

MCR Pathways Evaluation – May 2023

Executive Summary

In total 278 young people have actively engaged with the MCR Pathways programme. As of May 2023, of those young people who are active or have previously been active with MCR Pathways, 12.23% are currently care experienced, 16.18% previously care experienced with the remaining 71.58% being identified as vulnerable. From April 2021 to May 2023 there have been 80 Group 1 pupils who are active and engaged with MCR Pathways. During those academic years, there were 217 care experienced pupils in MCR schools (100 currently care experienced and 117 previously care experienced) of which 37% were active and engaged with MCR Pathways. This balance is impacting on the extent to which the programme impacts on our aim to increase the number of care experienced young people achieving a sustained destination. However, the programme may be helping to reduce the likelihood of needs escalating. More consistent staffing (Pathways Coordinators and MCR Managers) may help shift the balance to include a higher proportion of those in Group 1. Staffing will need to be addressed should the programme continue.

The high number of volunteers (144 trained volunteer mentors and 66 progressing through training) committed to delivering one to one mentoring is exceptionally positive and helping us discharge our Corporate Parenting responsibilities. Our young people who choose to engage with the programme tell us that they value and benefit from time with their one to one mentor and qualitative evidence is strong.

Research continues to highlight the positive impact of mentoring programmes, but the pandemic and data quality issues have impacted our ability to gather strong quantitative evidence of impact against key measures. Many of the data sets shared by MCR, when matched with ACC data, have contained significant errors which has made data matching extremely challenging and labour intensive, the split of responsibilities across ACC and MCR may be contributing to this challenge. If the programme continues there is a need to address these data issues to enable more effective on-going monitoring.

The pandemic appears to have impacted on MCRs ability to deliver Talent Tasters. It is hard to quantify what the impact of these may have been if delivered. Given that the Talent Tasters are a key tenant of the programme, the lack of Talent Tasters may be contributing to the limited quantitative evidence base. This will need to be addressed should the programme continue.

The Aberdeen City contribution to the programme (£242,318) is being met from funding designed to help to address the gap in educational outcomes between those who experience care and their peers. Given the targeted and limited funding, and concerns around outcomes for those who are and have experienced care, any future MCR programme may be better funded from alternative means. Data suggests that Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding should now be utilised to address identified vulnerabilities in the provision of appropriate learning pathways and provision of Family Support.

The Scottish Government has committed to funding programme costs of £168,000 for the next two years. Given the strong research base in support of mentoring, there is a need to determine the approach to be taken to mentoring across Aberdeen City in the longer term.

Background

In June 2018, the National Operational Guidance (2018-19) on Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding was first published. The funding is distributed to local authorities as Corporate Parents, and utilised by the Community Planning Partnership to address the gap in educational outcomes between those who experience care and their peers. Plans to utilise the funding require to have a clear focus on delivering equity, improving educational outcomes and supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people who are care experienced, for those aged between 0-26. The Guidance references a range of organisations who might be considered for funding, including MCR Pathways, due to the strong research base available on the positive impact of mentoring.

MCR Pathways is a school-based mentoring programme supporting care experienced young people and other vulnerable groups who have faced additional challenges which may impact their educational experience and outcomes. MCR Pathways was highlighted in the guidance for having made a significant positive impact on the educational outcomes for care experienced young people in Glasgow.

Corporate Parenting is a key priority for Aberdeen City and, as a multi-agency partnership, we must evidence that we are fulfilling our Corporate Parent duties. The Aberdeen City Corporate Parenting Plan 2018-2021 highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for employees across the partnership to fulfil those responsibilities to our care experienced young people. One of the ways this could be done was by recruiting volunteers from across the partnership to undertake a mentoring role in schools.

Improvement Aims - What were we trying to improve?

MCR Pathways was commissioned to support Aberdeen City in meeting its Corporate Parent duties and to provide support to care experienced and other identified young people.

The commissioning intentions, in line with the guidance for the Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding, outlined that the programmes should be able to evidence improvements in the following:

- increase post-school positive destinations for care experienced young people
- increase staying on rates from S4 to S5 for care experience young people
- increase educational attainment in Literacy & Numeracy for care experienced young people
- increase the number of subject awards at National 4 and National 5 for care experienced young people

These educational outcomes also align with Stretch Outcome 6, in the Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) 2016-26:

‘By meeting the health and emotional wellbeing needs of our care experienced children and young people they will have the same levels of attainment in education and positive destinations as their peers by 2026’.

Following an early positive test of change at St Machar Academy which realised improvement in attendance, reduced exclusions and increased engagement during 2018/2019, the programme was further tested as a LOIP Improvement Project to determine if wider implementation of the programme would help increase the number of care experienced young people accessing a positive and sustained destination.

What was put in place?

Aberdeen City commissioned MCR Pathways to commence in February 2020 across six secondary schools in order to increase the number of care experienced young people accessing a positive and sustained destination:

- Dyce Academy
- Harlaw Academy
- Hazlehead Academy
- Lochside Academy
- Northfield Academy
- St Machar Academy

In 2018/19, there were 113 secondary pupils who had or continued to experience care. The 6 pilot schools supported 74% of all secondary care experienced young people in 2018/19. The proportion of care experienced young people across the 6 schools has remained fairly static (71% in 22/23).

School based MCR Pathways Co-ordinators have access to a subset of data held within the SEEMIS database to generate lists of pupils who could benefit from participating in the programme. Pathways Coordinators, alongside Guidance teaching staff in the pilot schools, identify and agree which young people will be referred to take part in the programme. Participation in the MCR Pathways programme is optional and is the choice of the young person and their parent or carer.

To be eligible for the MCR Pathways programme, the young people need to fall into the following referral group categories:

Table 1: MCR Pathways Referral Group Criteria as of May 2023

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked After At Home • Looked After Away from Home • Previously Looked After 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addiction Issues • Asylum Seeker or Refugee • At Risk of Homelessness • At Risk of Social Work Involvement • Bereavement/Family Member Serious Illness • Family member in prison • Informal Kinship Care • Lack of One Good or Consistent Adult • Prolonged Financial Hardship • Safeguarding Concern • Young Carer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exceptional Circumstances

The referral group criteria for Group 2 has expanded over the 3 years since the programme's adoption in Aberdeen City due to emerging national policy, to reflect the increase in vulnerability evident as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the cost of living crisis. As a result, a wider cohort of young people with identified vulnerabilities can now access the programme. Additional categories are marked in blue. Expanding the reach of the programme makes easy comparison of the 'added value' of the programme more challenging given that the cohort has changed considerably.

MCR Pathways outlines its service delivery in the following areas:

Group Work

Pathways co-ordinators support transitioning from P7 to S1 and deliver a 28-week groupwork programme for S1 and S2 pupils across the academic year. Groupwork sessions are delivered to groups of 10-15 pupils per year group and focus on building confidence, engagement and improving Literacy and Numeracy levels. Each session is supported by a detailed lesson plan complete with clearly identified objectives and outcomes. Health and wellbeing principles and practice, independent thinking and

positive attitudes and actions are included in the syllabus. This allows the Pathways Coordinator to build trust and an individual relationship with each young person, preparing them for mentoring. Data on Group1 and Group 2/3 participation is included later in this report.

