
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

2 June 2026

Cabinet (Education)

Title: Care Experienced School Leavers' Attainment and Achievement 2024-25

Purpose: To update Cabinet on the overall performance of the 2024-25 cohort of care experienced school leavers in North Ayrshire.

Recommendation: That Cabinet:

- a) Notes the content of the report, including the achievements of care experienced school leavers in qualifications in 2025; and
- b) Notes the continued focus on improving outcomes for care experienced learners in North Ayrshire.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 In literacy and numeracy at SCQF Levels 4 and 5, North Ayrshire continues to perform strongly in comparison with national figures. In 2025, attainment at Level 4 was above national performance for both literacy (74%) and numeracy (80%). At Level 5, attainment remained broadly positive.
- 1.2 The average total tariff score for care experienced school leavers rose to 508 in 2025. This is the highest figure in the 7 years of available data for this measure.
- 1.3 In 2025, 85% of care experienced school leavers achieved at least one qualification at SCQF Level 4 or better, while 65% achieved at least one Level 5 award, representing an increase on the previous year. Notably, 42% attained at least one qualification at Level 6, an increase of eight percentage points from 2024.
- 1.4 Post-school participation for care experienced leavers remains a key strength with 94% of care-experienced learners entering a positive destination, matching the highest level achieved over the past five years.
- 1.5 Alongside universal strategies to raise attainment, schools and the Service continue to provide tailored and bespoke support for care experienced learners, ensuring that targeted interventions respond effectively to individual needs and circumstances.

2. Background

- 2.1 The performance information in this paper is collated from two key sources:
 - The [Local Government Benchmarking Framework \(LGBF\)](#) which lists a range of performance indicators for all 32 local authorities across Scotland, including a few

focused on care experienced learners, allowing performance to be considered relative to others.

- The ScotXed INSIGHT Benchmarking Tool, which is produced for schools and education authorities to enable analysis and improvement planning across all key national measures of attainment, filtered by those who have experienced care.

2.2 Schools in North Ayrshire focus on the attainment for each care experienced learner by the end of the Senior Phase (exit qualifications), rather than solely on the individual year on year attainment pattern. The attainment of each learner across their Senior Phase is more important than what they achieve in a single year (except for S4 leavers).

2.3 The attainment data in this paper relates to the attainment of care experienced school leavers who left school in session 2024-25, which includes leavers up to Christmas 2025. This is the most up to date school leaver attainment and reflects what was published in February/March 2026 in the sources named above.

2.4 In session 2024-25 there were 92 care-experienced leavers. This represents 6.6% of all school leavers in session 2024-25. The average percentage of school leavers who were care-experienced in the last 5 years is 6.9%.

Care-experienced leavers by stage

Year	S4	S5	S6	Total	Percentage of all leavers
2020-21	27 (26.5%)	44 (43.1%)	31 (30.4%)	102	7.4%
2021-22	21 (22.1%)	35 (36.8%)	39 (41.1%)	95	6.3%
2022-23	35 (34.7%)	29 (28.7%)	37 (36.6%)	101	6.8%
2023-24	35 (30.7%)	45 (39.5%)	34 (29.8%)	114	7.3%
2024-25	24 (26.1%)	31 (33.7%)	37 (40.2%)	92	6.6%

2.5 In comparing the leaving patterns of care experienced learners to those of the overall cohort (see parallel Cabinet paper “School Leavers’ Attainment and Achievement 2025”, 2 June 2026 for details), around double the proportion of care experienced learners choose to leave school at the end of S4 compared to other S4 learners. A key driver of future improvement will be ensuring that the needs of the care experienced group of learners are met in terms of curriculum offer beyond S4. Getting this right should help to reduce the proportion of care experienced learners leaving at the end of S4 and enable schools to raise attainment for this key group.

2.6 This paper will consider the performance of North Ayrshire schools as a group, identifying trends and key highlights or areas for improvement in the following measures of attainment:

- Care-experienced school leaver attainment in literacy and numeracy
- The average total tariff scores of care-experienced school leavers
- The breadth and depth of qualifications attained by care-experienced school leavers
- Care-experienced school leaver initial positive destinations

2.7 Throughout this report, the attainment of North Ayrshire’s care-experienced leavers will mainly be benchmarked against previous NAC performance, as well as the performance of the virtual comparator. Where available, comparisons will be drawn with equivalent other local authority or national figures.

