

Committee for Health,  
Room 419,  
Parliament Buildings,  
Ballymiscaw,  
Stormont,  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

16<sup>th</sup> December 2021

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

NSPCC NI is grateful for the opportunity to provide oral and written evidence on the Adoption and Children Bill and further advice to the Committee on initiatives to improve the educational outcomes for looked after children. As stated in our oral evidence to the Committee on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021, there are a range of initiatives across the UK which are targeted at looked after children with the intention of improving and promoting their education. Some of the most notable initiatives are included below.

## **Northern Ireland**

In February 2021, the Departments of Health and Education in Northern Ireland published a joint Strategy for children in care and care experienced children. Learning and Achievement is covered in the Strategy and there are a range of commitments in this area outlined in pages 42 and 43. - [A Life Deserved Caring for Children & Young People in Northern Ireland Strategy.PDF \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

## **England**

In July 2014, the Department of Education in England published its framework, most recently updated in February 2018, through which local authorities discharge their statutory duty under 22(3A) of the Children Act 1989 to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children. The Children and Families Act 2014 amended section 22 of the Children Act 1989 to require every local authority in England to appoint an officer employed by the authority, or another authority, to make sure that its duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked-after children is properly discharged. This officer is known as the Virtual School Head or VSH. Virtual School Heads are in charge of promoting the educational

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achievement of all the children looked after by their local authority they work for. The statutory Guidance details the duty local authorities and VSHs have to promote the educational achievement of the children they look after.- [Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

In February 2018, the Department of Education updated its statutory guidance on '[The role and responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked-after children](#)', originally issued in 2009. This Guidance relates to the obligations on school governing bodies by virtue of Section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 to designate a member of staff (the designated teacher) as having the responsibility to promote the educational achievement of looked-after children, including those aged between 16 and 18 who are registered pupils at the school.

## Wales

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 sets out the importance the Welsh Government attaches to improving the lives and well-being of looked after children. The 2014 Act (section 78) places a responsibility on a local authority to safeguard and promote the well-being of any child in the care of the authority and sets out ways in which the authority would be required to support these children and young people. It also places a positive duty on the authority to promote educational achievement of these children and amends the Children Act 2004 (section 25) to provide for local authorities and relevant partners to co-operate to improve the well-being of children, including educational outcomes. The Welsh Government published its Strategy, '[Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales](#)', in January 2016. It describes the Welsh Government's programme and its six key themes to tackle the educational underachievement of children who are looked after. Chapter 4 of this Strategy identifies a range of actions to be taken at all levels to strengthen the educational outcomes of care experienced children.

More recently, the Welsh Government commissioned research into improving educational outcomes for looked after children. In 2020 the Raising Attainment Advocate, Sir Alasdair Macdonald published a report '[An integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales](#),' which outlines some of the good practice that is currently happening in Wales, and also focusses on parts of the system where there are opportunities to improve. The report includes five recommendations for the Welsh Government, including the development of proposed options for a new Welsh model, similar to the virtual school model used in England, Scotland and other countries. The Government went on to

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commission further research to assist them in shaping the future policy direction for supporting looked after children in education, to ensure the effective co-ordination of support, and to improve educational outcomes. [An Integrated Approach to Improving Educational Outcomes for Looked After Children in Wales](#) and was carried out to help the Welsh Government to formulate and begin to implement a plan for a Welsh approach. The report was published earlier this year and will determine how a new model can build on existing best practice and systems in Wales, how a new Welsh model can be implemented, and the impact of introducing a new model.

## Scotland

The Scottish Government published its [Getting it right for looked after children and young people strategy](#) in 2015. There is a great deal of work ongoing in Scotland on improving the experiences and outcomes of all looked after children. Some of the developments listed below do not relate solely to educational outcomes but given the impact of permanence and stability on children's lives as a whole, not least on their education and capacity for learning, we felt that these warranted inclusion.

The Government commissioned an [independent care review](#) which took place between February 2017 and February 2020, to ensure the care system is meeting the needs of Scotland's looked after children and young people. The work of the Care Review culminated in the publication of 7 outputs on the 5th February 2020, the main volume of which was [The Promise](#), which includes five foundations and over 80 calls to action. In the Scottish Parliament [on the 5th February](#), the First Minister and all of Scotland's political parties pledged to #keepthepromise to Scotland's children. The First Minister underlined this commitment in the [Programme for Government](#) 2020-21 to support the recommendations of The Promise.