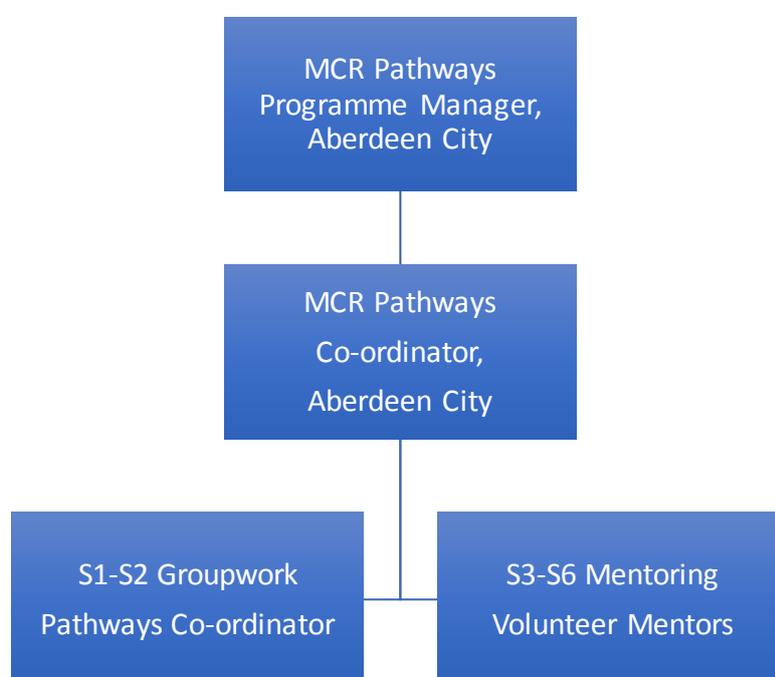
Talent Taster

Talent Tasters are a chance for young people to try out work, further and higher education and cultural experiences through manageable, bite-sized sessions. They are designed to engage and inspire S3-S6 pupils with hands-on learning opportunities. They provide more options for young people to find their talents and focus on the pathways to achieve their ambition. We have been unable to gather this data from MCR.

One to One Mentoring

Young persons are matched with their own mentor from S3 stage onwards. Pupils meet with their mentor once a week for 50 minutes and receive guidance and support. Mentors build a relationship, helping their young person to develop confidence and self-esteem. Data on Group1 and Group 2/3 participation is included later in this report.

Figure 1: MCR Pathways Structure for Aberdeen City



MCR Pathways Co-ordinators are employed by ACC. Their day-to-day line management is through MCR Pathways (Programme Manager) who support the progression of the programme in the schools. HR processes including CR&D, absence management and annual leave are supported by ACC through the Virtual School Head Teacher. 4 of the Pathways Coordinators were also provided with weekly supervision to support wellbeing for an extended period of time.

Volunteer mentors undertake a comprehensive training and careful selection process to ensure the best match with young people and mentoring relationship success. Ongoing training and support with the respective school Pathways Co-ordinator is also delivered throughout the academic year to volunteer mentors. The programme operates a planned transference model to the Local Authority to ensure sustainability of pupil support. The MCR programme aims to transfer skills, networks and knowledge to the Council in order that it becomes self-sufficient within 5 years of running the programme. Once staff and resources are transferred, MCR will be available at a National level to provide support and programme development where required. MCR provides a full documentation suite including Programme Overview, Programme Manuals, Functional Operating Manuals and impact reports.

What metrics (outputs, indicators and outcomes) were used to measure success?

Outputs

From April 2021, monthly pupil data extracts were requested from MCR Pathways to enable more regular tracking and monitoring of pupil engagement with the programme in addition to the annual report from MCR Pathways. This included school attendance, temporary exclusions, staying on rates, attainment and positive destination measures. In addition, qualitative feedback from young people, mentors and school staff was gathered from participating schools by MCR Pathways. Data is presented for both Group 1 (those who currently or have experienced care) and for Groups 2 and 3 to help determine the impact of the programme on those for whom we have Corporate Parent responsibility and those identified as vulnerable due to a range of factors. The most current information available to Aberdeen City Council has been used to support this evaluation.

*Due to staffing changes and data system changes in MCR there was not a consistent monthly sharing of raw data until November 2021. All data referencing 'over time' is clarified with a time period in the table.

Table 2: MCR Pathways Outputs

Outputs:	Position as of May 2023¹
Active engagement for care experienced young people and young people who have faced additional challenges which may impact their educational experience and outcomes	There have been 278 actively engaged S1-S6 pupils in MCR Pathways over time. Group 1 pupils make up 29% (80 pupils) of the cohort while Groups 2 and 3 pupils make up 73% (203 pupils).
Group 1 and Groups 2 & 3 who have a mentored relationship in school – using the MCR definition (young person is mentored if they have had 10+ meetings with a volunteer mentor) – over time	From November 2021-May 2023 (period of time data has been made available from MCR using the MCR pathways definition of a mentored relationship for S3-6), 36 Group 1 (27%) and 96 Group 2 (73%). A total of 132 young people have had 10+ meetings with a volunteer mentor.
Group 1 and Groups 2 & 3 who have a mentored relationship in school – using the ACC definition (young person is mentored if they have had 1+ meetings with a volunteer mentor) – over time	From the period of April 2021-May 2023 (period of time data has been made available from MCR using the ACC definition of a mentored relationship for S3-6), 66 Group 1 (28%) and 179 Group2 (75%). A total of 245 young people have had at least one meeting with a volunteer mentor.
Current mentored relationships (using MCR Pathways definition) - Group 1	26
Current mentored relationships (using MCR Pathways definition) – Group 2 and 3	76
Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3 pupils who have access to regular Talent Tasters	Currently no data provided on this and anecdotal evidence from schools suggests that the Talent Tasters have not been delivered.

Young people can be matched with a mentor from S3 and meet with their mentor on a weekly basis. MCR pathways class a young person as being mentored only when 10 mentor meetings have taken place. The following graphs show the number of pupils in Groups 1, 2 and 3 who have also completed 1-9 mentor meetings.

¹ N.B. – Five pupils are double counted in the referral group calculations where they have been re-referred to MCR Pathways in a different referral criteria group.