- 2.8 To support understanding of technical terminology, a glossary of key terms used throughout this report is included at Appendix 1.
- 2.9 It should be noted that the cohort size for care experienced school leavers varies from year to year and is generally around 90-100 young people. Therefore, care must be taken when analysing variations in performance for this group and, while there are reasons to be positive about these results, we would also urge some caution on that basis. For example, one care experienced learner attaining/not attaining a specific qualification may account for more than 1 percentage point of a difference in the overall attainment measures for care experienced learners (whereas in the general population, one pupil would make less than 0.07 percentage points of a difference in the same attainment measure).
- 2.10 Schools have a clear narrative for individual circumstances of the learners in this group, as these circumstances are bespoke to each individual learner.
- 2.11 Secondary attainment meetings provide the opportunity for the Service and senior school leaders to analyse attainment data to inform improvement priorities and individualised support and allow for quality assurance of raising attainment activities and approaches for care-experienced learners.

2.12 Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy

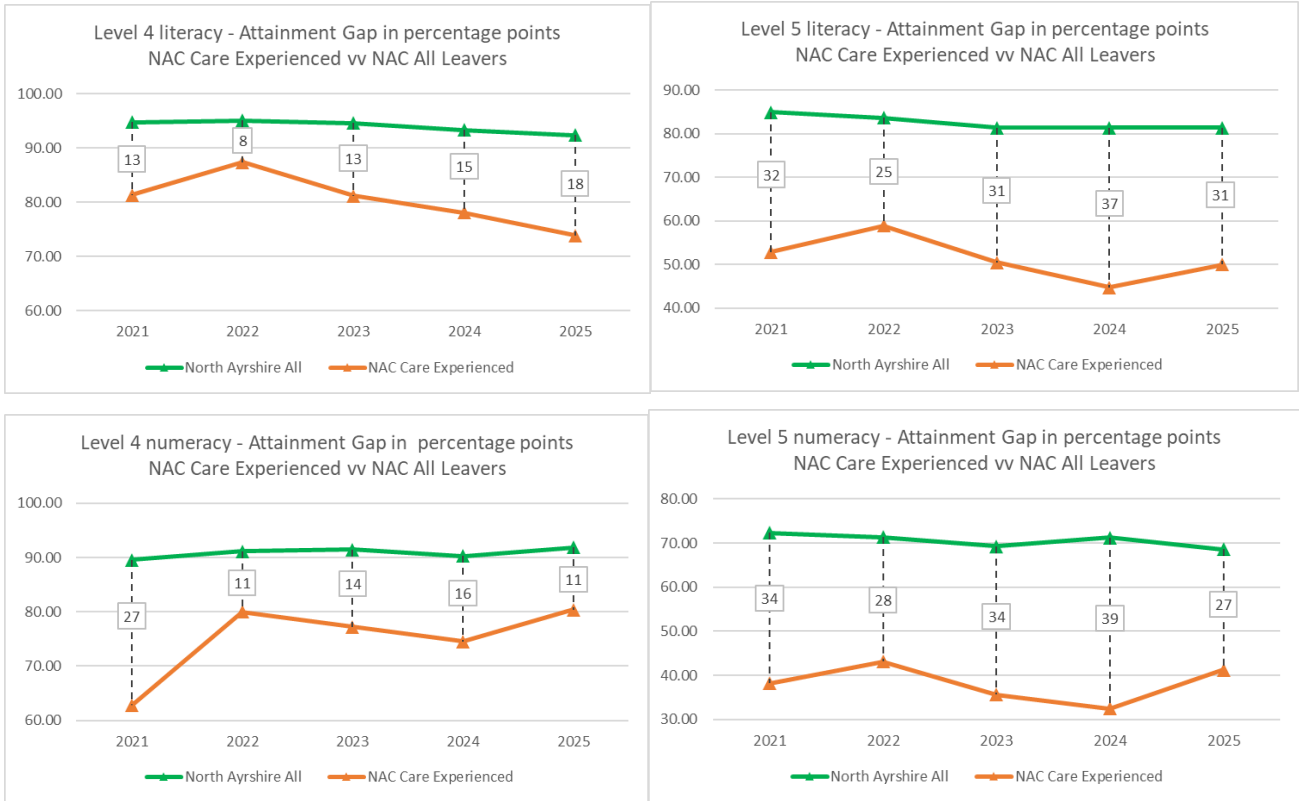
Year	Level 3 Literacy or better	Level 4 Literacy or better	Level 5 Literacy or better
2020-21	91%	81%	53%
2021-22	97%	87%	59%
2022-23	94%	81%	50%
2023-24	90%	78%	45%
2024-25	95%	74%	50%
Average 21-25	93%	80%	51%

