“...just as much of a dream to be like a Disney Princess... people like me, we don’t get to go to university”

Education and future plans for children on a Child Protection Plan

University of Sheffield

LONDON ACADEMY OF EXCELLENCE TOTTENHAM

Frontline

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THE BRILLIANT CLUB

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, nearly 50,000 children in England were subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP). Despite seeing similar educational outcomes to care-experienced young people, children on a CPP are, as a rule, not included in higher education (HE) access initiatives and admissions processes, and there is a limited body of evidence as to "what works" to support them on their educational journeys. This report, produced by The Brilliant Club in collaboration with the University of Sheffield, London Academy of Excellence Tottenham, and Frontline, seeks to address this gap by exploring the lives and educational experiences of children on a CPP, and using these insights to inform the design of a targeted intervention to support them through their education.

Key Findings

- Children on a CPP often experience similar levels of trauma and disruption as care-experienced young people, yet receive significantly less support and are not routinely included in HE access interventions or contextual admissions.
- Many children on a CPP live with ongoing trauma which they must manage alongside their learning. At the same time, they worry about disclosure/identification of their CPP status, due to fear of judgement.
- Persistent absence, and disrupted focus can impact attainment, as well as causing students on a CPP to miss out on the information, advice and guidance required to make positive future plans.
- The relationship between schools, families, and social care is often seen as fragmented, and education as not always prioritised in CPPs. Children may feel excluded from decisions about their own lives.
- Insights reflected that schools and professionals sometimes hold lower expectations for children on a CPP, and that young people themselves often internalise these, seeing university as unattainable or not for "people like me".
- A recurring theme was the importance of consistent, trusted adults who believe in and advocate for young people on a CPP. Such "champions" were felt to have a transformative impact, providing the emotional support and advocacy students need to thrive.

Implications for Intervention Design

The report identifies several key considerations for designing an effective intervention in the next phase of the project:

- Focusing on children on a CPP is the priority, however including a broader group of students may reduce stigma and ensure viable group sizes, while allowing others to benefit from the intervention.
- It is vital that the intervention be delivered by relatable adults who can provide consistency and build trust. Training in trauma-informed practice is essential.
- The intervention must balance academic support with emotional wellbeing, be flexible yet structured, and provide safe, inclusive spaces for participation.
- Timing, location, transport, and food provision must be carefully considered to ensure accessibility and engagement.
- Building trust with families/supporters will be critical to the success of the intervention. It is important to clearly communicate the purpose and benefits of the intervention, as well as finding accessible routes to engaging supporters along the way.
- Success should be defined broadly, allowing students to focus on progress against their own goals and priorities. Measures of success are not limited to academic progress and eventual HE progression, but include self-efficacy, increased knowledge and awareness, and enhanced sense of belonging/mattering.

This report contributes to the limited evidence base on the educational experiences of children on a CPP, recognising the unique challenges faced by this group. The forthcoming intervention will be shaped by these insights, with the aim not only to support individual students on their educational journeys but also to inform sector-wide practice and policy.

Introduction

In England in 2024, 49,900 children were subject to a child protection plan (CPP), equating to 41.6 per 10,000 children, or approximately 1 in every 240 children (Department for Education, 2024). These children have been identified as being 'at risk of significant harm' and placed on a confidential list known as a child protection register (CPR), to which authorised individuals in social work, education, health, police and the voluntary sector have access. Those added to the CPR must also have a CPP in place, which outlines the changes needed to reduce the risks faced by the child, the support to be offered to the family, and how social workers will monitor the child's welfare (NSPCC, 2023).

In England, these children are described as being on, or being the subject of, a CPP. This group of young people sees some of the lowest school attainment and higher education (HE) progression outcomes – in 2023-24, 8.9% of children on a CPP achieved a grade 5 or above in GCSE maths and English, closely mirroring the 8.2% of children in local authority care gaining these grades, while children on a CPP had an average Attainment 8 score of 17.0, compared with 17.3 for children in local authority care and 48.9 for all children (Department for Education, 2025). When it comes to progression to HE, work by TASO (2025) identified that 16% of young people ever on a CPP entered HE by age 22, not dissimilar to care leavers and those ever in care (14%), compared to 48% of all pupils not known to the social care system (Department for Education, 2024b). Despite this picture, to date, children on a CPP are almost entirely absent from access interventions and contextual admissions processes.

This project

The Brilliant Club, together with the University of Sheffield, London Academy of Excellence Tottenham, and the social work charity Frontline, were awarded funding from the Office for Students' Equality in Higher Education Opportunity Fund, for a project focused on what works for supporting children on a CPP on their educational journeys.

Since launching the project in February 2025, The Brilliant Club has spoken with social workers, Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) in schools, HE professionals, and young adults who had previously been on a CPP (YA), through a combination of semi-structured one-on-one conversations, focus groups, and surveys. We aimed to gather reflections and insights about the barriers faced by children on a CPP, and to understand what steps might be taken to support them to succeed and thrive in school, at university, and beyond. These insights are explored in this report. We also hosted a half-day symposium on 9th July 2025 at the University of Sheffield, bringing together colleagues from across social work, academia, education, policy and third sector to further explore these ideas. The contributions from this event can also be found throughout this report.

All these insights are helping to shape an access intervention for Key Stage 3 students on a CPP, to be delivered as part of this project. The project partnership – which now also includes Imperial College London, Aston Community Education Trust, and Outwood Grange Academies Trust - will run this bespoke intervention for ~30 students in each of South Yorkshire and London, in both 2025-26 and 2026-27, and we look forward to sharing the outcomes, impact, and learnings with the sector along the way.

Report structure

The report that follows explores the current policy landscape, with a particular focus on England, as well as the existing research and literature on educational experiences and life outcomes for children on a CPP. Next, it details the approach taken by the project partnership to gather the insights of different stakeholder groups, including through a sector symposium, hosted in July 2025. The data sections look first at the realities of life for children on a CPP, and then at their educational experiences, ambitions and future plans. Next, the report explores the often complex interplay between school-home-social work, before finally examining what all these insights might mean for the access intervention we are designing. The report concludes with the next steps for the project as a whole.

Review of policy and literature

The following section outlines the current policy landscape for children subject to a CPP, with a particular focus on England, as well as exploring the existing body of literature on supporting these children through their educational journeys. At present, this is not a student group which has seen a strong research focus, so this review will also include – where necessary and appropriate to inform the reader - literature that focuses on children with/who have had a social worker, those with adverse childhood experiences, and trauma-sensitive education, as each of these relates to the group in question.

Policy Landscape

As described in the introduction, children subject to a CPP have been deemed 'at risk of significant harm'. The concept of 'significant harm' was introduced in The Children Act (1989) as 'the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life in the best interests of children' (HM Government, 2025). Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect are all examples of significant harm, and the degree of risk determined may reflect a single traumatic event, or a series of events. In March 2024, the most common initial categories of abuse for children on a CPP were neglect – which accounted for around half of affected children – and emotional abuse, accounting for over one-third (Department for Education, 2025).

However, there are no absolute criteria for judging the level of risk and the significance of the harm, so the concept relies on the professional judgement of those involved, weighing up various factors, and compared to the health and development which 'could reasonably be expected of a similar child' (HM Government, 2025). Decision-making around a child's child protection status 'should be a collaborative process between the lead practitioner and the multi-agency team working with the family, including the social work qualified practice supervisor or manager' (HM Government, 2023). Child protection status is not fixed, which means a child may move onto or off a CPP according to need, or indeed be escalated to local authority care, should relevant thresholds be reached: 'Regular decision and review points should be held, involving the child and family and relevant practitioners to ensure that help is given in a timely and appropriate way, and that the impact of this help on the child's outcomes and welfare is evaluated and changed as needed' (ibid). According to government data, of the cohort of children who were looked-after children in 2017/18, 62% had spent some time on a children in need (CIN) plan in the previous 5 years and 39% had spent some time on a CPP (Department for Education, 2024a).

It is important to note that the way harm is evaluated and decisions taken with regards to child protection status is subject to regional variance – and sometimes even variance between neighbouring local authorities. For example, in the local authorities which are the focus of this project, Haringey and Enfield utilise levels 1-4 for thresholds of need (Haringey Safeguarding Children's Partnership, 2023; Enfield Children's Services, 2022), whereas Barnsley works on a 'Spectrum of Support' with 5 levels (Barnsley Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2024), and Rotheram refer to a 'Continuum of Need' with 4 levels (Rotherham Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2024). The implication is that two children in very similar circumstances may receive different levels of support depending on where they live – or if they move from one local authority to another.

