', 'children in care', 'children subject to a Child in Need Plan', 'children subject to a Child Protection Plan' and 'care experienced children'.	• Interventions and research not targeted at CSC-experienced children.
Interventions	• Interventions explicitly targeted to widen participation for young people with experience of CSC in the HE or further education (FE) context where HE-level qualifications are studied. • Interventions for supporting progression to, and success in HE, for young people with experience of CSC. • Interventions conducted in the UK or if elsewhere, sufficiently replicable and relevant to the UK context.	• Interventions not designed to widen participation and/or improve HE experience for young people with CSC experience • Non-UK interventions with no replicability/relevance in the UK context
Study design OfS Type 1 'narrative'	**Include studies that show:** • Coherent strategy • Approach/activities backed by evidence from literature or other evaluations • Shared understanding of processes • Reason for activity • Clear conception of why the changes sought to make are important • Programme reviews	**Exclude studies that show:** • Disjointed activities • No rationale for developing approach and activities • Model of change that is not shared • Ad-hoc activities • No understanding of needs of target groups • No review or evaluation
Study design OfS Type 2 'empirical enquiry'	**Include studies that show:** • Clear aim of what it sought to achieve • Selected indicators of impact • Use of quantitative or qualitative data or both • Pre/post data (minimum two points in time) • Analysis competently undertaken • Sharing of results and review of activity	**Exclude studies that show:** • Aims developed after activity • No concept of measuring success • Information that is not systematically collected • No pre/post data • Data not related to the intervention • Results not used to inform decisions
Study design OfS Type 3 'causal'	**Include studies that:** • Have a treatment and a comparator group • Use an experimental or quasi-experimental design • Consider selection bias and try to avoid it	**Exclude studies that:** • Do not have a comparator group • Use groups that are not comparable • Have selection bias in control groups
Time frame	Emphasis on studies published since 2012 due to major changes to the student finance regime	Older studies, particularly those that relate heavily to obsolete funding regimes

LITERATURE REVIEW

The objectives and scope of the literature review were:

- To compile a database of evidence on the efficacy of interventions designed to support access, transition or success in higher education (and HE delivered in a further education context) for learners with CSC experience.

- To identify the strength of evidence and direction of impact of interventions and any remaining evidence gaps.

- To identify barriers that learners with CSC experience may face when entering HE, including HE in a further education setting.

- To identify factors affecting student success in HE that learners with CSC experience may face.

The review included quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods evidence, with a particular focus on causal impact evidence, where possible. To align the review with sector standards, each source was classified according to three distinct types of evidence, as recommended by the OfS.[5] The full typology used to categorise the studies can also be found in Annex A.

The initial phase of the literature review was done using Google Scholar and Google Search to ensure that we captured not only peer-reviewed articles, but also high-quality grey literature published by practitioners or evaluators via relevant websites or sector-specific conferences. To identify a breadth of literature, search criteria that were inclusive of terms used across delivery and academic staff were applied (see Annex B for more details). In addition, we also filtered for studies that were performed after 2012 to account for the student finance reforms that occurred in that year.

We used a four-tiered approach for the collation of relevant sources. Firstly, we performed three broad searches. These searches included the results from the list of search terms in Annex B, which were then reviewed for their relevance by title only. Then, we performed a more restricted search aimed at identifying evidence of a causal nature (referred to as Type 3 evidence in the OfS' Standards of Evidence). This third round focused solely on studies that demonstrated the impact on outcomes for CSC-experienced learners.

Lastly, we conducted a fourth search for the names of organisations associated to support and/or promote the interests of care-experienced learners in education. This additional round was performed to compile relevant research outputs that might not have been picked up in our previous search rounds.

For detailed descriptions of all search rounds, please refer to Annex B.

In addition, we included several evidence papers that were returned by widening participation experts and researchers in response to a call for evidence undertaken by TASO and What Works for Children's Social Care between April and June 2020. After each search, we used snowballing techniques through those studies to identify further studies that may be of interest.

Lastly, by reviewing the abstracts and findings from each study, we applied our inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify the final set of studies to be included in the literature review. The resulting studies were categorised according to year of publication, type of evidence, provenance and main methodology. Further analysis of the findings helped us to identify the type of interventions used, strength of the arising evidence and any reported direction of impact.

According to these criteria, the final studies were compiled and coded into a database of relevant literature which allowed us to identify patterns and trends in the arising evidence and to spot emerging evidence gaps. The total number of studies included in the final database is 57 which will be discussed in more detail in the remainder of this report.

Analysis of the research

As Figure 1 outlines, 33 of the 57 studies focused on interventions or exploratory research taking place before CSC-experienced learners accessed HE; 12 studies focused on support and exploratory studies once target groups had entered HE; and 12 of the studies under review covered both time periods that occurred pre-and post-entry to HE.

Figure 1: Focus on student lifecycle within studies
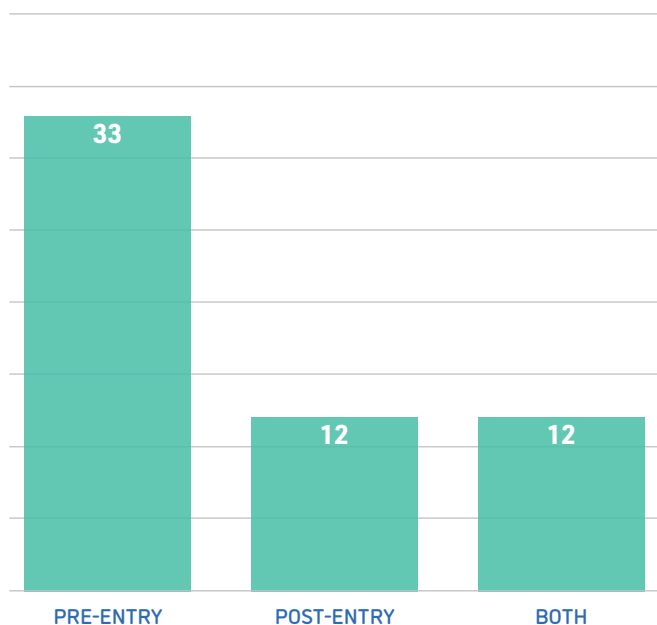
When looking at the evidence type and methodology used in the studies – see Table 2 for more details – we found a small number of studies (5) exclusively using quantitative methods, 31 studies using solely qualitative methods and the remaining 21 studies using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Using the OfS' Standards of Evidence, we identified that evidence was mostly narrative (27) with 26 studies categorised as empirical inquiry and only 4 studies claiming evidence of a causal nature.

Table 2: Studies by methodology and evidence type

| Evidence type	Methodology			Total
	Primarily quantitative	Primarily qualitative	Mixed-methods	
Narrative	0	23	4	27
Empirical enquiry	3	8	15	26
Causality	2	0	2	4
Total	**5**	**31**	**21**	**57**

We further looked at the strength of evidence, as defined by the OfS' Standards of Evidence, for each of the evidence types. As per Table 3, we classified around half of the research included as developing evidence, 21 studies are classified as best evidence and 5 are classified as weak evidence.

Table 3: Studies by evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	6	13	2	21
Developing evidence	16	13	2	31
Weak evidence	5	0	0	5
Total	**27**	**26**	**4**	**57**

The country of origin for studies is important for the generalisability of findings to the UK. As shown in Figure 2, all but one of the causal studies are international. Apart from one RCT conducted in Northern Ireland, the majority of UK-focused research was primarily classified as narrative or empirical.

Figure 2: Studies by evidence type and country of origin
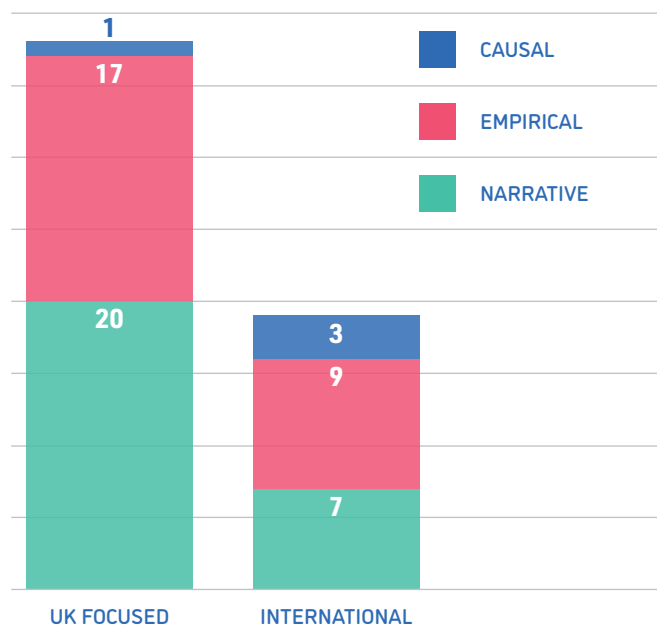
Analysis of interventions

The following section will focus on studies investigating the effectiveness of a variety of outreach interventions that target CSC-experienced learners. Results are categorised by the most common types of outreach activities described in the studies under review. These are multi-intervention outreach; mentoring, counselling and role models; virtual schools and pre-16 intervention; and information, advice and guidance (IAG).

Multi-intervention outreach

Out of the 57 sources included in the final review, about a fifth of studies (11) focused on so-called multi-intervention outreach activities. For the purpose of this review, we define multi-intervention outreach activities as interventions that combine multiple components; for example, summer schools, tutoring and IAG. They are of particular interest in the context of supporting learners with experience of CSC as many studies acknowledge the complexity of disadvantage for these groups of learners and outreach activities targeted at them therefore rarely focus on a single approach.