In 2024-25, 74% of care-experienced school leavers achieved level 4 literacy or better, which is lower than the average performance of this group over the last five years. Literacy achievement at level 3 and level 5 are broadly in line with the average performance over time.

Year	Level 3 Numeracy or better	Level 4 Numeracy or better	Level 5 Numeracy or better
2020-21	89%	63%	38%
2021-22	92%	80%	43%
2022-23	95%	77%	36%
2023-24	96%	75%	32%
2024-25	97%	80%	41%
Average 21-25	94%	75%	38%

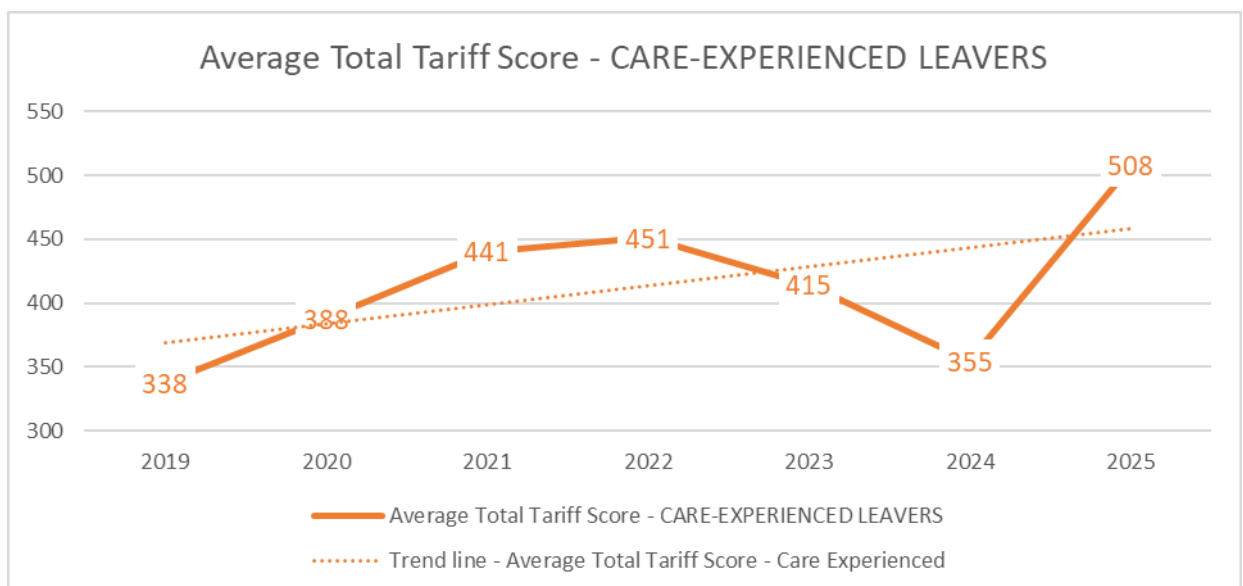
In 2024-25, numeracy achievement at levels 3 and 4 were the best performances in the last five years at those levels. Attainment in numeracy at all levels in 2024-25 exceeded the five-year average performance.

Despite some improvements in literacy and numeracy attainment for the care-experienced cohort, we recognise that there is still significant scope for improvement to reduce the gap between care-experienced and all other learners, as displayed in the charts below.