Figure 2: Total Mentor Meetings Completed for Active MCR Pupils, May 2023

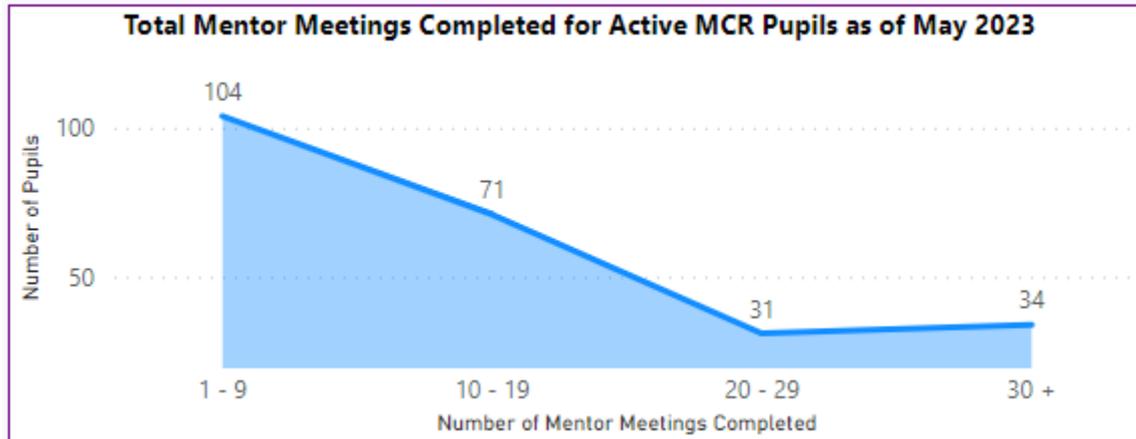
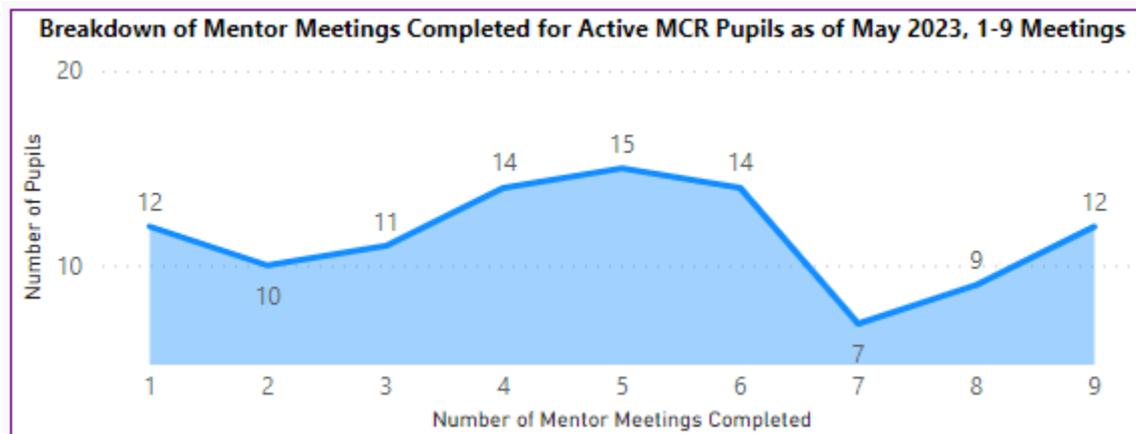


Figure 3: Breakdown of Mentor Meetings Completed for Active MCR Pupils, May 2023, 1 – 9 Meetings



It can be seen that by May 2023, 34 pupils have completed more than 30 meetings with their mentors. Of these 34, 14 pupils were in Group 1.

There has been considerable challenge in data matching the information supplied by MCR with pupil personal records held by Aberdeen City Council. This makes it hard to monitor the impact of the programme easily. As a result of this, further data collection was put in place to capture the outputs for school session 22/23.

Figure 4: MCR Pupil and Mentor Attendance, February 2023

MCR Pupil / Mentor Engagement - February 2023			
School Name	MCR Pupils - School Attendance Rate	MCR Pupils - Mentor Meeting Attendance Rate (%)	MCR Mentors - Mentor Meeting Attendance Rate (%)
Dyce Academy	88%	85	92
Harlaw Academy	87%	85	96
Hazlehead Academy	86%	83	90
Lochside Academy	74%	79	91
Northfield Academy	84%	91	93
St Machar Academy	81%	72	90
Total	83%	82	92

With consideration being given to the restrictions of the pandemic on an in-school mentoring programme, there has been a challenge in embedding the programme in the 6 schools. Over time, numbers have slowly increased. Engagement has increased of late, however, it is noted

that <30% of the young people who have had a mentored relationship over time are care experienced and 25% of those young people currently being mentored are care experienced. Currently, the Talent Taster programme has not been established and so no data is available.

There is a need to look carefully at how data is collected and shared. Currently data is extracted from a school system, amended by the Pathways Coordinator, shared with MCR Pathways and then returned to the Local Authority. Attempts to match end data back to pupil records continues to highlight a high number of data input errors. If the programme continues, there is a need to address how data is collected and shared to ensure that Aberdeen City Council can have confidence in the data and use it to maximise the impact of the programme.

Indicators

A range of educational outcome indicators were used to measure progress over time for MCR Pathways pupils. It is recognised that the small number of care experienced young people in each senior phase cohort, both in the whole city and the MCR Pathways data, results in a single young person having a significant effect on the percentages calculated. Different Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) assessment methodologies before, during and after COVID-19 measures also makes direct year on year comparison more complex.

Due to the challenges in data matching and changes in Group2 and 3 cohort, it has not been possible to provide the breadth of data from 2019 for the separate groups (Group 1 /2/3). Therefore, school performance for those defined as Looked After at the point of the census has been included along with Insight data on those in the 6 schools who are care experienced.

Table 2: Aberdeen City Secondary School Performance Indicators, 2019/2020 to 2022/2023

Indicators: *For clarity the term CEYP used here is in reference to young people who have the legal status of being Looked After at point of census	2019/2020 (baseline)	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
CEYP's post school initial positive destinations	73.33%	76.47%	70.59%	Available February 2024
CEYP's staying on rates to S5	Not available	Not available	55%	
CEYP Leavers educational attainment in Literacy and Numeracy @Level 3	73.33%	64.71%	70.59%	Available February 2024
CEYP Leavers educational attainment in Literacy and Numeracy @Level 4	46.67%	47.06%	47.06%	Available February 2024
CEYP's Leavers 1 or more subject awards at National 3	93.33%	64.71%	88.24%	Available February 2024
CEYP's Leavers 1 or more subject awards at National 4	80%	47.06%	70.59%	Available February 2024
CEYP attendance (All city secondary schools) – Validated data	84.89%	84.09%	82.85%	83.16% *live data
CEYP number of temporary exclusions (All city secondary schools) – Validated data	65	29	47	49 *live data

Initial Positive Destinations

Insight data has been gathered for those young people who were previously or currently Looked After at the point of census.

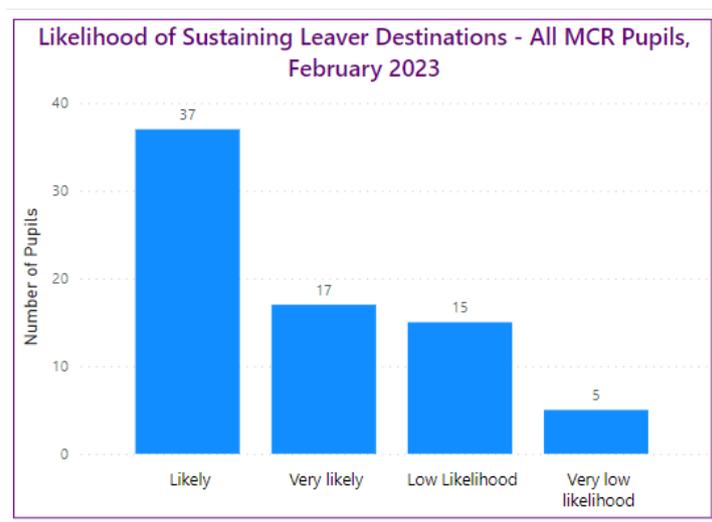
Table 4: Insight data extract for those recorded as currently or previously Looked After at the point of census

	2020/21	2021/22
Number of Leavers from MCR Schools	816	982
Number of Care Experienced Leavers, All MCR Schools	15	31
Number of Care Experienced Leavers (Group 1) referred to MCR Pathways	5	10
Number of Leavers referred to MCR Groups 2 and 3	**	22
Number of the Group 1 MCR Pathways pupils in initial positive destination	**	8
Number of the Groups 2 and 3 MCR Pathways pupils in initial positive destination	**	21

** Number less than 5 which could lead to identification of pupils

In order to consider those who will leave school in summer 2023, the 6 schools with the MCR Pathways programme were asked to complete an additional data set providing their professional judgment on the likelihood of leavers sustaining their future destination (this will include the 70% of those engaged who are not care experienced). Those young people who left during the 2022/23 academic year (winter leavers) are not included in the data set as data can no longer be accessed in SEEMIS for them.