With reference to education policy specifically, Virtual Schools have a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children looked after by local authorities, and of previously looked after children (Department for Education, 2018), and from 2024, they were allocated an extended, non-statutory duty to promote the educational outcomes of children with/who had previously had a social worker, and those in kinship care (Department for Education, 2024a). This extended duty, then, includes children on a CPP. Under this guidance, Virtual Schools have 'a strategic leadership role to champion the educational attendance, attainment and progress of children with a social worker' (ibid), meaning they should be:

- making visible the disadvantages that children with a social worker can experience, enhancing partnerships between education settings and local authorities, including with children's social care, to help all agencies hold high aspirations for these children
- promoting practice that supports children's engagement in education
- levelling up children's outcomes to narrow the attainment gap so every child has the opportunity to reach their potential (ibid).

The extension of these duties has been subject to ongoing evaluation, commissioned by the Department for Education and carried out by academics from the Rees Centre, University of Oxford (Sebba et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2024). Though these reports highlight that 'progress through the [Theory of Change] continues to gather momentum' (Brown et al., 2024), inconsistencies were identified in terms of the activities being carried out by Virtual School Heads across the country, as well as challenges related to recruitment, data integration, and the building of 'a shared understanding of the scope of the extended duties' between Virtual Schools, schools and social care (ibid.)

The policy landscape is subject to further development in light of the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2025*. Section 23ZZZA of the bill outlines that local authorities should take appropriate steps to promote the education of children in care or children considered in need, supporting them to overcome barriers to their educational attainment and to raise awareness of what those barriers might be (UK Parliament, 2025). The bill also confers statutory duty to Virtual Schools to support children subject to a CPP, beyond the current extended duties.

Educational outcomes

Government data on the educational outcomes of children with/who have had a social worker paints a challenging picture. Pupils who had a social worker in the year of their GCSEs were around half as likely to achieve a strong pass in English and maths than their peers, and at the end of Key Stage 4 were around 3 times less likely to go on to study A levels at age 16 (Department for Education, 2024a). They were then almost 5 times less likely to enter higher education at age 18 – just 6% were in higher education compared to 27% of those who did not have a social worker (ibid.). The Education Policy Institute and Action for Children (both 2023) reported similar findings.

This data complements the growing body of evidence around children with experience of local authority care, children who have had a social worker, or children with experience of social care more generally. One leading example is the recent TASO report *Pathways into and through higher education for young people with experience of social care 2025,* which found that young people with experience of children's social care were less likely, on average, to enter HE by the age of 22 than the general population or those eligible for free school meals – just 14% of care leavers and those ever in care entered HE by the age of 22, compared to 39% of FSM-eligible young people, and 48% of the remaining general population. This figure was 16% for those ever on a child protection plan. Of those with experience of social care who did enter HE, a relatively high proportion of young people took a vocational pathway, particularly in the case of care leavers. A report commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation (Berridge et al., 2020) identified similar trends in attainment and outcomes, and recommended greater focus on Children in Need as a form of early intervention, given that 'most [Children in Care] usually start as CIN'.

Educational outcomes are further confounded by disruptions to education, including through exclusions and absence. In 2024, children on a CPP had a permanent exclusion rate of 0.96% and a persistent absence rate of 38%, both significantly higher than the general pupil population (0.10% and 22.5% respectively) (Department for Education, 2025).

Trauma and trauma-informed responses

The lack of work specifically focused on supporting children on a CPP led us to draw on trauma-informed practices and work with those with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to inform our pedagogy.

Youngminds (n.d.) defines ACEs as 'highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity.' According to the Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (n.d.), ACEs can include different types of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual) as well as living with someone who abuses drugs or alcohol, and could also include exposure to domestic violence, living with someone who has gone to prison or who has a serious mental illness or losing a parent through divorce, death or abandonment. Many of these issues intersect with those faced by children subject to a CPP.

In *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* (2018), Jennings argues against a deficit mindset, and instead recommends focusing on the strengths and talents of this group of students, claiming it can be 'transformative' for educators and school staff to recognise this in their students (p.88). Similarly, in *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction* (2021), Eller and Hierck offer clear strategies for the trauma-informed classroom that focus on inclusivity, creating an environment that meets the needs of students with trauma, and emphasising the importance of trusting relationships with students and their families to foster a strong educational future for them. The authors explain that children who have experienced significant trauma are more likely to rely on the lower areas of the brain associated with survival, making behaviour in the classroom likely to be more reactive, as their past experiences prompt them to take action to protect themselves. This then prevents more complex cognition, disrupting the students' ability to engage in academic tasks as well as potentially the classroom environment. Educators need to be aware of this and work consciously to build safe environments.

Specifically in relation to work with care-experienced students, Burke et. al (2021) argue the importance of a 'relational navigator' who works holistically to build trust and foster recognition and understanding. This is a long-term intervention that offers slower, more responsive support than traditionally offered by HE student services, and as such requires significant investment. Such an approach might prove instructive to this project.

Conclusion

A TASO Evidence Review, published in 2021, found that 'very few studies have robustly evaluated the efficacy of activities targeted at individuals with experience of children's social care' and that '[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.' (ibid.) This same report highlighted the complex needs of this group of learners and the nuanced, context-specific approaches that are required to support them. Since the publication of this review, the sector has responded with increased focus on the needs of this group, and several of the resulting reports have been explored above.

Beyond government statistics and reporting, however, there is still a paucity of specific research into the education and HE outcomes of young people who are or have been subject of a CPP, and – importantly – what activities and interventions may support attainment, engagement and progression to positive destinations. As literature on children on a CPP is sparse, we have attempted to piece together recent and relevant policy shifts, the literature across different social care groups, and evidence on working with those who have experienced trauma and ACEs. This literature contextualises the research carried out for this project, described in the sections that follow.

Before moving on, it bears reflection that contributing to the body of evidence in this area is also an issue of equity, given the intersection of experience of care with protected characteristics such as race, disability and gender, as identified, for example, in the work of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Edney, et al., 2023). Similarly, the Child Welfare Inequalities Project report from 2020 found 'large scale inequalities in child welfare' with children in the most deprived 10% of small neighbourhoods in the UK over 10 times more likely to be in foster or residential care or on protection plans than children in the least deprived 10%.

Methodology

Between February and May 2025, the insights phase of the project was carried out, with the aim of contributing to the body of evidence around the experiences of children on a CPP, but also of understanding the types of interventions and activities that might support these children on their educational journeys. Research questions focused on experiences in education and, when considering HE, the types of interventions and activities children on a CPP have experience of, and the factors that should be considered when designing future interventions.

Design

The study was designed using qualitative methods to understand the nuanced experiences of children subject to a CPP, as well as social workers, DSLs, and other stakeholders involved in the lives of these young people. We chose to employ semi-structured interviews and focus groups as the main data collection methods as they are open by nature and allow for the collection of both descriptive and explorative data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). Semi-structured interviews can also be more collaborative in tone, allowing for the conversations to be more responsive (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews and focus groups took place over Microsoft Teams and the programme's functionality was used to transcribe the conversations. As well as collecting data in this way, we also shared an online survey with participants unable to commit to a specific time, so that their reflections could also be shared. This allowed both an anonymised response where participants preferred this option, and for participants to respond in as much detail as they chose at a time of their choice.

The project team used the 'Seven Stages of Inquiry' (Brinkman & Kvale, 2019) to thematise, design, carry out and transcribe the data, followed by a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to code and draw out themes. Each transcript was read and coded by at least two members of the research team and from this, we developed and agreed codes prior to a further round of coding. Theme generation was iterative using a mixture of both coarse and fine coding (Terry & Hayfield, 2020) and themes were further tested against the research questions.

Participants

Recruitment of participants across both target areas, North London and South Yorkshire, was primarily network-led, utilising the relationships and connections held by the project partnership. Frontline used their network to recruit social workers and young adults with lived experience on a CPP. Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools were recruited via the networks of London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham as well as the project's MAT delivery partners in South Yorkshire, and HE professionals and Virtual Schools (VS) colleagues were recruited using the networks of the University of Sheffield and The Brilliant Club. London Academy of Excellence, Tottenham was also able to recruit participants with lived experience of being on a CPP from amongst their alumni.

In total, the data includes the insights contributed across 6 focus groups, 5 individual semi-structured interviews and 9 survey responses. A total of 28 participants contributed insights through focus groups and interviews, including social workers (5), VS colleagues (3), school DSLs (6), HE professionals (6) and young adults with lived experience (7). Apart from amongst HE professionals, there was an approximately equal split between participants in North London and in South Yorkshire.