Most of the multi-intervention outreach studies investigated focus on the barriers and systematic difficulties that CSC-experienced young people face in accessing higher education. As Table 4 highlights, only one of the 11 studies was classified as best evidence, the majority of the studies were categorised as developing evidence and two of the 11 studies fell under the OfS' weak evidence categorisation. Reflecting the overall distribution of evidence in our database, there was a gap in causal evidence produced and the majority of studies fell either into narrative or empirical evidence enquiries.

The multi-intervention outreach activities included in this review were all made up of several components and complex in their delivery (and sometimes delivered across multiple partners); it is therefore not possible to infer from these studies which elements of the programmes may have been instrumental in causing any identified effects. Within our sample of multi-intervention outreach studies, the most common components were a combination of financial assistance, pastoral and academic support as well as activities aiming to increase learners' resilience and locus of control (the belief they have control over outcomes in their lives).

As CSC-experienced learners often lack information, advice and guidance when applying to and/or transitioning into higher education, some also focused on combining the above activities with employing a dedicated member of staff to support that target group through this process.
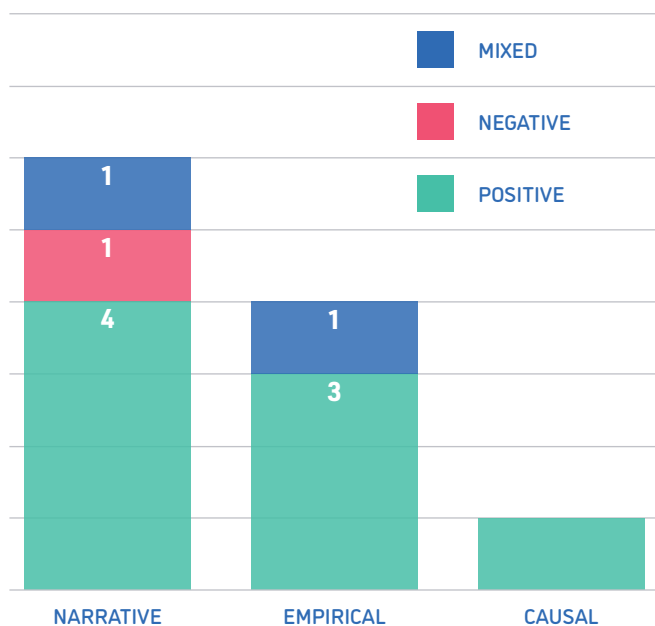
However, the majority of these studies focus on correlational impacts, with only one US-based study showing positive impact of a causal nature. This was a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of the 'Better Futures' programmes which involved a summer course coupled with individual peer coaching, and mentoring workshops (Geenen et al., 2015).

The trial tested whether the intervention had any impact on the resilience, mental wellbeing and subsequent participation in post-secondary education among participants. The results show that participation in the programme led to a small increase in the post-secondary preparation and participation of participants in foster care with mental health challenges in comparison to the control group. This research shows that this group have ambitions and goals but there is often a lack of support to keep these aspirations on track. Together with high expectations from carers and other professionals, building positive social networks and individual resilience were identified as areas that may improve access to and success in higher education for learners living in foster care in the US.

Table 4: Multi-intervention outreach studies: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	0	1	0	1
Developing evidence	4	3	1	8
Weak evidence	2	0	0	2
Total	**6**	**4**	**1**	**11**

Figure 3: Multi-intervention outreach studies: Impact by evidence type

Legend:
- MIXED
- NEGATIVE
- POSITIVE

Bar values:
- NARRATIVE: 1 (Mixed), 1 (Negative), 4 (Positive)
- EMPIRICAL: 1 (Mixed), 3 (Positive)
- CAUSAL: (Positive)

Mentoring, counselling, and role models

Many of the studies we identified highlighted that barriers to higher education for CSC-experienced learners are not just a question of attainment but also relate to perceptions of HE. These studies suggest that CSC-experienced learners have fewer reference points or support on how to navigate an academic environment which neither they nor others in their close social networks may have experience of. This issue motivates a number of interventions focusing on elements of mentoring, counselling or connecting young people to positive role models. Table 5 provides more details on the seven studies within our sample that focus on interventions employing mentoring, counselling and/or role models to support CSC-experienced learners.

These studies often offer support either throughout secondary school, or as part of specifically designed programmes taking place in the later years of secondary education. Interestingly, many of the interventions also focused on staff development where continuous professional development (CPD) programmes were designed to develop frontline staff, foster families and/or carers in order to increase participants' knowledge and skills in supporting learners' education journeys and providing relevant information and emotional support.

Analysis submitted by West Yorkshire Go Higher (see Aldridge, 2020) shows promising, albeit correlational, evidence into the effectiveness of training personal advisors, and building better lines of communication and understanding of higher education with foster parents and local authority staff in the region. The subsequent increase in understanding of HE among sector-external participants is associated with substantial increases in participant's knowledge on how best to support CSC-experienced learners' informed decision-making.

As outlined in Figure 4, all but two studies within this section are categorised as narrative evidence. The narrative and empirical evidence is promising and of a high standard but does not allow us to draw any causal impact claims between the researched activities and improved educational outcomes for the target group. Further research is needed to establish whether these interventions, which are often long-term and relatively high-cost are indeed effective. The single causal study in this section outlines a small-sample RCT which found a small, positive effect of intense group tutoring sessions on academic skills of children in foster care in Canada (Harper and Schmidt, 2016). Due to the small sample size of this trial (N=90) the effect size needs to be interpreted with caution and it has accordingly been categorised as 'developing evidence' in Table 6. Moreover, as the majority of participants in the study identified as Aboriginal-Canadian, a group with no natural analogue in the UK, generalisation of findings to the UK needs to be handled with caution.

Table 5: Mentoring, Counselling and Role Models: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	0	0	0	0
Developing evidence	3	1	1	5
Weak evidence	2	0	0	2
Total	**5**	**1**	**1**	**7**

Figure 4: Mentoring, counselling, role models: Impact by evidence type
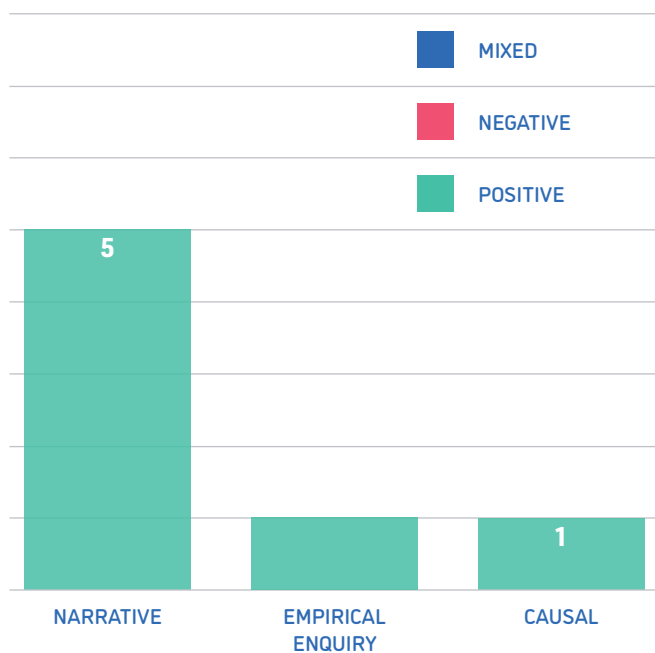
Virtual schools and pre-16 interventions

One promising area of activity for pre-16 intervention is the involvement of virtual schools. A virtual school is a group of education and social care professionals within a local authority who are responsible for the co-ordination of educational services to CSC-experienced children and young people within their local authority area. Virtual schools advocate for CSC-experienced children and young people within their local authority and seek to ensure they have the support they need within the educational system to achieve and succeed.

In the studies focusing on the activities of virtual schools, we found positive correlational evidence on their impact in enabling local authorities to fulfil their statutory duty and promote educational attainment for CSC-experienced children. A close collaboration and integration of virtual school staff into regular practices and teaching of physical schools was found to be of importance in supporting the accessibility, quality and continuity of early years experiences for CSC-experienced young learners (Driscoll, 2013, Mathers and Tracz, 2018, Caroll et al., 2019, Sebba & Berridge, 2019). However, the varied nature of virtual schools across different local authorities makes it difficult to solely attribute positive impact on educational outcomes specifically to the activities of the virtual school. Nevertheless, positive correlations in well-established virtual schools have shown promising emerging trends.

Two of the causal studies identified within this literature review focus on pre-16 interventions. One of the causal studies within this section reported on a small-scale RCT of a book-gifting intervention targeted at 116 children in foster care aged 7–11 years. The trial, conducted in Northern Ireland, showed no effect on reading skills (reading accuracy, comprehension and rate) and attitudes to reading and school among participants (Mooney et al., 2016). A follow-up qualitative analysis of the study conducted by Roberts and Connolly (2017) has since focused on how and why the intervention did not achieve greater impact, and found that levels of engagement from children and their carers were lower than hoped for as the study failed to pay attention to three main areas when engaging the target group of children with care experience: first, being supported to develop a sense of ownership over the books; second, getting books children actually like to read; and third, promoting children's choice over reading material.

The second causal study investigated a quasi-experimental evaluation of the Skolfam model in Sweden. Skolfam is an-early intervention model targeted at foster children attending preschool or any of the first six grades of primary school, who are placed in foster homes on a long-term basis, i.e. for at least two years. The fundamental principle of the programme is to foster and leverage close cooperation between the parties in the child's surrounding network.