Figure 5: Staff professional judgement around likelihood of sustaining positive leaver destinations, February 2023



Based on the professional judgement of school staff 73% of this year's cohort of young people in the MCR Pathways programme are likely to sustain a positive destination. The validated data for this cohort of leavers will not be available until June 2024.

Staying on Rates

MCR Pathways compares the staying on rates of young people engaged with the MCR programme with all young people ('Universal') in the 6 schools participating in the programme. The February snapshot also looks at Care Experienced (Looked After At Home, Looked After Away from Home and Previously Looked After) pupils. The S4 cohort is based on the Pupil Census for the previous academic year. The lack of baseline data impacts the ability to draw any firm conclusions from this data.

Figure 6: MCR Staying on Rates, February 2023

	2021/22 S4 cohort	S5 cohort at Feb 2023	% Returned
Universal (all young people, including Care Experienced)	992	749	75.5%
Care Experienced (At Home, Away from Home and Previously Looked After)	20	11	55.0%

Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy for all Looked After Leavers

*The data represented here is for those pupils who are Looked After at home and Looked After Away from Home. INSIGHT does not provide comparator data for the care experienced cohort as a whole which includes pupils who have been previously Looked After at Home or Away from Home.

Figure 7: SCQF Level 3 for all Looked After leavers

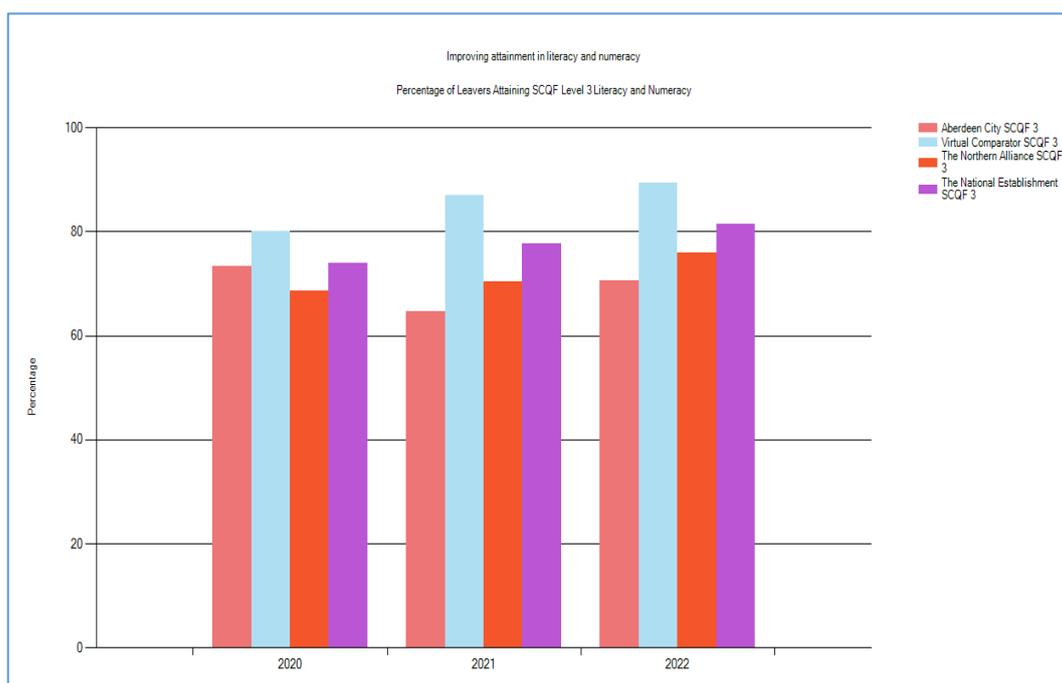


Figure 8: SCQF Level 4 for all Looked After leavers

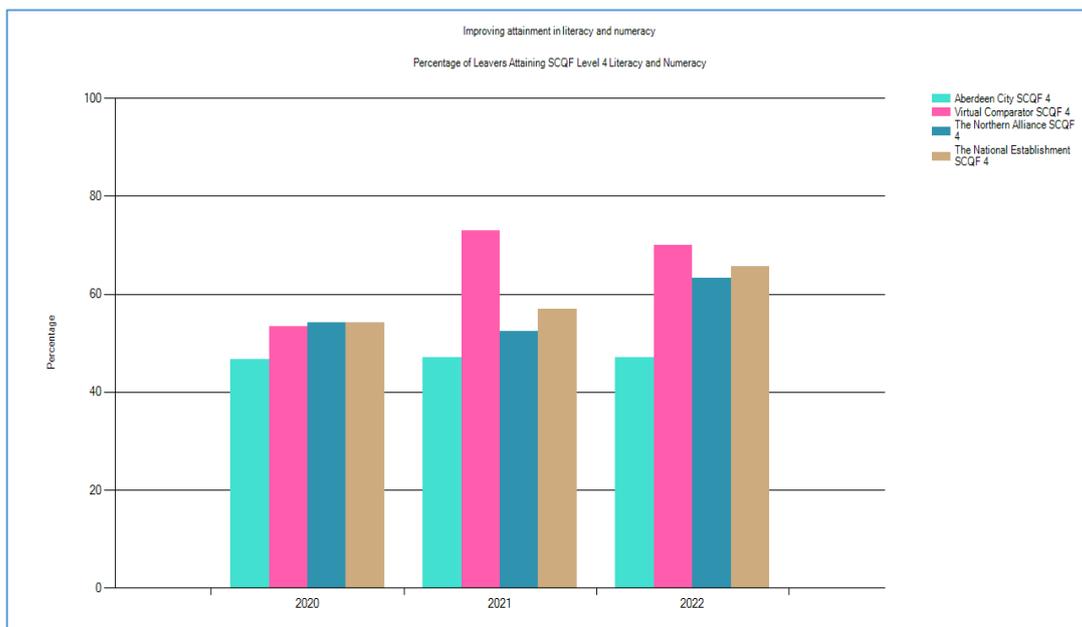
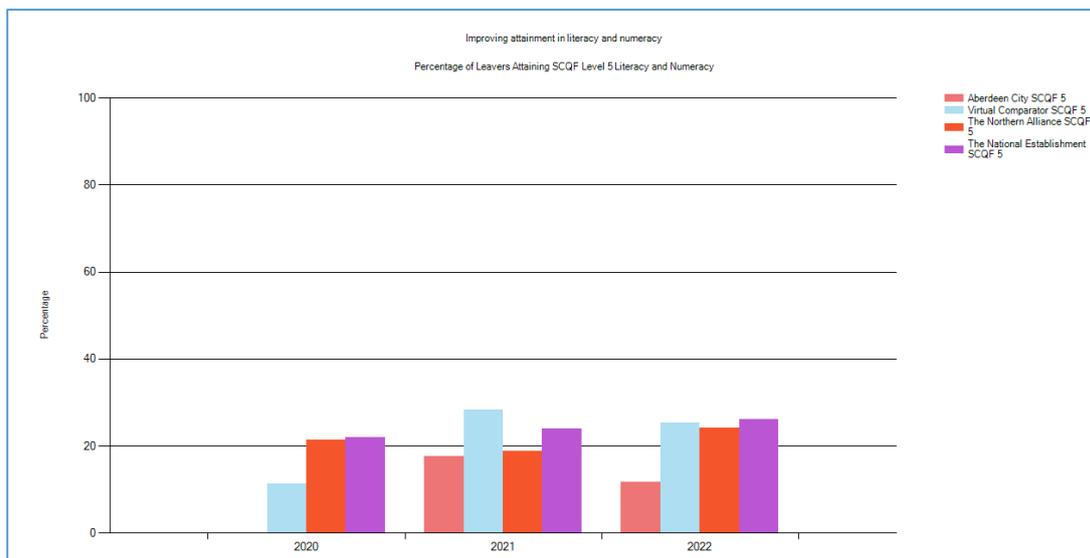


Figure 9: SCQF Level 5 for all Looked After leavers



For each level, it can be seen that the virtual comparator continues to outperform Aberdeen City for Looked After leavers for SCQF level 3, 4 and 5. At levels 3 and 4, performance has been relatively consistent each year.