Symposium

On 9th July, 2025, we hosted an Insights Symposium which brought together 29 colleagues from schools, social care, HE, third sector and beyond, including colleagues with lived experience of CPPs and broader social care. The event consisted of a project update, panel discussions focusing on success in school, and thriving in HE and beyond, and cross-sector table discussions to map barriers, potential interventions, and indicative success measures for young people on a CPP across their educational journeys. Panels and table discussions were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed, with the permission of participating colleagues, and insights are included throughout the report, along with an indication if the insight came from the panels or the table discussions. Appendix A contains images of the mapping activity carried out during the table discussions.

Limitations

Due to the focus on children living through complex personal and familial experiences, we determined that it would not be appropriate or ethical to involve children under 18 within this research phase. The risks of engaging these young people without relevant expertise, and potentially inducing additional trauma, meant that we relied on adult accounts of historic experience. This may mean that some of the lived experiences discussed are framed through an adult lens and/or that memories and reflections have altered over time. Over the course of the forthcoming intervention, the voices of the children who take part in the programme will be heard, and given ethical consideration throughout.

Secondly, due to the complexity of parent/school/social care relationships, it was not deemed appropriate to engage parents currently working with local authorities as part of CPPs relating to their children. However, as the project develops, we will be speaking to parents/carers/family members

through Frontline's networks, in an effort to understand the perspectives of supporters of pupils taking part in the programme. The final project report will, therefore, include the perspectives of both children and families.

Finally, there is also a small sample for each stakeholder group in each location meaning that the findings will not always reflect wider experiences. This was to be expected, given the short window for the research, and the network-led approach to recruitment, but means that care should be taken in generalising out from the responses contributed.

Before moving on to the data collected from the insights shared, it is important for our project team to acknowledge our own positionality and the complexities of the power dynamics of engaging in this space. The colleagues producing this report are not care-experienced, and while immense care has been taken throughout, we recognise our limitations, as well as the need to engage with those with lived experience in a meaningful way, to ensure their perspectives and experiences are centred, without tokenism or exploitation.

The Lundy Model of Child Participation (2007), has been a useful guide throughout. The core principles of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence have helped us to ensure that the participation and engagement of those with lived experience of time on a CPP – in the insights phase, the design phase, and in the intervention itself - is meaningful for all involved. Some key considerations prompted by this approach included:

- Offering a variety of spaces for young adults with lived experience to share their views in ways that worked for them (online or in person, individually or in focus groups, in conversation or through a survey, anonymously).
- Using trusted, established networks (e.g. existing relationships with project partners) to actively engage young adults from a variety of backgrounds and experiences to ensure a mix of voices, not expecting one individual to act as a voice for all. Throughout the process, supporting those taking part, through these networks.
- Taking care with confidentiality and informed consent throughout, making clear the voluntary nature of the project, not probing into areas individuals were not happy to share, allowing space for young adults to steer the conversations into areas that are important to them.
- Taking seriously the insights shared with us, and shaping the intervention directly based on their perspectives and recommendations. Communicating this back to young adults, to highlight the impact of their views and contributions. Remunerating participants for their time and contributions.
- Weaving opportunities for participation throughout the project – for example, invitations to attend the symposium and support to do so; participation in the design of the intervention; consultation on the proposed model – and committing to doing so on an ongoing basis.

As the project progresses, we would like to move from participation to co-production, as well as ensuring future project events include more people with lived experience, in ways that are safe and comfortable for them. To support our learning, over the coming weeks, we will be speaking to like-minded organisations to learn from their reflections and best practices.

The sections that follow explore the insights contributed by participating young adults, social workers, DSLs and other supporters, across a number of key themes: experiences of being on a CPP, experiences of education while on a CPP and the home/school/social care interface. The report then explores the implications of these insights for the intervention that forms the next phase of this project.

Experiences on a CPP

Earlier sections of this report have detailed the circumstances under which a child may be placed on a CPP. But what does being subject of such a plan really mean for a child's experiences of education, their progress and qualifications, and their future choices? This section focuses on the insights gained from our participants as to the realities of life for a child on a CPP, looking first at the designation of child protection status, before exploring the impact of harm and trauma, as well as the potential for unmet needs.

Child Protection Status

A common theme amongst the supporters spoken with for this report – DSLs, social workers, and VS colleagues – was the lack of consistency of experience between children and their child protection status, which reflects the policy landscape discussed earlier. One DSL explained that there is often "*a really fine line between whether you move a child from child protection to looked after*" (DSL 1), while one social worker (SW1) described how a child designated CIN may be facing issues that are just as complex, but never be escalated to a CPP.

This complexity is exacerbated by regional variance. One VS colleague flagged that some local authorities have very high harm thresholds that would need to be reached before triggering a CPP, and that these thresholds vary between local authorities:

> ***"We have very high thresholds in [local authority]. So, in some local authorities they may have put a child in care. In [local authority], we work with that young person and family to avoid going to care. But it's so high, is what I'm saying. (VS 2)"***

This will mean that we cannot assume that the experiences of all our young people (between South Yorkshire and London, but even within regional hubs) will be the same, or even similar.

To complicate matters further, child protection status is not static, with young people moving frequently as situations (de)escalate: "*You could have young people who have been on a child protection plan before. They're now back on a child in need plan, for example*" (SW 1). These insights chimed with the findings of Berridge et al. (2020), who identified 'much instability' with 13% of their national sample receiving 4 or more interventions from Children's Services, and nearly a fifth experiencing a further intervention within a year after the previous one ending (p.6).

Often it can be challenging, even for experienced professionals, to determine the correct level of child protection for a given child and situation, with SW 1 going on to explain:

> ***"Even to categorise risk sometimes as professionals, we don't agree. We can be in child protection meetings and two people think it should be a child in need plan and two people think it should be a child protection plan."***

One of the issues emerging in the literature, but also from the supporters we spoke with was that, while children on a CPP often experienced many similar traumas and disruptions as those children whose circumstances met the threshold for them to be in the care of the local authority, those on a CPP received much less intervention in terms of both local authority support, and education/higher education outreach and engagement activity:

> ***"I think what we see is there's a real disparity between the support in place for looked after children who often actually have quite a lot more stability in their lives than children who are on child protection plans, because they've got social services in and out of their lives but are still in that home environment, if that makes sense. And that can range from, you know, Mum, chucking you out to domestic violence, to criminal exploitation. To, you know, really difficult living environments. (DSL 1)"***

This echoes Berridge et al. (2020), who reported that '[c]hildren who entered Care or had moved to live with relatives often spoke of the improved stability and consistency in their lives' (p.10), compared with previous circumstances.

Harm/Trauma/Stigma

Beyond a child's formal child protection status, the particular detail of their experiences also varies significantly. Participants from all our stakeholder groups described a range of circumstances that could be present when a child is on a CPP. These could include domestic violence, substance misuse in the home, temporary homelessness, involvement in gangs, mental health struggles, neglect, financial pressures, and poverty:

> ***"Domestic abuse is my biggest category of concern… Emotional/mental health, self harm, suicidal ideation… We know that in situations where children are living with domestic abuse, they want to be at home to protect mum or dad, or whoever the adult is, but also to be the safeguard for their younger siblings. (DSL 3)"***

This was a theme that also emerged strongly at the symposium event, with one of the panellists pointing out:

> ***"…children are on child protection plans because they're going through something dramatic, so that might be a high percentage of neglect. When you think about neglect, you think about food. Can a child learn when they're hungry? No, it's a basic need."***

It came across clearly throughout the insights conversations that this trauma/legacy of trauma was something that children on a CPP live with every day and which, without appropriate recognition and consideration, can hold them back in their school lives and beyond: "*it's another huge brick that they have to put in their school bag as they carry that around school and think about future and aspirations*" (VS 2). Because of the regularity of the meetings with their social workers, for many children on a CPP their traumatic experiences were always lurking just out of sight, as described by one social worker:

> ***"Conversation, talking about some potentially traumatic things, resolves it in the moment, but it's not really resolved. It's parked… And what would happen is [young person] would then really struggle in a lesson afterwards… well, of course she's struggling. Going back into a lesson after I'm talking about things that are difficult for her. (SW 3)"***

The young adults, and the supporters, were also acutely aware of the weight of others' perceptions. Several participants spoke about the stigma and repeat traumatisation of being identified as a looked after child, a child with experience of care, or a child on a CPP:

> ***"Even when I was young, when I think about it, I was worried that I would be judged. I didn't really know what for. I just knew I was supposed to be judged because the way everyone treated it. So, I knew I didn't know why, but I knew it should be a secret. (YA 5)"***

At the symposium event, one panellist highlighted bias and perceptions held by social workers, educators and other professionals as the greatest barrier to children on a CPP thriving at school:

> ***"I think there's lots of logistical and practical things we can do to reduce barriers, but we can do that all we like. But if we have a perception of our young people on child protection plans that even unconsciously is that there's something less than, or they are problematic, or we see them through their behaviour rather than who they are and what they're capable of, I think that forms such a foundational issue for us as social workers, as educators."***

One young adult made the connection between being identified as a young person with social worker involvement, and the assumptions that people may make as to what that young person might achieve in their future – "*[I]t was never assumed by people working with me that I'd go to university and people talk about actually untrue statistics such as you're more likely to go to prison than go to university...*" (YA 4)

One social worker explained that these young people are already forced to stand out, through their many in-school appointments, time out of class etc.