The Scottish Government also funds the [Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children In Scotland \(CELCIS\)](#) to support and help improve practice within the looked after children workforce. There is a huge bank of resources on looked after children on the [CELCIS website](#) which will be of interest to the Committee, covering a range of issues including information about the [Care Experienced Students Bursary](#) on the [Education Forum](#), a network of over 200 professionals with a special interest in improving the educational experience and attainment of looked after children and on the [roles and responsibilities of Virtual School Head Teachers and Care Experienced Teams in Scotland](#).

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One of the programmes delivered by CELCIS is [Permanence and Care Excellence \(PACE\)](#), a system improvement programme which identifies and addresses drift and delay in permanence processes. PACE began in 2014 with the aim of enabling more looked after children to experience permanence. This means providing them with stability, including secure and nurturing relationships, in a setting that continues to adulthood. The programme supports local authorities and their partners to identify areas of blockages or difficulties in securing permanence for looked after children and to reduce delay where it is appropriate to do so.

Recent key activities introduced by the Scottish Government to improve educational outcomes for care experienced children and young people include:

- [£11.6 million](#) was invested this year alone by the Scottish Government split between Scotland's 32 local authorities to provide a diverse range of targeted initiatives, activities, and resources, designed to improve the educational outcomes of care experienced children and young people. These initiatives include mentoring programmes, outdoor and play-based education and laptops for looked after children to support their home learning during the coronavirus pandemic;
- Updated [National Operational Guidance Care experienced children & young people fund](#) has been published underlining increased flexibility for local authorities in the context of the pandemic;
- Education Scotland's [Attainment Advisors](#) are supporting how local authorities and school devise and implement plans to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and young people, including those who are care experienced;
- Useful guidance has been published for practitioners on the [National Improvement Hub](#), by [BPS](#), by [CELCIS](#) and [Who Cares? Scotland](#); and
- Insights provided by [CELCIS](#) and [Who Cares? Scotland](#) show that the [pandemic](#) is likely to have exacerbated the needs of many including those leaving care.

## Corporate Parenting Guidance Scotland

In our oral evidence to the Health Committee I also undertook to share the [Scottish statutory Corporate Parenting Guidance](#) to assist with its consideration of the Bill and proposed Corporate Parenting principles proposed therein. This statutory guidance was issued by the Scottish Ministers under section 63 of the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) (the Act). It provides corporate parents with information and advice about how they should fulfil

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the duties set out in Part 9 (Corporate Parenting) of the Act. These duties came into force on 1 April 2015.

In 2021 the Scottish Government published '[Caring for our children and young people: An update on Scotland's Corporate Parenting 2018-21](#)', detailing how Scotland's corporate parents have delivered on their duties to support children and young people with care experience.

The reporting period covers the COVID-19 pandemic which has impacted on all aspects of society, including the public bodies, agencies and services who are the corporate parents of Scotland's children and young people.

The report aims to become a useful learning resource for corporate parents and it:

- includes the Scottish Government's activities, and the activities of local authorities, universities, colleges, health boards, and national bodies;
- considers the factors that enabled and inhibited organisations in advancing their corporate parenting activities, before setting out what corporate parents view as their future priorities into 2021-2024;
- assesses the impact of Scotland's corporate parenting activities on care experienced children and young people, using nationally available statistical indicators to do so; and
- concludes by considering the key learning from this review of the 2018-21 corporate parenting activities and setting out some key areas for future development and improvement to better support care experienced children and young people.

Alongside the report is a [review of corporate parenting plans](#) has been published analysing how the plans (a specific requirement of the Act) of 85 different corporate parents have been created and developed.

In addition, the guidance for practitioners referenced above and published on the [National Improvement Hub](#), by [BPS](#), by [CELCIS](#) and [Who Cares? Scotland](#) will be a useful resource for the Committee in its consideration of Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

We hope that our comments will be useful to the Committee in its consideration of the Adoption and Children Bill. If the Committee requires clarification or further information on anything raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

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