In 2021 and 2022, young people have also achieved at level 5, with no Looked After leavers achieving National 5 in 2020. There is a need to broaden the range of curriculum pathways to address this.

Number of subject awards for all Looked After leavers at National 3 and National 4

*The data represented here is for those pupils who are Looked After at home and Looked After Away from Home. INSIGHT does not provide comparator data for the care experienced cohort as a whole which includes pupils who have been previously Looked After at Home or Away from Home.

Figure 10: % Looked After leavers achieving awards at SCQF Level 3

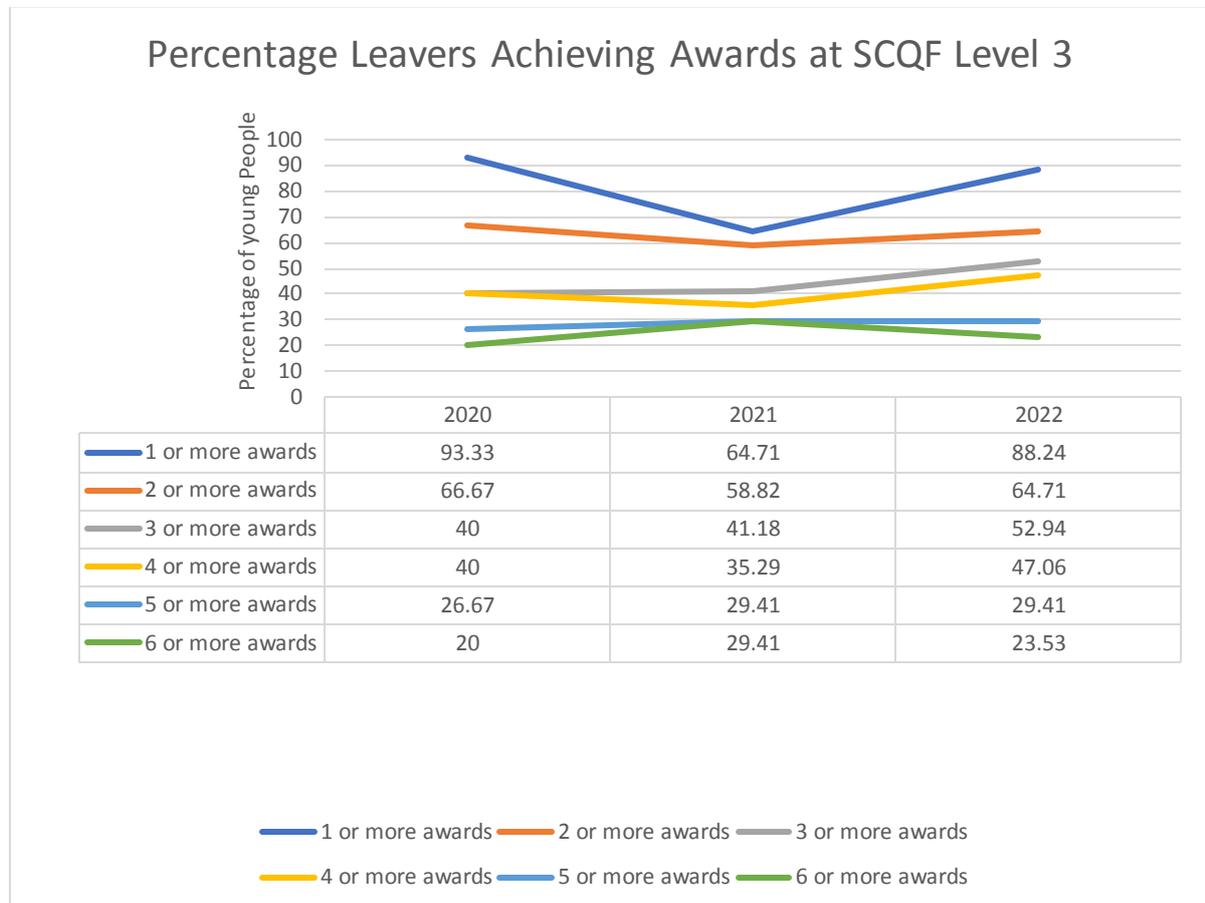
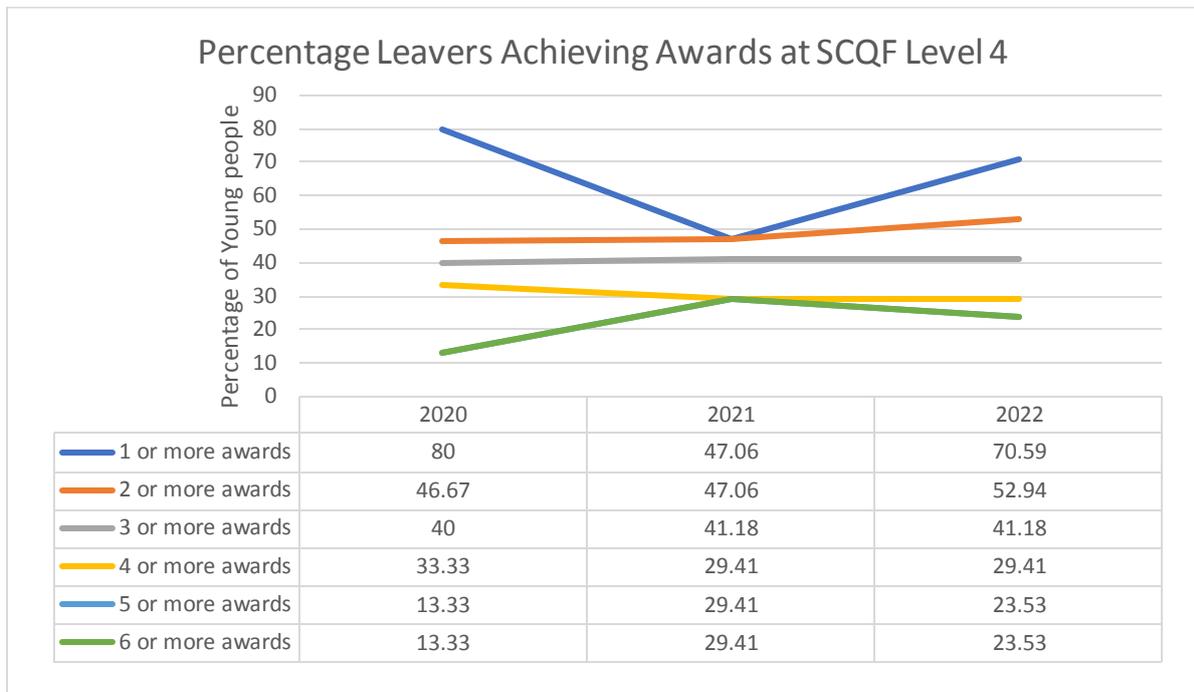


Figure 11: % Looked After leavers achieving awards at SCQF Level 5



The limited number of young people at each secondary stage impacts on the strength of evaluation evidence. There were 15 leavers in 2020 compared to 17 in both 2021 and 2022.