> ***"I would always ask [the child] the question of 'how do you feel about someone coming in to see you in school?' Sometimes they weren't bothered. Sometimes there was a thing of, well, 'what am I going to tell my friends when they come and get us out of my class? What were they going to do if I don't turn up to a lesson? They're going to want to know where I was. What if they see us wandering around school together?' (SW 3)"***

This was echoed by the young adults we spoke to, who did not want to be known for, or by, their child protection status: "*I don't want you to know about that because I wanted to, for me, my whole life all I wanted to be is normal. I never got treated normal*." (YA 7)

Unmet needs

A further facet of this issue is that children on a CPP are more likely to be living with a mental health or learning need - indeed, 2024 government data shows that 42.5% of children on a CPP have Special Educational Needs (SEN), compared to 18.1% of all children (Department for Education, 2025). HE professionals, social workers, school staff and young adults all noted the danger of children with additional needs not getting properly diagnosed due to a lack of awareness or advocacy:

> ***"There is a lot of crossover with mental health, or learning needs: for us when we were looking into these groups is they don't just fall under care experience, quite a lot of them will have other underrepresented [traits] like for instance, mental health, anxiety… (HE 4)"***

While several of the supporters we spoke to attributed this underdiagnosis to the broader crisis in youth mental health provision and the nationwide challenges in accessing an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), one young adult connected their own challenges to support and help not being sought by their parents: "*…you've got to remember that our parents don't necessarily care*" (YA 5).

Whatever the root cause of the lack of diagnosis and support, one social worker was explicit about the enhanced risks posed to children on a CPP if learning needs continue unmet "*[I]f I have additional needs, but I'm not receiving the right support, what are my chances going to be in terms of going into higher education or what is my relationship to higher education?*" (SW 4)

In conclusion, the stakeholders spoken with for this project identified life for a child on a CPP as a complex, moving picture. The reasons a child is subject to a CPP could be myriad, the thresholds between being on a CPP versus being designated CIN or being under local authority care vary between authorities, and children move between social care groups with regularity. In addition, the past responses of others to their experiences, and the help and support they have received (or not), may vary significantly. Therefore, we can make no assumptions about the experiences of the young people who will take part in this intervention, can expect no consistency of experience between our two regional hubs, or indeed between any two children, even in the same school.

Education while on a CPP

The report now moves to explore the impact of life on a CPP for a child's educational experiences, a very common focus in all the conversations held as part of this research. In these conversations, three key themes emerged: attendance challenges and difficulties focusing when in school, attainment and assumptions around potential, and ambitions and future plans.

Attendance and focus

Attendance is one of the biggest challenges facing the education sector at present, and for children on a CPP, the challenges may be even more acute. According to TASO (2025), those young people ever on a CPP had the highest rates of persistent absence (so missing 10% or more of possible sessions) – 63% of their ever CPP group were persistently absent, compared to 54% of those ever in care, and 14% of the general population. This was reiterated by the supporters in this research: "*It comes up in the national data, but attendance for this cohort is really, really low… Their really unstable home lives can be a barrier to kind of education. As things stand, never mind kind of additional interventions*" (DSL 1).

One symposium panellist countered this, making a compelling case for the power of school as an anchor in young people's complex lives, which might actually lead to consistent attendance:

> ***"…yes, attendance might be an issue for some children on child protection plans, but equally, children placed on plans like to come to school because they've got the routine and the boundaries and the rules. So they turn up day in, day out because that's where they find their constants."***

One VS colleague flagged that if a child on a CPP is struggling to attend school regularly, they will miss out not only on educational opportunities, but on additional sessions, extra-curricular opportunities, and university/careers Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG):

> ***"…the interventions around, you know, 'choosing your options' assemblies, 'we've got a speaker coming in', 'let's look at what you can do in your future'. All of those require your child – they have to be in school and those children where attendance is a problem miss out on those opportunities and therefore miss out on that discussion and then thinking about aspirations and where they could go. (VS 2)"***

Even where attendance itself is not an issue, the complexity of life outside school for a child on a CPP often inhibits their ability to fully focus on and prioritise their education – they are not, as one symposium

panellist described it, "*operating from a secure base*". One social worker explained:

> ***"You know, it's very difficult for them to show up in school, able to concentrate when they've not eaten or when they're not living at home anymore and they don't know when they're going to be living at home again or when they've been told that someone's going to come and, you know, beat them up after school. You know, there's all of these different things that can kind of impact their attainment. (SW 1)"***

This mindset was referred to by another social worker as "*survival mode*" and by a VS colleague as "*fight or flight*", but is perhaps best articulated by one young adult as home and school life being inextricable from one another:

> ***"…how I'm doing at home affects how I do at school… support needs to be there and it needs to be more aware that, like, the academics and the home life aren't two separate things. (YA 1)"***

Many of the young adults we spoke to felt that there was not sufficient recognition of this balancing act and the fact that additional help and support may be required for them to thrive, highlighting that if a young person is doing ok academically, they were mostly left alone. One young adult said "*I just tended to find because I was that shy, quiet, smart kid that just seemed like she had everything together. Like they just left me to it*" (YA 6) and another agreed:

> ***"…what was overlooked for me, was even though I was with a social worker, I did always perform quite well in school. And so, the teachers never, like, looked at me and said, 'oh, she needs more support emotionally' because they always thought, like, on paper and in classroom, I was really quiet, even though I was quiet and shy. I did really well in, like, exams. (YA 3)"***

This attitude was summed up by a third young adult: "*[W]e can't just say just because the grades are OK, it means they're OK*" (YA 1).

Attainment, potential and expectations

For many of the supporters we spoke to, attendance and attainment were very much bound up in one another:

> ***"They've had a fragmented education, you know, so their attainment is lower potentially, their attendance is lower… if the ultimate aim is to get them to progress to a high tariff institution, then one of the core barriers to that is their attainment is likely to be affected by their attendance. (HE 5)"***

Another HE professional agreed, making the connection between the disjointed, disrupted educational pathways of many young people on a CPP or with other experiences of care, and the impact this has on performance in school – and therefore on routes into higher education:

> ***"In my research, I talked to 234 young people who've moved from care to university, and they overwhelmingly said that it was really difficult because there are lots and lots of different educational transitions in their earlier education life. So, it can be quite hard to have the grades you need to get to university if you're always being pushed from one school to another. (HE 3)"***

For some, however, it was not just the challenges of life outside school that act as a limiting factor on academic achievement, but that these were compounded by low expectations held by schools. One VS colleague stated

> ***"…sometimes, you know, we find in schools it's, you know, they were not aspirational enough and it's 'they're on a CP plan… they're getting a 2 or 3, that'll be fine', you know, but why? Why is it fine for that child? (VS 2)"***

This was reflected in the account of one young adult, who was discouraged from applying to their desired course, because it was "*only for really high achieving students*" (YA 1). However, this was clearly not the case for the school staff who were part of this research, including one symposium panellist who explained:

> ***"…we build high expectations for all our students and if students come to us with a mindset of, you know, 'that's not for me', then we will do everything in our power to break those barriers down."***

Several participants offered insights that suggested young people are acutely aware of the gaps in their education – whatever had caused them - and how these gaps posed seemingly insurmountable challenges for completing school and contemplating what might be next. One social worker described

> ***"…that feeling of, 'OK, well, I've already messed it up now… even if I wanted to, I can't pull this back', because there's so much pressure and so much stock put into, you know, doing your GCSEs, Year 10, Year 11. For some of them, they can't really see a way out, if they don't do well during that time. (SW 1)"***

This was reiterated by one young adult, who explained the challenges of remaining motivated to continue, when you feel it is pointless to do so: "*I struggled a lot and I kept dropping out… Because, you know, what's the point in finishing secondary if you're not even going to be able to do anything?*" (YA 5)

There was a widespread recognition, within the insights gathered, of the vital importance of attainment for enabling positive future choices for children on a CPP. Indeed, one HE professional explicitly raised concerns about an intervention that 'raises aspirations' but does not support attainment alongside, leading to future disappointment:

> ***"What you don't want to do is raise our aspirations all the way to the front gates of university and then say 'Sorry, you've not got your two As and a B, you can't come in'… if one of the fundamental barriers is your attainment, then there needs to be something that's attainment-raising alongside any kind of belonging and affiliation-raising. (HE 5)"***

This issue sparked debate at the symposium event, in relation to the topic of contextual offers. While care-experienced young people can access contextual offers at many HE institutions, this is not an avenue presently available to young people on a CPP. One panellist spoke passionately of the need to lobby institutions to change this approach to reflect the level of young people's achievements in their contexts:

> ***"…the journey these young people are on, if they don't get A's and B's, so take them on D's and C's because they're just untapped potential at this point… if you're getting C's and D's at this point, that's the equivalent, that distance travelled is the equivalent of an A and B, if you're doing that without those family resources, without that support, without kind of your clothes being washed, without… food."***

This last point reflects some of the wider aspirations of this project, to explore recommendations to the HE sector for ensuring equality of opportunity for this student group, and to seek system-level change. We will return to this theme in the conclusions section of this report.