To this extent, an interdisciplinary team comprising a special education teacher, a psychologist, the child's social worker, and the foster home's social worker, cooperate with the child, his or her primary teacher, the foster parents and, potentially, also the legal caregiver(s).

Via this close collaboration, the programme aims to improve school performance among foster children in primary school. The study compared the effects of this model with ordinary support from the local community among foster children and found minor improvements in taking in and interpreting visual information, general cognitive ability and literacy skills relative to the comparison group (Durbeej and Hellner, 2017). However, both small sample sizes and differing local contexts limit the generalisability of these findings to the UK context.

Table 6: Virtual Schools: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
	3	1	0	4
Weak evidence	0	0	0	0
Total	**3**	**4**	**2**	**9**

Figure 5: Virtual schools: Impact by evidence type
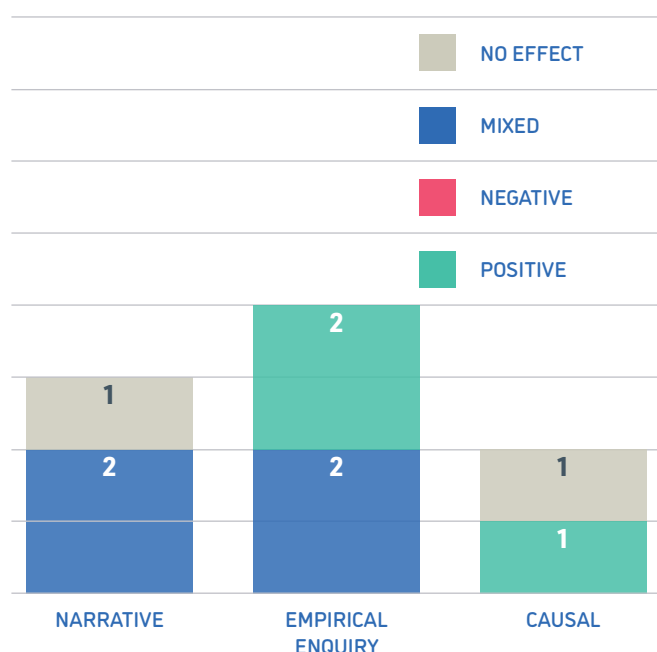
Information, advice and guidance

In the context of this evidence review, 'information, advice and guidance' (IAG) captures a range of activities and interventions that help CSC-experienced learners to make informed decisions about their educational pathways. Within the context of higher education, this includes both IAG in schools and/ or post-admission support offered by HE providers. Given the intersectional nature of disadvantage that many young learners with CSC experience face, IAG is often part of a multi-intervention outreach initiative, or provided in combination with mentoring. However, while such initiatives are intended to increase aspiration and awareness, IAG interventions usually aim at filling a specific information gap.

Since learners with care experience might have a less clear understanding of the costs and benefits of higher or further education, a growing body of research has focused on overcoming this information barrier by implementing low-cost IAG interventions. Indeed, designated websites, such as Propel, have been created to provide IAG which is tailored for looked after children and young care leavers.

In their evaluation of Propel, Alexander and Callaghan (2017) employed online surveys and in-depth interviews to gauge the short to mid-term impact of Propel on its users. They highlighted that care-experienced users particularly valued the promotion of inspirational success stories, clear and direct access to contact details for designated members of staff at universities and the easy navigation of a range of information within one website. This reflects barriers and facilitators discussed in previous sections; in particular, the lack of inspirational peers and role models within CSC-experienced immediate surroundings, the importance of a dedicated, trusted authority figure to support students throughout their academic lifecycle and the lack of accessible information in regard to available support and entitlements for these target groups.

Likewise, professionals who used the website and were interviewed in the study highlighted that resources provided by Propel often get embedded in their everyday working practices. Interviewees highlighted the usefulness of Propel's resources in better supporting young people as well as raising awareness of the available support within their professional networks.

However, as shown in Table 7, the evidence on IAG provision for CSC-experienced learners lacks robust studies investigating the causal relationship between better access to and provision of IAG and an actual improvement in access to higher education.

Studies of a narrative and empirical type indicate positive correlations between providing IAG sessions to the target groups and increases in access and retention rates as well as self-reported improvements of the student experience. However, these studies often lack the right methodologies and sufficient sample sizes to make causal claims of efficacy (Mendes, Michell and Wilson, 2014).

Table 7: Information, advice and guidance: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	0	0	0	0
Developing evidence	2	2	0	4
Weak evidence	0	0	0	0
Total	**2**	**2**	**0**	**4**

Figure 6: Information, Advice and Guidance: Impact by evidence type

NO EFFECT

MIXED

NEGATIVE

POSITIVE

|	
1	2
2	
NARRATIVE	EMPIRICAL ENQUIRY	CAUSAL
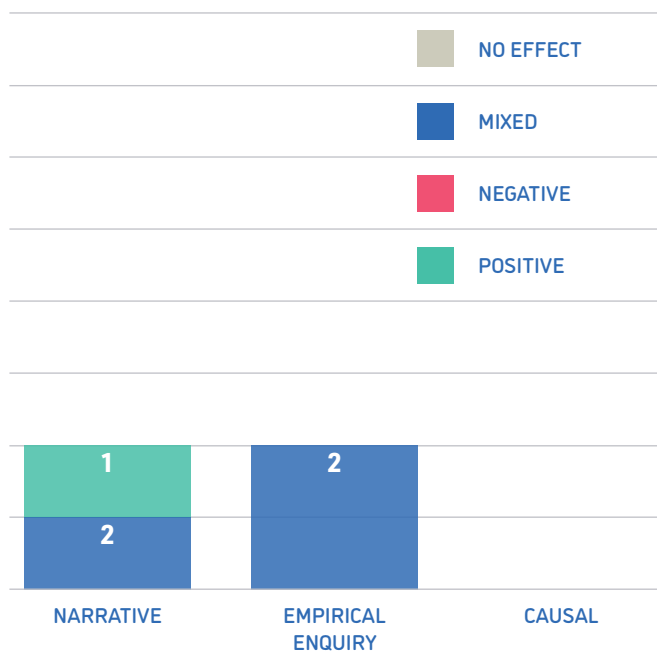
Analysis of exploratory studies

The majority of research into CSC-experienced young people's progression to, and success in, HE is focused on exploring the experience of our target group rather than the impact evaluation of individual interventions. Although out of scope for the analysis above, these studies provide useful insights into both CSC-experienced learners experiences, needs, and the broader challenges of impact evaluation with this group.

On the latter, many of the studies highlighted the lack of available data across the educational lifecycle of CSC-experienced learners as one of the major reasons for the limited number of robust efficacy studies. Data linkages between data owners – such as local authorities, school authorities and higher education providers – is time-consuming and complex, and often exceeds the resources and knowledge of already time-limited staff in any of these individual institutions.

Furthermore, the inconsistent definitions of CSC-experienced students between different organisations further exacerbate the difficulty of consistent data linkages to build a longitudinal understanding of individual learners across the educational lifecycle. Care experience data also has a high risk of being disclosive due to the relatively small numbers of pupils involved and needs to be stored and handled carefully and respectfully to the individuals themselves.

It is important to understand the experiences of young people with CSC experience, in order to design supportive interventions to address any disadvantage they may face. The following section(s) will therefore focus on exploratory studies, which shed light on specific areas of disadvantage or best practice when supporting learners with CSC experience. Broadly speaking, these studies explored the following areas: student experience accessing HE; student experience in HE; as well as policy and practice. For further information on the detailed categorisation and studies within each category please refer to Figure 7.

Figure 7: Exploratory studies by categories

26		
	11	11
ACCESSING HE	STUDENT EXPERIENCE	POLICY & PRACTICE
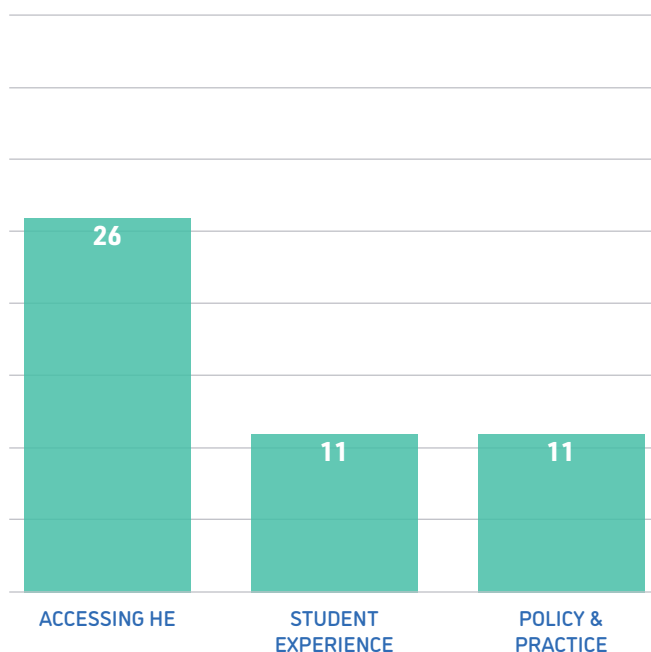
Student experience accessing HE

This section will focus on exploratory research identifying facilitators and barriers that learners with CSC experience may face when accessing HE. It is worth mentioning that all studies in this category rely on data from a small (and potentially unrepresentative) sub-group of CSC-experienced students that considered and accessed higher education successfully.

The arising findings are therefore not necessarily representative of the underlying wider population of CSC-experienced learners and caution should be exercised when applying insights from these findings to those CSC-experienced learners who didn't enter HE at all.