At SCQF level 3, the percentage of young people achieving 1-6 or more awards has risen in 2022 or remained the same as in 2021. At SCQF level 4, overall over the past 3 years, those young people achieving 2 or more awards has increased, with little fluctuation for percentage of young people achieving 3 – 6 or more awards. There is a need to think carefully about the range of courses available and how they are delivered to increase the number of awards being achieved.

Attendance

Validated attendance data for Aberdeen City secondary schools in 2021/22 shows that children and young people who are care experienced have an average attendance of 82.85%. This is 7.87% lower than the average attendance of 90.72%.

The attendance rates for both the general school population in the 6 MCR Pathways academies and those young people who are active in the MCR Pathways programme for S1-6 has been compared. It should be noted that 2018 and 2019 provide a baseline comparison of the attendance rate prior to the start of the programme in 2020.

Figure 12: Attendance rates for all pupils in the 6 schools

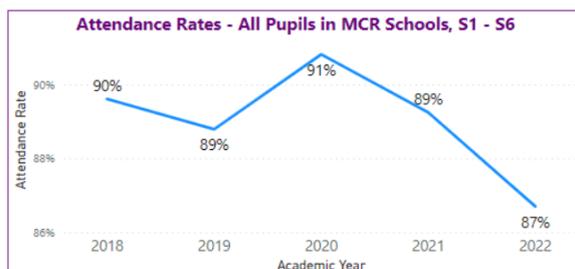
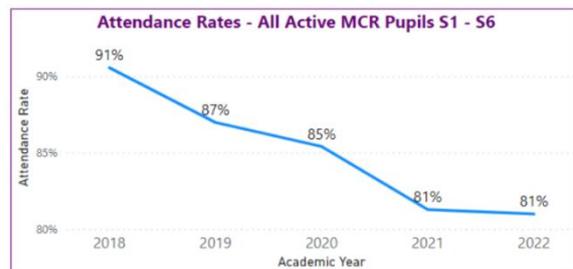


Figure 13: Attendance rates for all MCR pupils



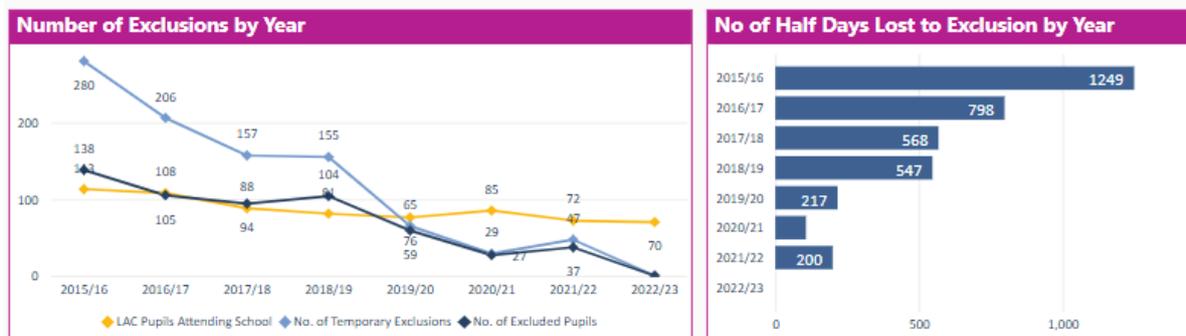
Those young people who are being supported through the MCR pathways programme and have experience of care, although they have an attendance rate of 81% compared to their peers which is 87%, the fall in overall attendance has slowed and appears to have stabilised

to date for session 2022/23. This could be partially attributed to engagement with the programme.

Temporary Exclusions

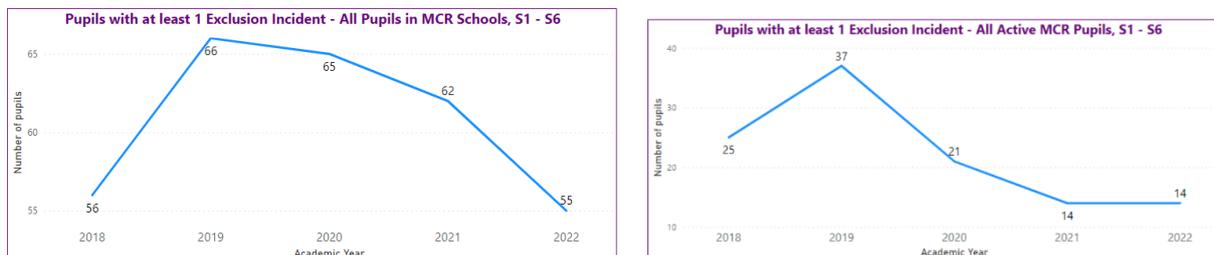
The graphs show that in 2021/22 there were 47 **exclusions** for care experienced young people across all city secondary schools which is a 70% reduction from 155 from the 2018/19 pre pandemic baseline. This trend is mirrored across the general population.

Figure 14: No of exclusions of Looked After Children



The whole school cohort across the 6 MCR Pathways Schools (S1-6) with 1 or more exclusion incident has been compared with those who engaged with the programme. It can be seen that there is a fall in the number of incidents is consistent with the city wide fall in exclusion incidents.

Figure 15: Exclusions for all young people in the 6 schools. Figure 16: Exclusions for MCR young people



The number of pupils with at least 1 exclusion incident has fallen since the introduction of the MCR Pathways Programme in 2020 and this mirrors the city trend. This may be due in part to engagement with the programme and be partially attributed to an increased focus on health and wellbeing across the city.

A number of indicators have been used to try to determine impact, however, due to difficulties matching the data shared it has been very difficult for the local authority to compare data sets. Looking at the city wide data, there has been no compelling evidence of improvements to date. This could indicate that a better way of working with the data will need to be found if we continue with the programme.

Outcomes

As noted above, Aberdeen City implemented a test of change project, governed by Community Planning Aberdeen, to measure the improvement of care experienced young people in positive and sustained destinations.