Ambitions and future plans

Several participants from across all our stakeholder groups talked about the norms and attitudes in the home, and how these impact a young person's understanding of what might be possible in their futures. In some cases, the concerns were practical, for example, that the lack of experience of school completion and of further or higher education meant that parents/family members were not equipped to advise, help or support with educational activities such as homework, or with the steps needed to explore or apply for university:

> ***"Schools need to be aware that, like, it's not always possible to take things home, not necessarily because, like, home is, like, unsafe or bad. But I think just the general fact of not everyone's parents may understand, not everyone's parents have gone through the education system. (YA 1)"***

Pragmatism was also identified as a major factor, particularly by DSLs and VS colleagues – in homes where unemployment, low income, or poverty were considerable pressures, the focus was very much on attaining paid employment as soon as possible:

> ***"…for these children, money has played a big part and kind of, you know, debt management and all of the issues surrounding, and kind of financial inequalities. And so, for some children, I feel that they feel that they need to go into paid employment very quickly. Because they don't want to be caught up in a situation. (DSL 6)"***

When considering university, then, many young people decide they would "*rather go into work and have some money to bring into the household to take the stress off the parents*" (VS 1).

Other examples shared related to a familial scepticism around education in general and higher education in particular. One DSL explained:

> ***"…students that we have had open to child protection have not always been encouraged to attend school. They don't see the importance of education, which then kind of leads on to the third thing of the aspirations really, of our children. They have grown up and - I don't want to carry the stereotype, but - a lot of families don't work. They live on benefits, they've got no aspirations because, well, 'Mum and Dad manage'... So, we do have to try to talk about, you know, wanting bigger and***

better things, you know, do you want a nice house? Do you want it? So, we do spend an awful lot of time with our children trying to change the way that they think. (DSL 5) ”

And a VS colleague agreed: "*it's also about your community and your culture and your aspirations within the family home around. You know many a time, you know, 'I left school when I was 12. It didn't do me any harm' -type theory in the home*" (VS 2). In these cases, one DSL worried about a lack of parental support for the intervention that will form part of this project, either from parents who may say '*I didn't need qualifications to get to get to where I am now*', or from those concerned we are '*picking on*' their child or labelling them '*thick*' (DSL 5). Navigating this will require sensitivity, and we plan to consult with parent groups in Autumn 2025. The importance of doing so was emphasised by a panellist at the symposium event:

“ …how can you make sure that they're not thinking about you as the enemy? Because that's when it starts to break down… So, doing those little things and creating those bridges to the parents to help with that. ”

Making it happen

Whether ideological or practical, norms held at home were seen as heavily impacting the ability of children on a CPP to imagine a different life for themselves and to believe themselves capable of achieving that change. More than one young adult highlighted a complete lack of 'champions' or people who believe in you and your future, as did several supporters:

“ I think sometimes people underestimate the power of having people at home who are kind of supporting you and championing and who are telling you that you can do things. It's one of those things that sometimes people take for granted, like growing up and hearing, 'Oh, that was fantastic'. Some people don't ever kind of hear that when they're growing up. And so, for some young people, it's actually they would really like to go to university or they'd really like to do these things. But they've never really had people who are telling them that that's something that they're capable of. (SW 1) ”

The young adults we spoke to reminded us that not every child has someone at home who believes in them: "*I think something to remember with kids that if they're not shown anywhere that they, you know, there's a reason to believe they can do this, because not everyone has parents who say, 'yeah, you can do this'*" (YA 5). And one young adult highlighted the long-term impact of this: "*I see it a lot and it really upsets me a lot. It reminds me of my own childhood, where I didn't get that encouragement at all*" (YA 7). The importance of such 'champions' was also echoed at the symposium: "*at the heart of it, young people want a champion and a mentor, don't they? They want someone to say, 'you matter, we've got you, you can do this'*".

There was a real sense among the young adults we spoke to both of the unattainable nature of university study for 'people like me', and of a sense of embarrassment that they would even entertain such an ambition "*[L]ike, what am I even doing? Thinking I can go to UCL and so and so is happening?!*" (YA 2). This was, perhaps, best encapsulated in the words of one young adult from our focus group:

“ It was like a dream to go to university, but just as much of a dream to be, like, a Disney Princess. You know, it wasn't going to actually happen because, you know, people like me, you know, we don't get to go to university…we don't get to do that kind of stuff. (YA 5) ”

This does, however, lead to hope that an intervention like the one being designed as part of this project, may have a real impact on the young people involved. One social worker discussed the potential of a project like this to change the perceptions of young people, describing an intervention where:

“ …you're able to kind of see development, you're able to get that feedback and sort of build those skills over a period of time, something that says 'actually, I am capable and I can improve and I'm already demonstrating some of these skills that I'm going to need will be really helpful.' But also, 'I can now see myself there. I have a better understanding of what university is like. I have a better understanding of the fact that when I go there, I can still access support'. (SW 1) ”

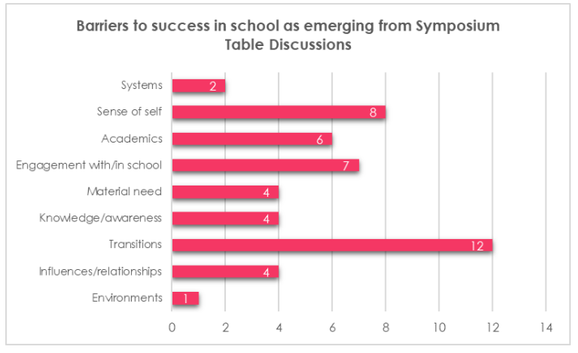
Two factors seemed to be critical to the future success of such an intervention. The first is ownership over involvement: "*you feel like you just don't have a choice and like nothing you say is ever listened to and you kind of get like that kind of like hopeless feeling, especially when it comes to being aspirational*" (YA 2).

And the second is relatable role models, ideally who have been on a CPP themselves:

“ …there is also something about being the only one as well that can be really difficult… have children or young people now, young adults who have themselves been subject to CP plans who talk to possibly those that are considering it and talk about what life is like and support that they had and support that they could get etcetera, etcetera… sometimes young people talk to young people, rather than tell the professionals or other adults you know, and will hear it better when it comes from another young person. (VS 2) ”

These and other implications for intervention design will be discussed later in this report.

In conclusion, the young adults and supporters highlighted several complexities for young people on a CPP in navigating their educational journeys. Some of these, such as disruptions to education, and the challenges of focusing fully on learning, were directly linked to being on a CPP, while others – such as having to combat the low expectations placed upon them – were, perhaps, consequences of a lack of understanding and awareness amongst some supporters. These themes, and others, emerged from the table discussions at the symposium, summarised in the graph below, which shows the frequency with which each was discussed:



Several of these barriers – academics (which for our symposium delegates encompassed lesson engagement, attainment, academic skills, self-efficacy and exam pressure); engagement with/in school (including challenging behaviour/suspensions/exclusions, attendance, and interest in school); knowledge and awareness (support at home, missing IAG); and sense of self (trauma, identity, expectations, horizons) – have been discussed already, but others such as the importance of moments of transition, and the need for system-level change, will be explored later in the report. One identified barrier type – influences and relationships – specifically the relationships between children on a CPP and the professionals in their lives, is the focus of the next section of this report, which explores the interface between school, home and social care.