This section comprises 26 studies focusing on factors that CSC-experienced learners face when accessing and/or considering accessing HE. As Table 8 outlines, none of the studies under review established causal factors influencing these experiences explicitly but almost half of the empirical studies included some form of comparator group in their analysis of access rates and experiences. These analyses showed starkly diverging trends between the relevant target groups of CSC-experienced students and their more advantaged peers in terms of/with respect to access to and continuing in higher education.

A study by Harrison (2019), which was one of the first exhaustive attempts to map engagement and success patterns of care leavers in England, highlighted that these groups show significantly lower academic attainment at the point of HE-entry than a comparator group of peers without care experience. Controlling for a range of variables known to affect higher education attainment such as gender, age, ethnicity, previous attainment and regional markers of disadvantage, he hypothesised that the experience of early trauma disrupts the educational experience of young learners, therefore leading to lower rates of attainment and smaller numbers of care leavers entering HE. Furthermore, the analysis found that care leavers tend to enter HE as mature learners (categorised as first-degree learners who are 21 years-old or older) and be less likely to have the standard A-level entry qualifications than the comparator group of learners without care experience, instead, they enter with Vocational Level 3, Access to HE courses, and HE diploma qualifications. Driscoll (2013), argues that due to the fact that care-experienced students tend to access HE later than their counterparts, there should be more effort placed on supporting their participation on alternative and 'second chance' pathways into this destination.

Surveys with CSC-experienced students conducted by Harrison (2017) also showed that negative transition experiences often related to poor support from local authorities. Participants reported a lack of awareness from local authority staff with regard to signposting and promoting available access schemes to HE, as well as provider-specific support with, for example, student finance or accommodation packages. Exploring individual students' journeys, interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of positive role models and the encouragement of a trusted 'authority' figure in their environment. The importance of trusted contacts was also investigated in Bluff et al. (2012) who particularly highlighted the roles of teachers, carers and social workers as one of the key drivers for CSC-experienced learners' decision to progress into HE.

Table 8: Student experience accessing HE: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	5	7	0	12
Developing evidence	5	8	0	13
Weak evidence	1	0	0	1
Total	**11**	**15**	**0**	**26**

Student experience in HE

This section includes exploratory studies focused on the experience of CSC-experienced young people post-entry into HE. Most of the studies in this category include some form of primary research with students, either interviews or focus groups. In these sources, students reflect on their journey into HE and explore how they are engaging in their studies. However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution as they may be derived from a highly engaged and unrepresentative sub-group of the underlying population of students with experience of CSC.

Studies within this sample referenced student accounts of feeling isolated and unaware of, or unable to seek, relevant support on campus. The feelings of loneliness and isolation were often associated with the sudden drop in support from the local authority after finishing secondary school. Interviewees also reflected that the lack of close peers or other confidantes to consult and share their feelings and worries with over the academic year exacerbated their sense of not belonging (Harrison, 2017).

Students were cautious about proactively contacting university support services and perceived HE providers as large and faceless institutions that didn't care about individuals within them. They related this to previous negative experience when dealing with large organisations.

These challenges appear to play a role when CSC-experienced students report poor mental health and/or considerations of dropping out (Ellis & Johnston, 2019). Consequently, where students could identify a designated member of staff as a main point of contact to help them navigate the available support and to signpost relevant guidance and information, this was identified as a key supportive factor (Cotton et al., 2014; Bland & Shaw, 2015, Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018). Having a named contact to support them from pre-enrolment to post-graduation also meant that students did not have to disclose personal and traumatic information multiple times when seeking support or services (Stevenson, 2020).

For further details on the type and impact of all studies highlighted in this section please refer to Table 9. As in previous sections, we cannot confidently say that any of the interventions that students self-identified as helpful (or unhelpful) in their HE experiences are actually causing these changes in attitudes and behaviours. Bias in these findings may arise as the research above is reliant on the self-reported experience of self-selecting groups of students who were already engaged in learning, so caution should be exercised when applying the insights to those who aren't engaged in the research process.

Table 9: Student experience in HE: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	0	4	0	4
Developing evidence	3	4	0	7
Weak evidence	0	0	0	0
Total	**3**	**8**	**0**	**11**

Policy and practice

Considering current studies on established policies and their implementation, we've identified six studies that analyse the wider policy and practice setting for CSC-experienced learners.

As Table 10 shows, the majority of studies in this section are of developing evidence and no evidence has been produced to test for causal effects between policy initiatives and their implementation.

In general, studies within this section reiterated the importance of collaboration and communication between local authorities and educational providers. Ellis and Johnston (2019) highlighted the importance of key transition points to be integrated into any pre/post HE-entry support once CSC-experienced learners leave local care and enter independent living at the age of 18. Key moments of transition, such as the move into student accommodation at the beginning of a degree need to be reflected in wider institutional policies so that appropriate support services across campus can provide relevant and timely support to CSC-experienced students. The Care Leaver Covenant (DfE, 2019) highlighted the importance of providing welcome packs to care leavers who may be unaware that student rooms do not come fully furnished and require many students to bring their own bedding, cutlery, etc.

Hauari et al. (2019) further highlighted the importance of a more systematic and holistic approach to supporting access to and success in HE. In order to ensure frictionless support for CSC-experienced learners' diverse needs, institutions need to implement cross-departmental policies that bring stakeholders together across common areas of need such as accommodation, finance, mental health and academic/tutor support. These points are also recommended as particular areas of need by the upcoming NNECL (2019) Quality Mark and the above-mentioned Care Leaver Covenant (DfE, 2019).

In addition to the acknowledgement that the diverse needs of the target group require a diverse offer of support, the studies collated under this section also highlighted the importance of evidence-based policy- and decision-making. Where possible, Wilson et al. (2019) further advocated to involve and integrate the voice of CSC-experienced young people in designing institutional policies and practices. In terms of policies and systematic processes, Jackson et al. (2005) suggested that HE providers should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support for students from a care background.

The OfS (2020) encouraged the inclusion of CSC-experienced student groups within institutional Access and Participation Plans;[6] however, these targeted outreach activities tend to cluster around care leavers only (with tiered support for other groups of CSC-experienced students available in some providers) and therefore only capture a subsection of the target group in need.

Brady et al. (2019) further highlighted the lack of available and consistent data across the educational lifecycle. As outlined in previous sections, there is a need to make use of data related to the educational attainment and progress of CSC-experienced learners across the system of educational providers. Policy makers and evaluators need to have access to evidence that allows critical questions to be answered and to collate the right data to answer relevant gaps in the current data landscape. As a related example, Bland (2015) made use of Student Loan Company[7] (SLC) data to identify students with experience of estrangement. However, coverage of the data is patchy and accessing it requires a Freedom of Information request.

Table 10: Policy and practice: evidence type and strength of evidence

Strength	Evidence Type			Total
	Narrative	Empirical enquiry	Causality	
Best evidence	1	2	0	3
Developing evidence	1	2	0	3
Weak evidence	0	0	0	0
Total	**2**	**4**	**0**	**6**

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Findings from the literature review helped to inform the second strand of the research, our stakeholder interviews.

The aims of the interviews were to gain a deeper understanding of the insights arising from the literature review, and to contextualise them using practitioners', evaluators', and academics' reflections. The interviews helped us to understand where challenges but also opportunities arise, where current resources are targeted well and/or where they should be re-directed.

Methodology

Sample

Respondents were recruited through a non-probabilistic purposive sampling procedure. A list of 20 relevant interviewees were identified as part of the literature review (all were either cited in papers or responded to the call for evidence) and were invited via email to participate in a remote, recorded interview. Of the 20 stakeholders who were approached, 18 consented to participate. The final sample included front-line practitioners supporting CSC-experienced learners within higher education providers (HEPs) and/or local authorities, third-sector representatives lobbying for the interests and opportunities of CSC-experienced learners, academics researching the educational trajectory of target groups, and representatives of government-sponsored bodies.

Interviews ranged between 45-90 minutes and were conducted via Skype, Zoom or telephone. Participants were sent a consent form via email and were asked to return the completed form ahead of the interview. All interviewees consented to be recorded and the notes from the interviews were analysed.

Method

The main method for this research project was semi-structured interviews based on an interview topic guide developed in response to the findings of the literature review.

In designing the topic guide, we used Schoeman (2014) as our key methodological text for identifying best practice and identifying potential ethical issues.

Each interview covered the points below, with 10-15 minutes scheduled for each theme:

- How the interviewee engages with CSC-experienced learners in their daily context, what they do in that context and what resources are at their disposal.

- Reflections on opportunities and challenges in supporting the target groups.

- Discussing what they think the key impact and objectives of evaluation activities targeted at CSC-experienced learners are and where challenges and developing practice may arise.

- Projecting what they would like to see change about CSC-experienced learner support and evaluation and lessons learned from their past experiences.

Interviewing in a semi-structured manner allows us to understand how interviewees defined and engaged with the target group of CSC-experienced learners within their area of experience (Golafshani, 2003). We therefore developed a topic guide that took interviewees through the lifecycle of their involvement with the target group, aiming to elicit narrative descriptions of what stakeholders identified as key events, elements and/or concepts and how they chose to engage and/or disengage with these.