Table 3: LOIP Improvement Project 6.1, Percentage of care experienced young people accessing a positive and sustained destination

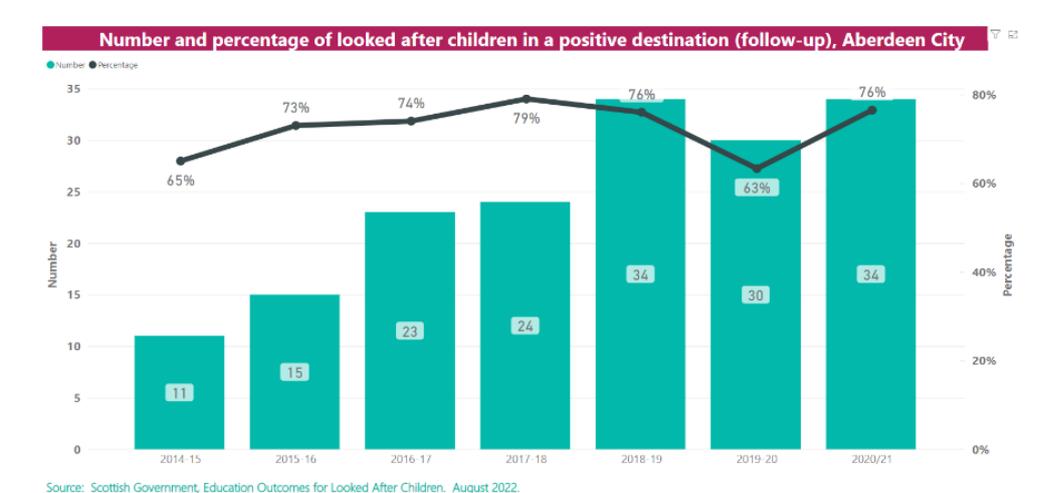
Outcomes:	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022
-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------

25% increase in the number of care experienced young people (CEYP) accessing a positive and sustained destination				
*For clarity the term CEYP used here is in reference to young people who have the legal status of being Looked After at point of census	76%	63%	76%	Available August 2023

There has been an increase in the sustained positive destination of those young people who are Looked After of 13% although the dip to 63% in the baseline year was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and potentially a misleading baseline.

Significance testing has been applied and due to the small numbers, even if the percentage had increased to 100%, the change would not be statistically significant. This is often a challenge with setting appropriate targets when working with small numbers.

Figure 17: Number and % of Looked After Children in positive and sustained destination.



Qualitative Feedback

Central to evaluating the ongoing impact of the MCR Programme is the feedback from young people and how they have benefitted from having a mentor in S3-6 to provide input and support. The following quotes are from young people who have benefitted from the programme. They have been provided by MCR pathways and so we are unable to split by group. From the quotes shared, the young people are telling us that it is impacting positively on their wellbeing most notably confidence:

"Speaking with my mentor has helped me decide to try and stay in school longer. He has also increased my confidence."

"Making a big difference and has given ideas for after school. Opened my eyes to all the options out there for me. Huge confidence boost to me and I don't feel so worried about leaving school."

Getting on well, they really help me to feel more confident and more support with subjects and making

MCR Pathways is a really helpful thing to have in schools, they can help with a whole range of things from: mental health, building confidence, meeting new people, helping with applications for college, giving advice, having someone to

Staff in school also provided feedback on the experience of having MCR pathways in place, sharing what they believe has been the impact on the young people that they support.

Since MCR came into Dyce Academy we have seen positive outcomes for all pupils that have been involved with the school PCs for 1:1 and groupwork and we are now reaping the rewards of the mentor programme. Although Dyce is not a traditional MCR school in that we have low numbers of Care Experienced pupils we have been able to make full use of the resource to support a number of pupils in both categories. This has been evident since our return to school post COVID as our PC was able to assist with mental wellbeing input and support the pupils coming back to school following home learning. Our PCs work in close partnership with PTG's, PEF PT, SfL and SLT as well as our feeder primary schools to identify pupils who would benefit from MCR input. The mentor programme has been hugely positive and has helped our young people with their confidence, resilience and with future planning. Mentors have organised trips to potential employers and beyond. For Dyce Academy, MCR is an integral part of our support packages for our young people and the PC in school is well known and trusted amongst pupils, staff and mentors. Losing MCR at Dyce Academy would leave a large gap in the support provision we are able to provide for our young people. *DHT and school link, Dyce Academy*

In my short time in this role, the MCR programme has been an essential resource for the most vulnerable children in my House group. The programme has helped to build a bridge to help pupils return to education when they have not been engaging. It has been crucial in allowing pupils with multiple aces to build a positive relationship with a trusted adult who can support them. It has allowed pupils who are struggling in school to build confidence and resilience. This has led to tangible improvements in attendance and attainment which we can evidence through our tracking and monitoring system, including helping pupils with the transition to positive destinations after school. For pupils who are struggling to access support for mental health conditions related to their ACES, it has been a comfort and support. A significant number of the pupils who have benefitted from MCR also have additional support needs, and MCR helps them to feel a positive connection to school and to begin to feel more included when they have been struggling with various challenges.

The relationship that each of these pupils have built with the PC and their mentor are central to everything – anything which unexpectedly took these relationships away from these pupils, many of whom already have attachment conditions due to important figures in their life withdrawing support or breaking their trust, would be catastrophic for their wellbeing and education. *Guidance teacher, Hazlehead Academy*

We have a number of pupils who are not engaging with school very well, yet they turn up to school on the days their mentor is due to come in and see them. Some of our mentors have created a pathway to help sow the seeds of reengagement. They have been seen as highlight to some of our young people in what could otherwise be perceived as really negative period of time in their schooling.

Our Pathways coordinator has also managed to stay connected with young people and their families when there has been a lack of engagement with a number of professionals. She has been seen as unbiased, positive support that is 100% looking towards positive outcomes for the young people she has been working with.

Our Pathways Coordinator has also assisted in pupil reengagement and at times has been the only point of contact for some of our pupils and families. Her ability to develop relationships with some of our young people have given us more insight to the challenges and barriers they are facing. She has gotten to know some pupils really well and they feel comfortable in approaching her for support and advice.

Our Pathways coordinator is seen a valued member of our Multi-Disciplinary team within school. She works with Skills Development Scotland, Home School Liaison officer, Youth Worker, Educational Social Worker as well as in school team Guidance Staff, Target Support and Family Liaison. *Family Liaison Officer, Lochside Academy*

'I feel this is an amazing programme. The offer of group work and taking a strengths-based approach is so valuable, as well as the introduction of a Mentor. This is a great example of why relationships are key - how important it is for children to feel valued, to feel as though they can relate to someone, and to have that person to have time with, without the pressure of the agenda that often comes within professional relationships. Children need a champion and I think Mentors can be this person.'

Two pupils, known to my service, have accessed MCR Pathways and their relationship with the Pathways Coordinator has been one of trust, respect and inclusion. The relationships with their mentors have offered positive role modelling, hope and connections. No matter their academic progress, success and achievement is promoted by MCR Pathways. Both children have been excited to see their Mentor, adding to their motivation and sense of inclusion. For one pupil in particular, I have observed his confidence grow as well as his ability to look forward and plan for a positive destination.'

**Caroline McEwan
Social Worker**

'I have been working with MCR on an occasional basis over the years, however, since June 2022, this working relationship has become more robust and regular. The MCR mentors and the pupil mentees are meeting in the school library; a calm and relaxed area where both can sit, relax and spend time communicating. As a school librarian I have known a high proportion of the pupils involved in the scheme for a number of years. I am able to see first-hand the positive relationships built between mentor and mentee and the improvement in the young people's positive behaviour and outlook on life.'

**Karen Shaw
Librarian**

Challenges

There have been a number of challenges that have impacted on the delivery and embedding of the MCR Pathways programme within the 6 Aberdeen City schools.

Recruitment - There were challenges in recruiting Pathways Co-ordinators initially and this remained a challenge throughout the 3 year period. Initial appointments were made between February and August 2020 and there has been considerable churn thereafter and this has impacted on the quality of relationships with young people at school level resulting in relatively low numbers of young people being supported in some schools. 7 Pathways co-ordinators have moved on within the 3 year period with exit interviews suggesting this was due to the temporary nature of the Pathways Coordinator contracts and to relationship challenges with the MCR Manager. ACC has continued to work to address the issues in recruiting Pathways Coordinators and MCR took action when issues with relationships were raised with them.