The home/school/social care interface

As discussed in previous sections, monitoring of the wellbeing of a child on a CPP, and the progress of the plan, is done through regular, multi-agency meetings with a core group made up of family members and practitioners who are involved with the child or family – this includes a social worker as lead practitioner, alongside practitioners from education, health, and other services as required (Leeds Safeguarding Children's Partnership, 2024). Understandably, there is often less focus on academic progress and more on ongoing risk reduction, though this is subject to change given the new statutory duty for Virtual Schools in the Wellbeing and Schools Bill, making attainment a more explicit focus, as it already exists for children in care.

While ideally support for the child and the family is provided in a consistent, joined-up and child-centred way, with the family fully engaged, many participants in this research noted the complexity of the relationship between school, social care and home for children on a CPP. Themes emerging here include young people's complex perceptions of this interplay and how they attempt to navigate those relationships, as well as the key role of the "designated person" in supporting with this.

Navigating the interface

According to our participants, social workers often arrange to visit children in school during the school day, which garnered mixed reactions from the young adults who had experienced it. Some young adults with lived experience noted a lack of communication with the child and highlighted that interventions lacked a child focus (e.g. YA 5; YA 6). They described the challenges of being taken out of lessons for such meetings, with one young adult described staying in lessons as a kind of "*escape*" (YA 2), and questioning why they would be

“ …taken out of lesson to have to talk about something that you're going to have to go home and deal with. It's like, can I not just have my time and enjoy a lesson without having to think about what I'm going to have to go back to? (YA 2) ”

Young adults also described feeling excluded from conversations between different agencies that related to their ongoing needs and care, with YA 5 noting that they were so disenfranchised by the system that they often lied: "*they would ask questions and I was a sarky kid and I, I thought it was hilarious*". This was mainly due to a disbelief that anything useful or personalised would be actioned following the conversations. The same young adult described an interaction with their social worker in the following way:

“ I had to fill out a form and then everyone went and had a meeting about me. No one really asked me anything, but maybe

someone would have like an hour conversation with me, but they weren't really … there wasn't the real questions... It was just 'how's stuff, how's school? Oh, everything cool, awesome.' And then we drove around for fifty minutes, you know, so there wasn't that much focus on it. (YA 5) ”

This correlates with a VS colleague who discussed a deep dive that had been carried out into social work files to understand how education and social care worked together. She noted that:

“ With our CP cohorts of young people, [education] doesn't come up as often. So, we've put in a lot of support with our …our CP chairs, that when they're having their conferences, they're using and really looking at education in depth. And it's not just [Child X] attended 50% and then that's it. (VS 2) ”

This was supported by DSLs who noted that education was not always written into the plans that they had seen, and at least one young adult felt that their social worker knowing about their interventions and school-based behaviours would have been beneficial so that they would have been able to access more personalised and relevant support (YA 6). Similarly, one of the table discussions identified the need for CPPs to have a more explicit education focus, as seen in PEPs for those in local authority care. One DSL suggested that taking part in this project could be written into CPPs (DSL 1), however, another felt that inclusion in the CPP may cause a lack of buy-in from parents who sometimes feel like interventions have ulterior motives and were a way of school and/ or social care being “*nosy*” (DSL 5).

Although none of the young adults that we spoke to had any knowledge of the role of the Virtual School, both social workers and school-based staff felt that the forthcoming statutory duties in the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill* would lead to a more joined-up approach at the interface between school-home-social care (e.g. VS 2), as well as making it easier to track young people between schools and other institutions. Should this prove to be the case, this will only be beneficial for children who are subject to CPPs because, as one participant with lived experience noted, the struggle to get support was hard and often not fruitful: “*They just kind of like, forget about you if you don't keep pestering them, but you don't have the energy to keep pestering them*” (YA 2).

The “Designated Person”

A further strong theme from the accounts of both young adults and school staff was the importance of having a known, trusted adult in school to help navigate education, and interact with multi-agency support.

Usually, there will be a named professional in school, often a Year Leader or DSL, who holds the responsibility for liaising with the child's named social worker and/ or the wider social care team as well as with those at home.

One DSL described this role as being the person in school responsible for “*attending all of the child protection reviews, … trying to build relationships with parents, … [but keeping] the child in the centre of everything [they] do*” (DSL 5). DSLs also explained their work to support pupils pastorally, with one describing being there to make sure the young person doesn't “*feel left alone and abandoned*” (DSL 4). Although processes vary between schools, DSL 5 described having “*weekly conversations with parents*”, providing them with updates and checking what support school might provide. They also discussed gathering 'student voice' prior to any formal conversations and ensuring that parents understand “*why that process is happening*”. This is particularly important because “*if they don't understand why you're doing it, they think you're being nosy*” (DSL 5).

In most schools, however, the details of who is subject to a CPP and/or the details of that plan are kept strictly confidential, and wider school staff - e.g. subject teachers - may not be given this information. The value – and success - of this approach was contested amongst the young adults we spoke with. While some mentioned feeling upset and stigmatised that a range of teachers knew their situation, others explained that they were surprised that more trusted adults in school did *not* know about their circumstances and felt that had more people known, they may have had better support (e.g. YA 5). Participants noted that having a trusted adult in school who can adapt provision according to individual personal needs was key, while others reflected that often having somewhere to retreat to when overwhelmed was helpful. One young adult remembered a counsellor's “*door was always open*” (YA 3) and being given the flexibility to take time out when home was particularly stressful added to her feelings of safety at school.

The importance of this trusted adult was underlined in table discussions at the symposium, which highlighted the various roles this adult may play for a child:

“ …it's not a one size fits all, you know, someone might want to have someone that really champions them academically, whereas someone else might just need somewhere to go when they run out of steam or something like that… someone that knows the context and is there with those things in mind when interpreting behavioural principles. ”

A consistent theme throughout the symposium was the importance of educational transitions as particularly challenging for children on a CPP, be these large transitions (e.g. from primary to secondary, secondary to sixth form or college, or onto university), mid-level transitions (e.g. from one school year to the next) or micro transitions (e.g. back into school following a school holiday or even a weekend). Such transitions were identified as potentially problematic because of the need to get used to a new, often overwhelming environment, the challenges in “handing over” information related to needs and support, and how to access support “in between” (e.g. over the summer). However, one particular challenge identified by the symposium delegates at the point of transition was the disruption to that relationship with their designated, trusted adult:

“ …one of the barriers is that they're coming from a very nurturing, warm-hearted teacher, into a secondary school where they have 15 different teachers, so it's about building relationships with them, and identifying the key worker, I'm not saying that doesn't happen because it does, but in the child's mind that might be a barrier… because they're used to seeing the past teacher for six and a half hours a day on the primary level, aren't they? ”

To summarise, whilst many different practitioners already work to support pupils on CPP, the relationships between those individuals, the children themselves and their families is often complex and hard for the children to navigate. For this project, it will be important to ensure that any intervention does not add to that complexity – either for young people, or for their supporters - and that the young people taking part feel heard and taken seriously by any adults they encounter.

Implications for intervention design

As well as offering incredible insight into the lives and educational journeys of children on a CPP, the accounts of the young adults and supporters provided significant insights for the design of the intervention to come in the next phase of the project.

Stakeholders who contributed to this report were clear about the level of challenge they foresaw in the design of an intervention for children on a CPP. One social worker summarised the issue, in saying “*I'd say the biggest barrier is trying to tackle the issue as a one size fits all approach because there's so many varying circumstances*” (SW 1) whilst a DSL explained “*I don't think you can get it right. I think you're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't*” (DSL 4). On the other hand, the young adults recognised the value of interventions and experiences, even if they were single events, and shared positive memories of trips abroad and of inspirational speakers delivering assemblies (e.g. YA 2).

Themes identified by participants included: choosing the right cohort; selecting and training delivery staff; developing suitable content; and ensuring that messaging surrounding the intervention is positive and forward-looking.

Cohort

Participants had conflicting opinions as to which children should take part in the forthcoming intervention. Many recognised the merits of a fully targeted intervention solely for children on a CPP, due to the poor outcomes for this group discussed earlier, and seen in the data. However, others expressed concerns about an intervention that purely consisted of this group, and the risks this may pose to participating students. Some participants reflected on the potential issues of working with a group of young people who, potentially, only share the characteristic that they are on a CPP – in part, because numbers of pupils subject to a CPP in any given setting are often small. One DSL explained:

“ …across our two secondaries and in the largest secondary where we've got in excess of 1800 students, we've got three children on a CP plan and in the other secondary where there's approximately 900, we've got four now. They're not big numbers. (DSL 6) ”

These low numbers create the possibility that the group feel isolated or different from their peers as if “*being on a plan is the only thing that identifies them*” (VS 1).