This open approach avoids pushing participants into presenting normative accounts of their view and analysis of CSC-experienced learners. Rather than asking direct, narrow and predefined questions geared towards pre-existing narratives and reported figures and trends on CSC-experienced learners, the course of the interview is thus solely directed by interviewee-led narratives around their own experience and their perception of facilitators and barriers for these learners. Samuels (2004:12) describes this technique as the "breaking of the frames" of the researcher. It draws attention to more practical, every-day aspects of a research topic which are otherwise often overlooked by the 'outsider-researchers'. Particularly for this research, which aims to identify how to support CSC-experienced learners in an evidence-led manner, these granular context-specific insights are invaluable.

Coding and Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. The interviewer coded the transcripts in NVivo, with a colleague acting as an independent reviewer. Where diverging opinions occurred, these were discussed, and an agreement reached. Once coded, cross-analysis was used to identify the reappearance of domains, as well as the categories within each domain. Through our coding framework, we identified the common themes of:

- Working with local authorities and virtual schools
- Imprecise definitions and understanding of sub-group needs
- Inconsistent definitions and data availability
- Advantages of a whole-institution approach
- Gaps in evaluation

Limitations

The findings need to be read with the caveat that we were speaking to stakeholders who opted into participating in interviews and who have strong experience in supporting CSC-experienced learners through their everyday jobs. We therefore need to be careful in generalising any of these barriers and facilitators they have identified to the wider community of people who support individuals with CSC experience. We also need to be mindful that the interview insights highlighted in the next sections represent individuals' experiences and reflections as reported to us and, unlike the studies discussed in the literature review, have not undergone robust peer-review.

Themes arising from the interviews

Working with local authorities and virtual schools

Almost all interviewees raised the importance of building sustainable relationships with local authorities/virtual schools, as the primary forms of support and gatekeepers for CSC-experienced young people.

'Sometimes there is only so much the universities can do because we have a limited reach and if local authorities are not supporting, that is a big gap that they can fall down. That is one of the biggest challenges.' (Third sector)

Interviewees highlighted the variability of support that was available and mentioned that school-aged students with CSC experience often reported inconsistent or inaccessible support from their local authority.

'We had students who hadn't seen their personal advisor or social worker for over a year and who haven't been able to get the financial support they are entitled to receive.' (HEP)

Approximately one-third of the CSC-experienced students interviewed by Harrison (2019) reported having a bad experience when dealing with their local authorities. In this regard, interviewees also talked about young learners not receiving information about universities, application processes and available support.

'And indeed, talking with our young people shows that [...] finding and understanding what support is going to be available to them is extremely challenging. And we find that we are regularly approached trying to find out information about [...] other forms of support for young people. This is a perennial issue.' (Third sector)

Interviewees highlighted the sometimes tense relationships between social workers and CSC-experienced learners and felt that social workers might not know how higher education works anymore as the landscape has changed since they were in HE.

'Many of them [social workers] don't know how it works anymore. There are different ways of being a student. There are different ways of succeeding. Sometimes that gets lost somewhere. We hear a lot about social workers saying "I know you want to go to university. But why not be a carpenter or beautician". They appear to just want to be a bit more realistic but from a student's perspective it's quite demeaning to their own aspirations.' (Academic)

And while situations like the above likely reflect good intentions on the part of the social worker, this misperception of HE and lack of knowledge on available support can be a substantial barrier to CSC-experienced learners seeking support from their local authorities to access higher education.

'And I do often get a lot of staff [...], either social workers or support workers, contacting me, saying they don't know enough, and they feel like they're failing that prospective student a little bit because they don't know where to go. They miss out on having someone to advise them and help them in accessing HE.' (HEP)

Many of our interviewees therefore highlighted the importance of targeting outreach activities, transition support and time to this area in order to equip CSC-experienced young people with the correct information and aspiration pathway.

In addition, interviewees noted the decline in support that these groups experienced to help them transition successfully into higher education.

'Quite a few local authorities are under-resourced. Students get neglected when they are in higher education for support from their local authorities.' (HEP)

When it comes to effective working relationships between higher education providers and local authorities interviewees highlighted common issues regarding the high turnover of social workers, meaning relationships constantly need to start from scratch, and the lack of incentives that would lead local authorities and higher education providers to work together.

'The support from local authorities is very different and that is a challenge in itself. [...] I think if I had a magic wand, I'd ask for a more consistent approach to engage local authorities across the country. [..] It can be time consuming getting to know people but it is beneficial and it should be about working together. Local authorities, charities and universities should all work collaboratively.' (HEP)

Interviewees who had built productive working relationships with local authorities highlighted the mutual benefit of sharing best practice and the opportunities for staff to connect with professionals with complementary knowledge and skills. Respondents noted that members of staff supporting CSC-experienced students within HEPs are often quite isolated, and professional networks across organisational boundaries could act as safe spaces to discuss problems and solutions.

'Working groups with professionals from different providers and organisations attending. They would specifically talk about individuals and where they're at and someone who would say, "I can help with this". We used to meet bi-monthly and it was fantastic. But we couldn't keep it going in other local authorities. There are different priorities and resources in each local authority which made it difficult to scale up.' (Third sector)

Six of the 18 interviewees particularly mentioned the collaboration with virtual schools as a promising area of local authority/provider collaboration.

'I have a good relationship with the virtual school. I attend the meetings and have regular contact. They send me the information about the students they have. Probably one of the most beneficial things. It can be time consuming getting to know people, but it is beneficial.' (HEP)

However, the scale and size of virtual schools can vary widely between local authorities. An academic who worked with a lot of virtual schools in their research explained that virtual schools were key to identifying and engaging CSC-experienced learners at salient points in their educational lifecycle. However, the effectiveness of virtual schools highly dependent on the leadership of the virtual head.

'Leadership in virtual schools works in different ways but often it comes down to the willingness of the virtual school head to get on the phone and talk to real head teachers in a way that is compelling and on the same level. [...] "We've got this child, we think they can go to university, but they need your support" or "We've got this child, we think they are quite able, but you are about to exclude them, could you please not exclude them?" This advocacy work is really important and good virtual heads will tell these stories about how they helped a child that would've otherwise been pushed away from education.' (Academic)

Overall, interviews highlighted how central local authorities and virtual schools were to enabling young people to access higher education. Many providers and third sector organisations we interviewed have worked to build bridges with staff in the local authority/virtual school, and where this has been successful, reported benefits for both staff and learners. However, they also noted the degree of variability across local authorities in the emphasis they placed on supporting CSCexperienced young people to access and succeed in HE.

Imprecise definitions and understanding of sub-group needs

As previously identified in the literature review, vague definitions of learners who have had experience of CSC but who do not meet the narrow definition of a care leaver were recurring issues for interviewees when advising HE providers and young learners with CSC experience on available support.

Every interviewee raised the need for a more inclusive conceptualisation of which students may benefit from additional support as a result of their experience of CSC. Whilst the statutory definition of a care leaver is often used, all interviewees highlighted the unnecessarily restrictive nature of the definition/ boundaries of the group.

Most interviewees highlighted that their organisations moved away from simply using the term care leaver and instead use more inclusive alternatives, such as care-experienced in order to catch and engage those learners who feel like they don't identify or don't fall under the narrowly defined care leaver label.[8] One interviewee engaged learners who had self-identified as having experienced children's social care in the development of the organisation's terms and definitions. They reflected this had the benefit of co-producing descriptors that resonated with group members, and foregrounded young people's experience as a valuable input into their work going forward.

Interviewees also highlighted the strength of the Scottish approach to statutory definitions,[9] compared to the sole focus in England on care leavers. They felt that the English approach led to the neglect of other groups with overlapping but distinct needs (such as estranged students or those with experience of the broader CSC system), making it difficult for providers to reach and support students with these experiences.

However, whilst most interviewees agreed that any kind of children's social care experience was a likely source of disadvantage, most organisations still operated within a tiered support system where care leavers could access the highest tier of support (often including accommodation and financial support) whilst CSCexperienced learners received no or lesser support.

We asked our interviewees to tell us about their support for each group. In general, there was an attempt to extend support to CSC-experienced and estranged students; however, the availability of this support relied on HEPs' willingness and ability to identify these students. Within the seven providers that we interviewed, the practical support for care leavers, CSC-experienced students and estranged students tended to be hierarchically tiered, with care leavers receiving the highest combination of support in comparison to CSC-experienced and estranged students.

The differentials in support concerned some of our interviewees who highlighted that support "cliffs" are being created. Some interviewees also noted that in many ways those who were almost taken into care, or have other forms of experience of CSC may actually face more barriers to HE access and success (see Harrison's study (2019) for empirical analysis on this).

'From my experience over the years, care [CSC] experienced students often have far greater difficulties than care leavers because they don't have that local authority's support or a personal advisor.' (HEP)

'This still worries me that we are placing a lot of emphasis on a group within the care community that is probably in comparison less disadvantaged than others. [...] If you spend a long period in care you are likely to have somewhat better educational outcomes than other disadvantaged young people, those in need, with the social worker and so on.' (Academic)

Studies on the longitudinal educational outcomes for these groups is scarce but an academic interviewed for this report observed that influx into care in England seems to be clustered at either a very young age or occurs for learners aged 11-14 who are just moving into adolescence. The former (younger) group seem to be more likely to succeed in education.

'Those who are placed into care at a later age are probably much more vulnerable to not succeed in school and go to higher education. Because they had this disruption just at the wrong point in their life. They are missing school and are not passing their GCSE when they're being passed from foster care to foster care. We don't have a good evidence base on this yet and it would be great to evidence this.' (Academic)

As a result, the interviewee recommended providers target their outreach activities at learners with experience of being looked after aged between 11 and 16 years to capture as many individuals from both groups as possible. This approach aligns with findings from our literature review suggesting that many promising interventions with CSC-experienced learners take place before they turn 16 years old. Interviewees generally agreed that earlier interventions are the most effective in supporting young people with CSC experience.