As a result of the level of vacancy, the MCR Pathways manager rightly prioritised maintaining mentoring relationships with young people from S3 resulting in the S1 and S2 groupwork reducing and no evidence of Talent Tasters evident over the lifetime of the programme. There have been 3 changes in MCR manager within the 3 year period of the contract with Aberdeen City. Again, this change is thought to have partially impacted on the progress made and added pressure on MCR Pathways.

Staffing uncertainty has also impacted on the time commitment required by the contract manager in ACC who had to provide supervision to some Pathways Coordinators for an extended period of time in order to support them to remain in role. This has therefore increased the real term cost of the programme to Aberdeen City Council

The Pandemic - During the two periods of national lockdown, MCR Pathways continued to provide mentoring (and in some schools Group Work) through virtual platforms. Pathways Coordinators followed a scheduled programme of regular contact with young people on the programme (through video call, email, text or phone call; dependent on young person choice) to check-in and provide wellbeing support where needed.

MCR Pathways provided 5 young people across Aberdeen City with Google Chromebooks, portable WiFi with unlimited data in order to help maintain connection with the Pathways Co-ordinator/ Mentors. Pathways Co-ordinators maintained over 85% cohort participation rate in interactions with young people meeting with mentors online (36 interactions over the first comparable period of national lockdown rising to 120 during the second). This supported and maintained connections and relationships for the young people which then supported the transition back into school.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on face to face delivery of the programme, particularly during periods of school closure. It should be noted however, that the number of young people engaged with increased significantly from 36 interactions from the first period of lockdown to 120 interactions in the second. It is also appreciated that establishing a new intervention amid a pandemic was exceptionally challenging for both the schools and MCR pathways. This undoubtedly impacted the smooth running of the programme.

Data quality and data matching - Considerable time had to be invested in matching data provided by MCR to central data sets to improve accuracy and confidence. This has again increased the real term costs of the programme to the Council and highlighted almost consistent data quality issues. Time has been invested in working with MCR pathways to improve data quality. Despite on-going work, the indicator and outcome data each organisation holds (MCR and ACC) is at odds. If the programme is to continue, there is a pressing need to revise the approach being used to ensure that both organisations can see accurate real time data to enable accurate on-going evaluation of impact.

Young people not being selected, or not choosing not to engage - Not all young people who were eligible were part of the MCR programme. Reasons are wide ranging and include:

- The young person being disengaged from school or having poor attendance (MCR criteria to be involved in the programme includes a need for the young person to have a current school attendance of 70% which a reduction in the last year)
- The young person moving to another local authority or school without the MCR programme
- The school not recommending the young person for mentoring. Reasons for this can include the fact that a young person already has a high number of professionals involved in their lives, they may struggle to build new relationships and so adding to existing relationships would need to be carefully considered and it may be that a young person is not in a place to engage in programme and what is involved
- The young person declining to be involved in the programme following a discussion with the pathways co-ordinator

In some schools, the school link worked alongside the PC where an eligible person may not have been referred by the PT Guidance. Those young people who did not want to engage were kept on the list and offered support at a later time. The recruitment challenges will have impacted here, inconsistent staff on temporary contracts are less likely to build relationships with young people in school and be at the heart of pupil support structures.

What was the level of investment?

The annual financial commitment is broken down as follows:

Annual Programme cost for 6 schools	£168,000 (£28,000 per school)
6 Pathways Co-ordinators recruited by Aberdeen City Council on temporary contracts	£228,312 (£38,052 per school)
Time invested in managing the MCR contract	c. £7,000 per year from existing resources
Time invested by Data and Insights for data management, data cleansing and data analysis	c. £7,000 per year from existing resources

All costs (£410,318) were met by Aberdeen City Council for the first two academic years (2020/2021 and 2021/2022) by making almost full use of the Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding.

The Scottish Government have directly funded the programme costs (£168,000) in the 2022/23 academic year, with an additional two years of Scottish Government funding for the annual programme costs agreed. As a result, the cost of the programme for session 2022/23 was £242,318.

Was the intervention cost effective?

The intervention costs in excess of £400,000 per annum. There is currently insufficient strong quantitative evidence to conclude that this intervention is improving outcomes for our care experienced young people. There is however emerging evidence that a higher number of vulnerable young people are being supported. Qualitative evidence from those who choose to participate is strong. It is hard to draw a firm conclusion on if the intervention is cost effective as the programme will be transformational for some of those who participate but it is not yet possible to triangulate evidence and draw firm conclusions.

We can however, reasonably conclude that funding the programme from the Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding may be

inappropriate as doing so restricts the resource available to invest in this most vulnerable group.

Conclusion

In total 278 young people have actively engaged with the MCR Pathways programme. As of May 2023, of those young people who are active or have previously been active with MCR Pathways, 12.23% are care experienced, 16.18% previously care experienced with the remaining 71.58% being identified as vulnerable. This balance is impacting on the extent to which the programme impacts on our aim to increase the number of care experienced young people achieving a sustained destination. However, the programme may be helping to reduce the likelihood of needs escalating. More consistent staffing (Pathways Coordinators and MCR Managers) may help shift the balance to include a higher proportion of those in Group 1. Staffing will need to be addressed should the programme continue.

The high number of volunteers (144 trained volunteer mentors and 66 progressing through training) committed to delivering one to one mentoring is exceptionally positive and helping us discharge our Corporate Parenting responsibilities. Our young people who choose to engage with the programme tell us that they value and benefit from time with their one to one mentor and qualitative evidence is strong.

Research continues to highlight the positive impact of mentoring programmes, but the pandemic and data quality issues have impacted our ability to gather strong quantitative evidence of impact against key measures. Many of the data sets shared by MCR, when matched with ACC data, have contained significant errors which has made data matching extremely challenging and labour intensive, the split of responsibilities across ACC and MCR may be contributing to this challenge. If the programme continues there is a need to address these data issues to enable more effective on-going monitoring.

The pandemic appears to have impacted on MCRs ability to deliver Talent Tasters. It is hard to quantify what the impact of these may have been if delivered. Given that the Talent Tasters are a key tenant of the programme, the lack of Talent Tasters may be contributing to the limited quantitative evidence base. This will need to be addressed should the programme continue.

The Aberdeen City contribution to the programme (£242,318) is being met from funding designed to help to address the gap in educational outcomes between those who experience care and their peers. Given the targeted and limited funding, and concerns around outcomes for those who are and have experienced care, any future MCR programme may be better funded from alternative means. Data suggests that Scottish Attainment Challenge – Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding should now be utilised to address identified vulnerabilities in the provision of appropriate learning pathways and provision of Family Support.

The Scottish Government has committed to funding programme costs of £168,000 for the next two years. Given the strong research base in support of mentoring, there is a need to determine the approach to be taken to mentoring in the longer term.

Recommendations

It is recommended that ACC engage with MCR to ascertain if the data issues can be addressed. If they can be addressed to enable more effective monitoring it is proposed that:

- Schools be asked if they are prepared to use Pupil Equity Funding to cover the cost of the Pathways Coordinator over school session 2023/24
- That Pathways Coordinators be given permanent contracts in schools who are happy to invest in the programme through Pupil Equity Funding
- That our relationship with MCR continue for those schools prepared to invest for one further year with a shared commitment to work to resolve the issues outlined in this evaluation

- To review data in March 2024 to help determine if we work to spread MCR Pathways mentoring further or design an alternative model given that Scottish Government funding will cease in 2025.