Several participants highlighted the need for the reason for a child's involvement in the project to not be instantly identifiable to their peers, for example by including a range of students from different target/ priority backgrounds. One social worker described selection as “*a really tough one for me to even know*

what the right answer is, because I really think it depends how those young people feel about the fact that they're on child protection plans"(SW 1). However, for some participants, including one participant with lived experience, this was not a concern, because "*I don't think it's really exposing*" (YA 3). They went on:

> ***"in terms of taking the students out of lessons… I didn't mind it too much, but I guess there was sometimes attention of like why I… always been taken out of lessons even though [they're] a really good student… I never got any, like, questions or, like or, comments or bullying about it. (YA 3)"***

One young adult discussed the competing tensions around "*getting somewhere based on merit*" but also felt strongly that "*kids who have struggled in that way should not be overlooked just because they're not achieving well*" because for them "*university felt like five, ten, fifteen steps away*" (YA 1).

One DSL supported the idea of extending participation in the intervention to pupils not on a CPP:

> ***"I wonder whether if you've got more students who've a less disrupted home life engaging more frequently and norm like... basically, the last thing you want is you have a programme that just kind of falls to pieces because no students are able to consistently engage with it. (DSL 1)"***

Other supporters discussed the potential of widening the groups to ensure a reasonable sized cohort, for example "*they might be in care, but they also might have car[ing] responsibilities. They might be, you know, free school meals, low income family. There might be kind of lots of other children that would be vulnerable*" (HE 1). However, one participant with lived experience also reflected on the potential danger of "*diluting it too far, getting too, too many people from too many different backgrounds like kind of loses the focus and the meaning*" (YA 4).

From the insights offered, then, there seemed to be an overall preference for a more mixed cohort, to reduce the risk of identification and stigma for participating children on a CPP.

Delivery staff

Most stakeholders raised the value of relatable adults delivering sessions as part of any intervention, which was no surprise given the importance afforded to relationships with trusted adults throughout the insights. One young adult with lived experience explained:

> ***"I think sometimes it's not even the content, it's just who's delivering the content that matters because, like, even, like, with the teacher who helped me with my application… another teacher could have said the exact same things, but it just wouldn't have meant the same to me, especially because that teacher, they also grew up in this area, they also understand the things that I meant. (YA 1)"***

This was reinforced by another young adult who suggested having "*an older mentor but not too old because then you're thinking like they have no idea*" (YA 2). Many participants also noted the importance of trust and consistency in adult support, be that in the school, with their social worker or with another adult and it was stressed multiple times that a key worker in school should have oversight of the programme and be available to support intervention staff should the need arise.

As discussed earlier, these trusted role models should ideally have experience of being on a CPP themselves, however, it was seen as more important that those delivering the programme be specially trained, both in terms of content (DSL 5) but also in responding to young people using a trauma-informed approach. Social workers suggested a need for intervention leaders to be "*really skilled at holding that space and helping the children to not feel judged and to not feel that being on a child protection plan is negative*" (SW 4). One young adult highlighted the importance of not feeling like their "*struggles in life are on display*" (YA 1) and another described discussing their situation as "*quite difficult*", explaining that "*[y]ou get quite like, not defensive, but like it's quite a sensitive topic*" (YA 2). This was also something that emerged very strongly from discussions at the symposium, with one panellist explaining the importance of the ability to:

> ***"…lean into that uncomfortableness and hold that space. Because holding that space is what that child needs at the moment. You might not have the answer. You might not be able to say to them, we can fix this. But to be able to hold that space in that one moment, because that child is reaching out in that moment. And if you shut that down, they may never open up again. They may never feel like they can because they haven't been heard."***

Identifying "the right delivery staff" for this project, then, will be a key priority, with participants agreeing that this needs to be someone who is relatable, reliable and appropriately trained.

Content

Thinking about the possible content of any intervention, many participants noted the need for a "*fine balance*" (SW 4) between a structured approach to sessions to enable young people to feel comfortable participating, but also the need for flexibility of expectations where they were unable to attend or to give their full attention. Social workers, DSLs and young adults highlighted the need for a focus on emotional regulation and the need for spaces that felt safe, where children could self-regulate, as well as time built in for them to do so. Participants also reflected on striking the right balance between educational and academic intervention and the pastoral support needed to fully take part, for example:

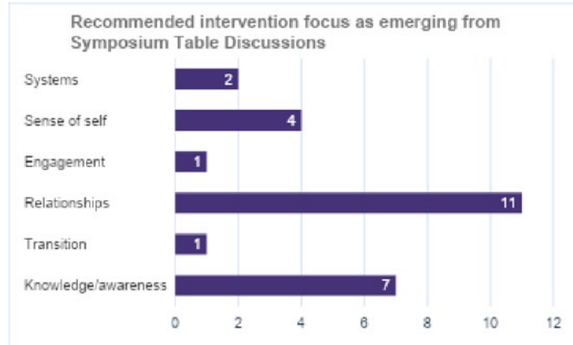
> ***"Not bringing their circumstances into it and just keeping it solely focused on education and what's happening for them educationally, I think is a really important thing as well. But letting them know that that support is there and making sure that the school have the backup support there, the back-up pastoral support I think would be really helpful if it is needed. (SW 1)"***

Many participants noted the need for any programme of intervention to be sustained over a significant period. Interventions that were deemed successful by school-based staff included those that gave young people a space to explore their own identity and how they align with the specific communities of which they are a part (DSL 3; DSL 4), however a social worker cautioned that children often feel a sense of repetition in telling their stories, and for an academic intervention to be successful, a space where their stories are not highlighted might be more impactful (SW 3). This idea of a "safe space" also came up consistently in the symposium table discussions.

Participants, both HE professionals and young adults, confirmed the need for a programme to be aspirational but also realistic in terms of what opportunities might be available. One HE professional explained the potential damage of promoting entry to highly selective institutions if young people were likely to "*be turned away at the door*" (HE 5) and a young adult described how "*realistic conversations […] about next steps*" could enhance the security of decision-making (YA 4).

Many stakeholders discussed incentives as a potential opportunity to both reinforce attendance but also to ensure that pupils are fed and ready to engage. One DSL explained that "*food is the best thing. And after school with foods, they are ready to sit and relax*" (DSL 4), while one symposium delegate highlighted the value of experiences to increase cultural capital, though "*not that nonsense of 'Oh, let's take you to the theatre', but real cultural capital is getting out and about and seeing the way the world works, and it's language, and it's talking to different people*".

All participants seemed alive to the need for the intervention to balance academic content with pastoral support, to balance flexibility and structure, and to cater to students' individual needs. This balance was also illustrated in the symposium table discussions, which showed very mixed opinions as to what the focus of interventions for this groups should be. The graph below shows the frequency with which each theme was discussed across the tables:



Logistics

The logistics of running the intervention was perhaps the most contentious issue amongst participants, with arguments made for and against sessions inside and outside school hours, university visits during the school week vs. at weekends, amongst other issues.

Many stakeholders had conflicting opinions about when and where interventions should take place but concluded that there was probably no perfect approach. Most of the concerns regarding using lesson time in school centred on whether this was potentially exposing, as discussed earlier. However, there were some particular concerns raised around the idea of running the intervention after or outside of school. Particularly from participants in South Yorkshire, transport was a concern:

> ***"…we provide our own kind of bus service, if you like, that ferries out nearly 800 of our kids. So, if we were wanting them to stay for something, we'd have to ensure that we could get them home safely and for them not to incur that cost would be something that we would need to factor in. (DSL 6)"***

This was also echoed at the symposium, where one delegate explained that some of their children catch three buses to get to and from school. Other participants, particularly social workers, raised the issue of these young people having competing priorities and caring responsibilities in the home, that would make after-school sessions a challenge.

Many supporters reflected on the value of young people visiting HE settings to foster a sense of belonging

and open up institutions which might otherwise be seen as "*quite exclusionary*" (HE 3), however, there was also concern that travel to and from these locations could be a barrier in terms of resources and access (SW 1), particularly if scheduled outside the school day. Summer Schools or weekend interventions were, however, raised as a potential solution by social workers, especially to provide positive experiences for those with minimal financial resource for holiday activities. For the symposium delegates, the emphasis was around early, regular, low stakes interactions with HE, centering around fun activities and age-appropriate IAG.

Another question was raised around whether to expect pupils to do any work (e.g. homework activities) outside of the given intervention times. Concerns raised included pupils having the physical space and resources to complete activities at home (YA 1), having adults who are available and have the knowledge/ skills/ willingness to support (HE 5) and having the mental headspace to focus on these activities when other factors compete for their attention (VS 1).