Overall, this section of the interviews reiterated similar issues encountered during the literature review. Inconsistent definitions for students with CSC experience that do not qualify as care leavers lead to constrained support for a group of learners that anecdotally seem to show worse attainment outcomes than groups of care leavers who have been looked after for a longer period of time. Providers are therefore encouraged to consider the intersectional nature of learners with CSC experience and how to apply targeting approaches that ensure that their support equally captures and benefits different sub-groups.

Inconsistent data definitions and availability

In addition to the blurry definitions of target groups, interviewees cited the paucity and reliability of available data to identify, track and analyse learners with CSC experience or experience of family estrangement.

'The huge difficulty is that simply there is no data other than student loans company data on students who are estranged from family. And this data is a really good indicator but again it will only pick up those that are able to evidence that they are estranged, that have been assessed as estranged by student loans company.' (Third sector)

Interviewees highlighted that the lack of regularly collected, administrative data meant that organisations mostly had to rely on learners coming forward and proactively self-identifying as CSC-experienced as part of the admissions procedure. For HEPs this often means having to collect data via other means, such as the care leaver tick box on UCAS online application form. Applicants who tick the box and identify as care leavers receive information about the support that is available to them and can be considered for a contextual offer of admission. Many interviewees reported that this process helps them to identify care leavers, but raised issues with inconsistencies in how providers validate the self-declared data.

'It [the UCAS tick box] is a good starting point. From the profiling I've done it suggests that most of the people that tick that box are probably care leavers or care-experienced but there are definitely some false positives in there and we obviously don't know how many false negatives there are – people who for whatever reason don't tick that box.' (Academic)

Indeed, interviewees reported that the way data was handled by providers varied greatly, and there was a lack of consistent data definitions and cleaning procedures once the data is transferred into HEPs' student records.

'You can see, when you look at the data, that university practices dealing with this data vary widely. What we don't know is what is actually happening to that data once it goes into the black box of the university. Some universities are very diligent in cleaning that data and some clearly never touch it.' (Government-funded body)

A further challenge is that, as outlined earlier in this report (and explained in more detail in the intersectionality section of the interview insights), CSC-experienced students are much more likely to enter higher education via alternative routes and at a later stage in their life.

'About a quarter of all undergraduate students don't fill out the UCAS form because they are going through a work-based learning route, degree apprenticeships, they have done a compact transfer from a FE college. [...] In the data, that is a huge chunk of unknowns and what we kind of know is that care experienced students are more likely to use those sorts of pathways, so we are probably missing a huge chunk of care experienced students when we are doing our research. (Academic)

For interviewees who were interested in proactively identifying these learners, the collaboration with local authorities seemed to be vital but often proved to be difficult and time-consuming to build and maintain.

'We need to be friendly with local authorities as they are the ones who can share information. [...] We are reliant on information being passed on to find young people, so we need to be as friendly as we are critical.' (Third sector)

Interviewees who attempted to link different data sources in order to obtain a comprehensive and long-term dataset on CSC-experienced learners further highlighted the messiness of the various data sources that follow different definitions, have barriers to access, and often don't include unique identifiers to ensure robust matching of individual-level records across data sources.

'It's tricky in terms of the data side as there are different metrics available for care experience. And a lot of it is not available publicly. For researchers to link up NPD [National Pupil Database], HESA [Higher Education Statistics Agency] and DLHE [Destination of Leavers from Higher Education] takes a lot of work and it's not something that is easily and reliably available. So, we rely on HESA and UCAS, but we know this isn't perfect and different universities report care leavers/care experience differently. And SLC [Student Loans Company] has great data but it's unavailable. So, for anyone trying to link this data… it's just messy to join the data and they have to navigate a lot before they can understand what's going on.' (Third sector)

In the absence of easily available national data, many of our interviewees creatively linked up with third-sector organisations supporting CSC-experienced learners and have set up established channels of data sharing to identify, support and track these learners more effectively. One organisation we interviewed keeps its own records of CSC experience and got permission to share details with HEPs, which they saw as a substantial benefit.

'It means that our university partners can engage with those students earlier and more effectively. The university partners report that it encourages and empowers existing students to declare their status and become known.' (Third sector)

Overall interviews highlighted the continuous problems providers and third-sector organisations face when trying to collate consistent, exhaustive and longitudinal data on their target groups. Due to the lack of clearly-defined administrative data, stakeholders collaborate within their networks in order to identify, track and analyse data points for CSC-experienced learners of interest. Interviewees emphasised the need for a revision of current definition and data processes to harmonise and facilitate data collection and analysis for CSC-experienced students in higher education in England.

Advantages of a whole-institution approach

As mentioned in the previous section, the varying processes providers deploy in order to make use of the UCAS tick box data sometimes leads to unidentified care leavers within an institution. Some of the providers we spoke to therefore identified a whole-institution approach as crucial in expanding opportunities to identify and support these students and other groups of students with CSC experience.

'A whole-university approach and raising awareness of these students with different teams is essential in finding them. Internal referrals are another way of finding the students.' (HEP)

In addition, many of our interviewees also highlighted the benefits of integrating a designated member of staff to drive the whole-institution approach. These staff members can liaise and engage with colleagues across various university services in supporting the diverse needs of the target groups.

'Occasionally we have [CSC-experienced] students who are in their second or final year and they didn't know anything about the support and that is probably because they were overwhelmed with information. Students will disclose stuff at different points depending how they are feeling.' (HEP)

Dedicated staff members who liaise with internal departments on the student's behalf and who are able to provide an ongoing point of contact for pastoral support were identified as potentially important in the literature review. Interviewees emphasised the need for a single staff member to raise rapport with the target groups of students who often have had difficult relationships with bureaucratic institutions, and for whom a trusted individual can make them feel welcome and well-supported.

'Universities have to think how they can start to facilitate that belonging and build that relationship because our care experienced learners have very tenuous relationships or strange relationships with larger bureaucratic organisations. If we know that our young people have difficulties forming attachment or trust in big organisations how can we start to be a stable point of reference where even if they don't come to us straight away, that stability of support is always going to be there.' (Third sector)

Likewise, interviewees who acted as designated members of staff also identified benefits as they are able to develop their expertise in a particular area and are often supported by third sector organisations via specialised training, continuous professional development and conferences. One interviewee further highlighted the importance of training staff members to become institutional experts on supporting CSC-experienced students.

'Not all of them [general university staff] understand the education systems. One year we had a care leaver celebration event and only one staff member turned up. That is when I realised that we need to do some more work with them. Now we have regular events – providing information and raising awareness of the support and services we offer for this group. It's about supporting them to support the young people as well. So that's kind of, I guess, where I see that being a little bit of a barrier. They need to be trained.' (HEP)

As designated members of staff work on raising awareness for the needs of CSC-experienced students, different teams across the university can make their opportunities more inclusive. One interviewee suggested that opportunities don't always need to be designed for CSC-experienced students alone; it is sometimes just about opening up opportunities that already exist such as mentoring schemes, work experience schemes, funding etc. However, there are also specific point in the student lifecycle when CSC-experienced learners are likely to need specific targeted support.

'We want support to be recognised across the whole academic year but actually there is some key flag points within that academic year that we know that we need to really bring people's focus to. [...] Your first meal, or moving into halls, or doing a shopping trip. One of our care experienced students didn't realise she needs to buy a duvet and a pillow so she turned up to university and there was nothing in her room. She doesn't have any way of getting to the supermarket without getting on the bus and she hasn't had her loan yet so she doesn't have money to do that. So how is she supposed to be able to facilitate that.' (Government-funded body)

Within this section, interviewees highlighted the importance of a whole-institution approach to ensure that support services can effectively identify and support CSC-experienced learners throughout the student lifecycle. Interviewees reiterated common challenges for CSC-experienced students that were already identified in the literature. These mostly focused on struggles to source accommodation, finances and additional support for students struggling with mental ill-health. Designated members of staff as trained one-point-contacts for these learners were highlighted as vital to build rapport with CSC-experienced learners and to influence institution-wide awareness and change to deliver better outcomes for CSC-experienced student groups.

Disrupting the narrative/ intersectionality

The previous sections have highlighted the diversity of learners who fall into the category of CSC-experienced and their equally diverse set of barriers when considering higher education. In almost all our interviews, the discussion turned towards the complex nature of CSC experience, which often intersects with other forms of disadvantage.

'Our [CSC-experienced] students are statistically more likely to be mature, with mental health conditions and from a BAME background. All other disadvantages together with their care experienced status.' (HEP)

The most common overlap raised in our interviews lay between mature and CSCexperienced students.[10] Indeed, analysis of HESA data has shown that relatively few care leavers go to university at 18, compared to mature entry (Harrison, 2017). Interviewees hypothesised that many CSC-experienced students, due to disruption during key educational timepoints in their life, are either not in a place to enter higher education at 18, or may need longer to obtain the required qualifications to do so. Fears that higher education may not be a good fit for them, or hesitation to take on high levels of student debt were also mentioned as potential drivers for later HE entry for CSC-experienced students.

'The normal care leaver or care-experienced student is probably aged 22 or 23 when entering university, and we should give people a chance to refine themselves in early adulthood and not expect them to be in that position at 18.' (Academic)

Unsurprisingly, many of the organisations we've spoken to therefore advocate for a closer collaboration and integration of available support services for mature and CSC-experienced learners. The interface between care leavers and mature students is particularly challenging as there is no statutory financial support for those learners who have been looked after once they turn 25. In this case, these students rely on university support once they reach this age. Interviewees also reported to have discovered the CSC experience of some of their mature students coincidentally as students considered their experience with care to be too long ago to qualify them for any support.

'It is odd in the context of the WP [Widening Participation] world when you have two separate teams working on access for care experienced students and access for mature students and they seemingly never talk to each other when they are actually targeting the same students. [...] I think mature student targets on access can be partially solved through better and more inclusive work for care leavers, but I often think the two groups are viewed in silos.' (Third sector)

Discussion around the actual entry age of care-experienced students led to further discussions around disrupting the narrative of traditional student trajectories and the focus of policy and decision-makers on entering higher education at the age of 18.

'I was invited to a round table with the Minister about care leavers in HE. And it's great that it gets that ministerial attention, but it was all about "How do we get more care experienced 18-year-olds to go on to HE?". Instead, we need to think about how to get care experienced people to go on to HE. This age of 18 has a magical policy element to it that is really unhelpful.' (Academic)

Interviewees pushed for a wider perspective from policymakers and sector bodies in reducing the emphasis on progression to HE directly from secondary school. Instead, efforts should be redirected to consider looking beyond that point in time to strengthen efforts to get older CSC-experienced individuals to consider higher education.

'I found this less in the universities but particularly in the policy making side around higher education. We had to disrupt their narrative that every student is an 18-year-old school leaver who is going off to do a three-year full-time degree in a university in a city different from the one they live in. That's especially not the case for care experienced students who we know are more likely to be mature students, to study part time, to be commuter students and all those things.' (Third sector)

Within this section, interviewees raised awareness for the intersectionality between care-experienced learners and other known groups of disadvantages. Focus on care leavers hereby create tensions in giving the impression of a homogenous group of learners. In reality, the sub-groups of learners falling under the category of CSC-experienced are much more diverse and therefore require more nuanced support mechanisms depending on their underlying sub-characteristics. The overlap between CSC-experienced students and mature learners, who enter undergraduate degrees aged 21 years old or older, was hereby highlighted as particularly important.

Gaps in evaluation

The last theme arising from our interviews focused on the state of evaluation of interventions and services for CSC-experienced learners. Consistent with the literature review, interviewees generally agreed that there was a lack of robust evaluations of the efficacy of interventions targeted to support CSC-experienced learners' access to and success in higher education.

'We spent 10 million pounds but none of our partners or as a collective can confidently say that was well spent. We feel it is, and young people tell us it is, which is enough, but if we could say that it resulted in social return on investment, it would unlock so much more. [...] But for us to be able to do that, I think we probably have to go for more years, or we will need to probably invest so much in having an evaluation.' (Third sector)

Most of the schemes and support services we've heard about in interviews were evaluated through small-scale repeated surveys or focus groups, and sometimes included descriptive data on the access, retention and/or completion rates of participants. These evaluations provided interviewees with case studies and reassurance that young people with CSC experience appreciated the support they received but left many questions regarding the efficacy of programmes unanswered.

'I think the thing that was most disappointing about our research was that our research has found that they couldn't answer the principal question which was 'what makes the difference.' (Third sector)

The barriers to evaluation that interviewees mentioned mostly aligned to issues already mentioned in other parts of this report and focused on issues with the scope, validity and paucity of the data.

'There is HEBSS [Higher Education Bursaries and Scholarships Scheme], UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service], HESA [Higher Education Statistics Agency], NPD [National Pupil Database]. No matter what data set you are going to look at – it's going to be incomplete. We tried to ask our participating universities to report on number of identified students and their retention rates. But without accurate data across all providers, it's pretty much an impossibility. [...] There are pockets of measuring these in some providers and we are working with the DfE on supporting these. But when providers are only able to identify 2/3 of the actual cohort, the paucity of data makes robust generalisable claims difficult.' (Third sector)

However, despite ongoing challenges to robust evaluation of targeted support for CSCexperienced learners and learners with experience of family estrangement, more senior and experienced interviewees recognised a positive direction of travel in regard to integrating monitoring and evaluation activities into their Access and Participation Plan returns and reporting practices. The establishment of pledges and quality marks, as introduced by StandAlone[11] (targeted at supporting students with experience of family estrangement) and NNECL[12] (targeted at supporting students with CSC experience), were mentioned by several interviewees as setting realistic but challenging expectations around evaluation for providers. Interviewees also highlighted that these quality marks helped in creating opportunities for collecting and highlighting good evaluation practice as well as activities that have emerging promising evidence.

In addition to these quality frameworks, some providers we interviewed worked closely with third sector organisations to recruit and support CSC-experienced learners. The additional external work of the third sector organisations often complemented interviewees' own efforts to understand and address the needs their CSC-experienced students.

One of our interviewees mentioned aligning their reporting to the annual report of a third sector organisation they worked with, and sharing their internal findings as part of the charity's annual impact report.

'If we can bring together the university, the corporate in the form of money or services and the charitable endeavour, that we can be a greater power together, then we could separately say on a student level, sector level and society level – it is important and robust work.' (HEP)

No matter the background of our interviewees, this shared practice element of learning from each other's evaluation activities was continuously raised as the most useful element in driving evaluation practices forward. As mentioned in previous sections, cross-organisation collaborations and professional networks were praised by interviewees as safe spaces to discuss common challenges, and facilitated open dialogues about unsuccessful evaluation efforts – both where the evaluation didn't find evidence of impact, and where there were barriers to successful evaluation – and the lessons learned. Whilst these failed evaluation experiences often do not make it into published reports, interviewees felt these reflections enabled them to get further in their own programmes, evaluations, and avoid making the same mistakes.

'What I always love in impact reports is seeing a section with stuff that didn't work. Some did the report with "Here is some stuff we tried and turns out the impact was rubbish and we are probably not going to do it again". That was just really refreshing to see and really, really helpful for our work.' (Third sector)

Overall, interviewees confirmed the lack of robust and causal evidence on the efficacy of support activities targeting CSC-experienced learners and those with experience of family estrangement. Issues in compiling robust evidence were often related to the limited availability, scope and paucity of data sources where many providers and third-sector organisation had too little funding to put significant investments into time-consuming and complex data collation, cleaning and interpretation. As before, interviewees highlighted the need for harmonised approaches to evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.

Discussion of findings

The preceding interviews revealed many commonalities between the anecdotal evidence and 'lived experiences' of our stakeholders and the findings arising from our literature review. Common challenges around unclear definitions not only hindered the production of generalisable research in published journals but also impeded the effective targeting and delivery of support services to CSC-experienced learners on the ground. Interviewees outlined the unhelpful consequences of a focus on care leaver that started as a well-intended policy to support a disadvantaged group but in reality neglected the complex interplay of care-experience and disadvantage for many other learners with experience of CSC or family estrangement that currently drop off the policy radar.

Interviewees also confirmed the importance of interventions engaging CSC-experienced learners from an early age to ensure the identification and long-term support of these learners at key time points in their educational life. Consistent with our literature review, collaboration between local authorities and virtual schools was highlighted as particularly important in this regard.

The context-specific, person-centred approach that effective virtual schools can offer to CSC-experienced learners seems to work particularly well when virtual heads are aware of the particular background of an individual learner and can tailor the support available to the distinct needs of the pupil. Indeed, the intersectionality of CSC experience and other forms of disadvantage make this a far from homogenous group and a nuanced approach to support is required. The overlap between CSC-experienced students and mature students was mentioned as a particularly salient point for providers when recruiting and supporting first-degree entrants above 21 years to their undergraduate degrees.

Lastly, all our interviewees advocated for a whole-institution approach to CSC-experienced learner support to ensure that learners with little external encouragement can rely on salient and timely support across their student lifecycle. The presence of a designated member of staff who can act as a trusted source of expertise and further the interests of these student groups was raised as a particularly useful support mechanism post-entry.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research provides an overview of the factors contributing to the experience of, access to and success in higher education for CSC-experienced learners in the UK. It draws on a review of both academic and grey literature, and a set of interviews with informants across sectors who work to support CSC-experienced individuals to access and succeed in HE.

Promising areas of evidence and best-practice

Both strands of our research found that evidence on the topic is limited and, due to the often small sample sizes and blurry definitions of actual target groups, did not provide robust evaluations of relevant interventions. Consequently, the majority of sources we've summarised in this report, and the evidence compiled via stakeholder interviews, comprise studies that rely heavily on self-reported evidence – often via focus groups and/or interviews with self-selecting groups of CSC-experienced learners. We therefore need to be cautious about the generalisability of findings derived from a self-selected group that potentially overcame a lot of the barriers described in this report. In terms of potential interventions for widening participation for CSC-experienced young people, we found the following:

- **Few but positive causal findings on peer support and mentoring**
  There is some limited but promising causal evidence on integrated, early interventions that focus on building resilience and social capital, based on studies in Sweden and the US, but we were not able to find robust evaluations of similar interventions in the UK. Interviewees mentioned mentoring activities as a useful mechanism to provide positive role models and build a sense of belonging but none of the activities highlighted in interviews have been evaluated to a causal standard.

- **Supporting social capital**
  Many of the qualitative case studies and interviewees highlighted the importance of a social network to provide support, guidance and advice to CSC-experienced learners when they are considering entering HE. A key part of this network is often a trusted adult or mentor who can provide encouragement towards academic and personal goals and emotional support on the journey into and through HE. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of building relationships with a trusted figure, especially in the context of a group of learners who have often built an innate distrust in large bureaucratic institutions.