Positive Messaging

Participants generally agreed that transparency around the programme, parental understanding and buy-in would be paramount, especially given that many "*parents that we work with feel powerless whilst working with social workers within the child protection arena*" (SW 4). Others also noted the impact of previous negative experiences of social work and/or education on parental/familial perceptions.

School-based staff also noted the need for parental buy-in and for supporting both parents and children to understand the potential benefits of higher education in terms of future opportunities. One DSL noted that some parents do not want their children to take part in interventions because they are content with their way of life and sometimes do not understand the shift in requirements to access even trade-based education (DSL 5). The same DSL also noted that at Key Stage 3, young people still had aspirations to be "*a footballer or an influencer*" as that is the type of career that they are being exposed to. One symposium delegate reiterated the need for children's and parents' ambitions to be aligned:

> ***"I think that the conversations also need to happen with the families, to empower the families so the families that they can also see the dream. Sometimes parents do see that dream, but they don't know how to inspire their children."***

A range of supporters noted the importance of a consistent message around the purpose, long term aims, and expectations of children and their support networks (VS 2). And while some young people felt that engaging with their parents was "*awkward*" (YA 6), others felt that encouraging parental engagement when and where appropriate was important:

> ***"I've always tried to ask my teachers to talk to my parents or have them come in for meetings because I knew, like, with my parents, they just wouldn't understand it from me. Whereas I think if they meet someone quite professional and someone that was different, someone of authority, they'd kind of take it more seriously, which I think they did. (YA 3)"***

This was reinforced by one DSL who described interactions and updates between the programme and home as a really important part of maintaining parental engagement and buy-in to the programme (DSL 5).

An important thread emerging from the symposium was the need to have a broader articulation of what "success" looks like for the children taking part in the intervention – that this could include, but should not be limited to, progressing to a selective institution. According to one panellist:

> ***"…I think that we shouldn't be measuring, you know, that they're thriving if they've got into a Russell Group university. I don't necessarily think that's always, it's not the right path for everybody… If that person feels like they've grown on the programme, they've developed skills, they've got a really good insight into what university is and whatever decision they've made, if we've helped kind of give them more information, then that is success for us."***

This was reiterated in the table discussion, which identified three scales for measuring success:

Individual	Community	System
Finding out what is important to young people	Developing supportive materials for social workers, school staff, family/supporters, and HE colleagues	Making sector recommendations, including around HE provider recognition for this group
Setting their own goals and measuring success against these		Lobbying Student Finance and UCAS for changes to existing processes
Engaging with the programme as a success in itself		Carrying out longitudinal evaluation and sharing impact
Feeling known and included, that they belong and matter		
Having role models for the future		
Having knowledge and awareness of next steps		

At the individual level, symposium delegates talked about "*the interface between aspiration and agency*" and the combination of outcomes a young person will need to stand them in good stead for the future:

> ***"…there is academic attainment, that's super important for all of these things, but does that have as much weighting as generating a sense of belonging, or even just knowledge about next steps?"***

However, where the symposium discussions differed from insights gathered in the surveys, focus groups and one-to-one conversations was in their focus on system-level change. From the rallying cry included earlier in the report to lobby universities to accept children on a CPP on contextual offers, to the suggestion that changes are required to both Student Finance and UCAS approaches, the symposium delegates were keen that this project play a role in altering HE sector processes to improve outcomes for children on a CPP. The most commonly cited example of a change that could be made would be for the inclusion of a "tick box" to indicate time on a CPP at the point of application, to give similar consideration to these students as received by care-experienced young people:

> ***"When [a care-experienced] young person applies to university, there is a tick box on the UCAS form that says 'look at what they've been through and recognise that and give them the contextual offer'… As soon as you meet that criteria, most universities rightfully now recognise that they are exceptional to have got to where they are. Our students on child protection plans have none of that recognition."***

In the words of one delegate: "*it could be revolutionary, just that one tick box*".

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the insights shared in this phase by young adults with lived experience of time on a CPP, together with those of supporters from schools, HE and social care, have shone a light on the experiences of young people on a CPP, with particular reference to the challenges and priorities as they journey through their education, and the complexities of navigating multi-agency networks of support.

These insights will be vital to shaping the forthcoming intervention, to be delivered to KS3 students in North London and South Yorkshire in 2025-26 and 2026-27, in the delivery phase of the project. Participants were firmly in agreement that this group of young people are in need of interventions to support their educational journeys, but were less aligned on exactly what we should deliver and how. As we move into the intervention design phase, we face a number of choices, including:

1. Should the intervention cohorts include only children subject to a CPP or should we broaden the targeting criteria to include other students likely to benefit?

2. How can we ensure that an additional intervention will not add to the existing load of participants? How can we design sessions that strike the right balance between flexibility and structure?

3. How should we balance the academic content of the intervention with the sense of belonging/ mattering and confidence-building activities? How can we make the content accessible, including where all sessions are not attended?

4. Should all delivery be done by the same member of staff, or should the more mentoring elements be delivered separately? How should we ensure the right role models/relatable adults are available to deliver the programme? What training should we provide to ensure they can best support pupils?

5. How can we ensure that the programme is impactful for this cohort of young people and provides useful learnings for the sector?

Given the scarce existing evidence on the kinds of interventions that are impactful for this group of young people, and the lack of alignment amongst participants in this research phase on some of these questions, the next phases of this project will be exploratory and iterative. We will make the best, most informed decisions possible, evaluate the outcomes of the choices we make, and make changes as required. We look forward to sharing our learnings over the coming months.

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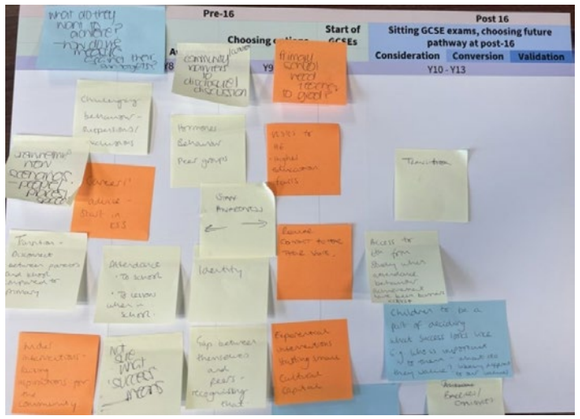
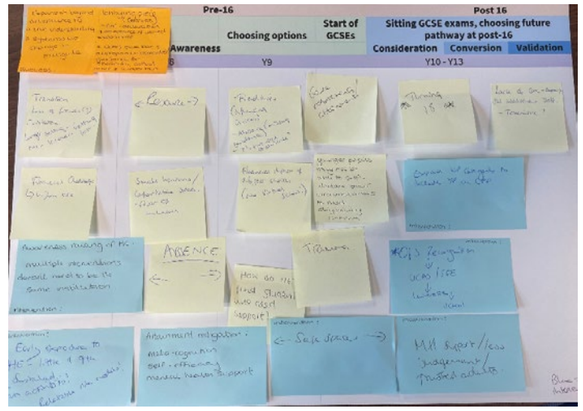
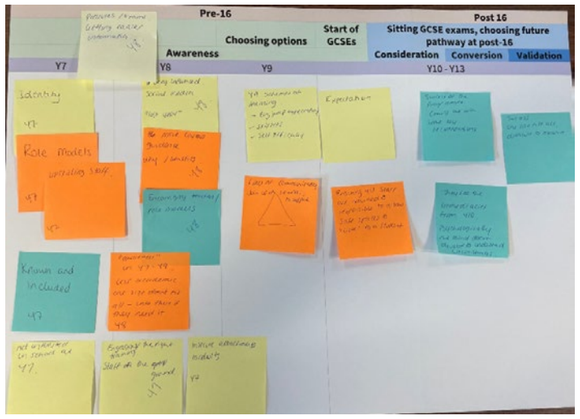
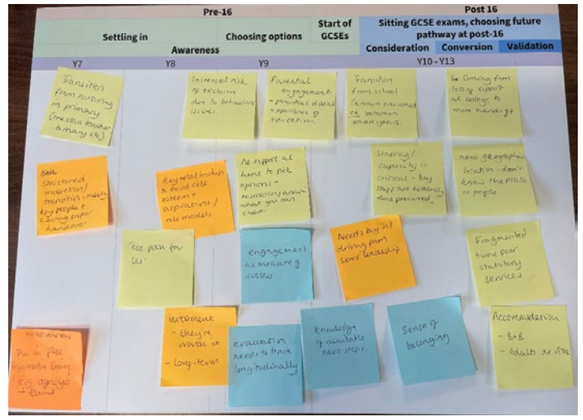
Appendix A









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