- **Single point of contact at each provider**
  Both strands of our research have indicated that there is likely value in having a single point of contact within a provider who can help learners navigate the institution and access the support they need. Within providers, a designated member of staff that is solely focused on supporting CSC-experienced target groups pre-application to post-graduation seemed to be correlated with higher progression and success rates for CSC-experienced students in HE. Likewise, interviewees acting in these roles also reported trickle-down effects for their employing institution as these individuals often improve awareness and knowledge of CSC-experienced learners and their required support across their network of colleagues.

- **Links between local authorities, carers, schools and HE providers**
  The majority of exploratory studies recommended inter-institutional work where several providers in the field worked and learned together to support CSC-experienced learners in their educational journey. In studies where this collaboration was felt to be successful, staff and carers reported better-managed transition support, relevant sharing of information between inter-organisational staff and learners who reported of feeling less alone and isolated.

Barriers to support CSC-experienced learners

In addition, the reviewed literature and interview insights highlighted some common barriers to more effective support of CSC-experienced learners as they consider, apply to and progress through HE.

- **Availability of data and its linkage**
  The limited scope and depth of data on the target groups is a recurring concern that was raised, both, in our reviewed studies and by the majority of stakeholders we interviewed. Better data linkages between pre-HE and HE providers would improve the identification and tracking of individual learners and their outcomes within education. In instances where researchers and interviewees have used administrative data via UCAS, the SLC and/or local authorities this has allowed insights into diverse pathways of CSC-experienced learners. However, more connected data is needed to understand common trends and contextual factors that impact these groups on a macro, rather than micro, level.

- **Clearer definitions of target groups**
  Many of the interviewees and studies in our review used varying definitions of CSC-experienced learners. The narrow legal definition of a care leaver often hinders the identification and flagging of other learners with CSC experience who do not meet this definition but are equally in need of further support. All interviewees we spoke to advocated for an expansion of the care leaver definition to include any kind of CSC experience. Examples of best practice for system-wide definitions and support services available for all learners with social care experience have been found in Scotland.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and evidence gaps detailed above we identify the following priorities for future research:

- To ensure effective allocation of support for CSC-experienced learners more causal studies investigating the actual efficacy of the interventions on the aspirations, enrolment and success of CSC-experienced learners is needed. Encouraging closer collaboration between institutions on similar interventions may be an opportunity for providers to increase the number of eligible participants to strengthen the robustness of arising findings.

- There is a need for more robust research on the impact of virtual schools on CSC-experienced learners' aspirations, progression and success in HE. Research in this area should include a strong emphasis on implementation and process elements to tease out facilitators and barriers to success across the virtual schools.

- Both strands of this report highlighted the need for HE providers to work more closely with external staff in local authorities and virtual schools to facilitate closer channels of communication and to upskill involved parties on synergies and potential areas for collaboration in their respective work.

- CSC-experienced students are more likely to enter HE as mature learners and not have standard entry qualifications. HE providers should ensure that staff and activities that support mature learners are better linked up with staff and activities that support CSC-experienced learners, and vice-versa, and evaluate these efforts where possible.

- More research on the effectiveness of designated members of staff within HE providers and their impact on the retention and success rates of CSC-experienced learners should be carried out. Robust monitoring and evaluation should be built into their work from the start.

- More research is also needed on the link between CSC experience and mental health, and its impact on access and success in HE.

- The lack of easily available, consistent data and data definitions is a major barrier to robust impact evaluation of the effect of WP activities on CSC-experienced learners. The Department for Education and its delivery bodies must place a greater emphasis on facilitating an inclusive understanding of definitions and a more consistent and easily-available tracking of CSC-experienced individuals and their outcomes over time and between the school, college and the higher education sectors.

- To ensure the most effective targeting, monitoring and supporting of relevant sub-groups, the inclusion of CSC-experienced learners' voices in the conception, dissemination and interpretation of research projects is strongly recommended.

ANNEXES

Annex A: TASO typology of evidence

Category	Option
Provenance	Peer-reviewed article
	Non-peer-reviewed article
	Book/book chapter
	Report
	Brief
	Other
Methodology	Primarily qualitative
	Primarily quantitative
	Mixed-methods
	Other
Student life-cycle stage	Primary school
	Secondary school
	Post-16 (not in FE)
	Post-16 (in FE)
	Undergraduate
	No specific stage
Outcomes	HE aspiration/awareness raising: widening participation in HE
	HE aspiration/awareness raising: progression to 'high tariff' HEP
	HE aspiration/awareness raising: recruitment
	Attainment raising
	Social/cultural capital
	Skills development
	Other
Intervention	Multi-intervention outreach
	Financial aid
	Mentoring, counselling, role models
	Information, advice and guidance
	Summer Schools
	Campus visits
	Virtual schools/ early intervention
	Other
	Exploratory: barriers to education
Sign of Impact	Positive
	Negative
	Mixed
	None
Strength of evidence	Weak evidence
	Developing evidence
	Best evidence
UK focus?	Yes
	No

Annex B: Search terms and items for the literature review

	Group 1: HE	Group 2: Outcome	Group 3: Design
Search 1	"Care Leavers" OR " in care" "looked after" OR "care experienced" OR "in social care system" OR "subject to a child protection plan" OR "subject to a child in need plan" OR "kinship care" OR "foster care" OR "residential care" OR "unaccompanied asylum seeker " AND "higher education" OR HE OR college OR university OR degree	Participation OR access OR admissions OR enrolment OR aspirations OR progression OR attainment OR engagement OR intervention OR support	Evidence OR impact OR intervention OR evaluation OR effect OR review OR analysis
Search 2	"Care Leavers" OR "Children in care" OR "care experienced children" OR "children in social care system" AND "higher education" OR HE OR college OR university OR degree	Outreach OR "widening participation" OR access	Evidence OR impact OR evaluation OR effect OR review OR analysis
Search 3	"Care Leavers" OR "Children in care" OR "care experienced children" OR 'children in social care system" AND "higher education" OR HE OR college OR university OR degree	Participation OR access OR admissions OR enrolment OR aspirations OR progression OR attainment OR awareness OR engagement OR intervention OR support	Random OR "controlled trial" OR experiment OR "quasi-experiment" OR causal OR matching OR RCT
Search 4 (key actors)	"National Network for the Education of Care Leavers" OR "Rees Foundation Charity" OR "Become" OR "Propel" OR "Buttle UK" OR "UNITE Foundation" OR Become AND charity OR "Catch22" OR "coram voice" "What Works for Children's Social Care" OR "Office for Students" OR "Access and Participation Plan" OR "Access Agreement – Office for Students" OR "Department for Education" AND "children in social care" OR "CLA" AND "evidence" OR "care leavers" AND "impact"		

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ENDNOTES

1   Our literature review looked for evidence relating to young people with any experience of children's social care. For the purpose of this report, we therefore use the term of CSC-experienced learners to be inclusive of the range of experience with children's social care settings a learner may have encountered, including having a Child In Need Plan, a Child Protection Plan, or being looked after, for any duration at any point of their life to be as inclusive as possible in our scope. Aligning to best practice outlined by UCAS, this broader term is also inclusive of applicants with earlier or shorter experiences of care and those who do not receive ongoing support from the local authority, such as those who left care through adoption and those above the age limits for statutory support. In practice, much of the literature we reviewed focused on young people who had been looked after by the local authority and interviewees often referred to a specific sub-group of CSC experience when discussing their work.

2   For further information on the standards and types of evidence, please visit: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

3   Within this report, we apply the term 'higher education' or 'higher education in further education' to any form of education that results in a level 4+ qualification. Next to the more traditional bachelors' and master's degrees this also includes higher national diplomas, foundation degrees and degree apprenticeships.

4   We define a 'care experienced' learner as someone who is, or has been at some point before they were 18, in the care of a local authority for more than 24 hours. This includes both individuals who are aged under and over 18. 'Care leavers' refers specifically to those who have care experience who are over 18.

5   The OfS Standards of Evidence have been developed to 'help providers to understand what constitutes high quality evidence and guide the selection of evaluation methods to generate evidence of impact.' The standards group evidence into three non-hierarchal categories (narrative, empirical inquiry, and causal), each divided into three hierarchal categories denoting the strength of evidence (weak, developing, and best). For further information, please visit: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/

6   Access and participation plans (APPs) set out how higher education providers will each improve equality of opportunity in higher education. They must be approved by the OfS if the provider wants to charge higher tuition fees. The commitments outlined in institutional APPs are monitored by the OfS to ensure that institutions honour the commitments they make to students in these plans. For further information please visit: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/.

7   The Student Loans Company (SLC) is a public body company in the United Kingdom that provides student loans. It is owned by the UK Government's Department for Education, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. Any student who wishes to apply for a means-based loan in the UK will need to apply via their national Student Finance body indicating their household income. This provides a large dataset on applicants' standing with their biological parents, their financial status and can be used to identify students with family estrangement or some forms of CSC experience.

8   In this research we are using the term CSC-experienced entirely for clarity, as it explicitly encompasses the whole CSC system and the range of ways in which individuals may be in contact with the system.

9   For further information on the statutory definition of care-experienced learners in Scotland and the available support for these groups, please visit: http://www.sfc.ac.uk/access-inclusion/equality-diversity/care-experienced/care-experienced.aspx

10 Mature students are defined as any student aged 21 or over at the start of their first-degree, undergraduate studies.

11 For further information on StandAlone, a charity lobbying and supporting the interest of people with experience of family estrangement, please visit: https://www.standalone.org.uk/

12 For further information on the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL), a charity championing the development and collaboration of staff responsible for supporting care leavers in their education journey, please visit: https://nnecl.org