2.13 Improving attainment for all

This measure focuses on **the average total tariff score** of the care-experienced candidate's latest and best qualifications, and is one of our Council Plan Performance Indicators. Tariff points are assigned to each unit or course achieved by learners – in all SCQF-graded awards, not just those provided by SQA (now Qualifications Scotland). The data source for this measure is the ScotXed Insight benchmarking tool.



Various alternative certification models (ACMs) were in place for 2020 until 2023. The “hump” in performance was anticipated. Exam arrangements returned to “normal” for 2024, which is the first year which can be reliably compared with the pre-pandemic performance in 2019, the last time when “normal” exam arrangements were in place. In 2025, the overall average total tariff score for care-experienced leavers has begun to rise again, up to 508 (the highest level over this period).

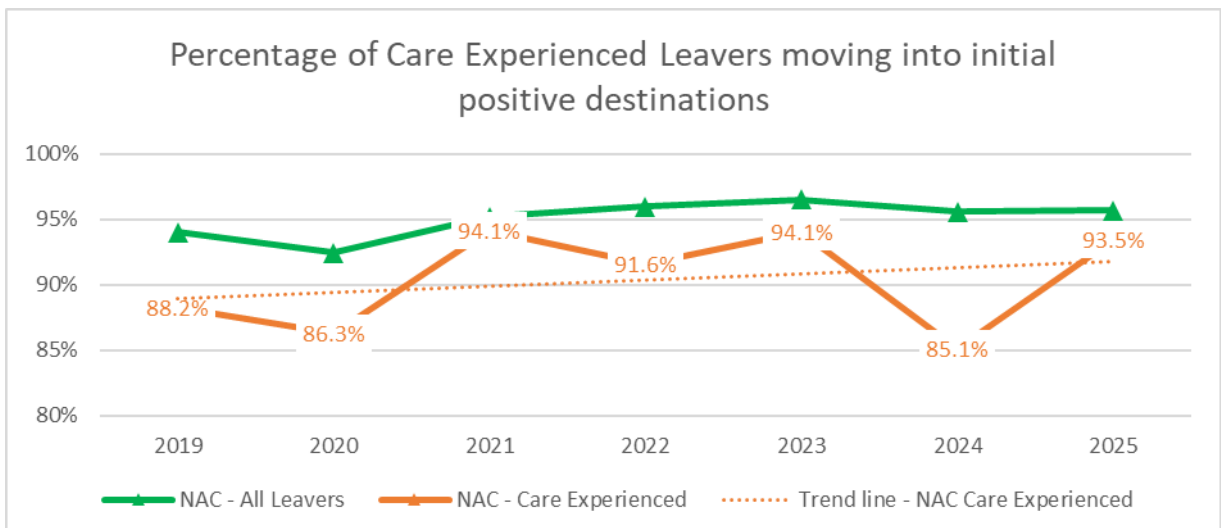
2.14 Breadth and depth of qualifications attained

Year	1 or more at Level 3	1 or more at Level 4	1 or more at Level 5	1 or more at Level 6	1 or more at Level 7
2020-21	94%	85%	62%	40%	6%
2021-22	98%	91%	67%	35%	6%
2022-23	98%	87%	61%	33%	6%
2023-24	95%	85%	63%	34%	4%
2024-25	97%	85%	65%	42%	10%

In 2025, 97% of care experienced school leavers attained at least one qualification at Level 3, representing an increase of 2 percentage points from 2024. 85% of North Ayrshire’s care experienced leavers attained at least 1 qualification at Level 4 or better, the same as the figure for 2024. For Level 5, 65% of care experienced leavers achieved at least 1 qualification at this level, which is 2 percentage points higher than the previous year. The proportion of care experienced school leavers achieving at least 1 Level 6 award was 42%, 8 % points above the 2024 figure of 34%. For Level 7, 10% of care-experienced school leavers achieved at least one award at this level which is 6 percentage points higher than 2024. Overall, there has been a strong performance in terms of the care experienced leavers cohort in 2025 achieving a breadth and depth of qualifications, comparing favourably to previous performances across a number of levels.

2.15 Post-school participation of care experienced school leavers

The overall percentage of North Ayrshire care experienced school leavers entering a positive destination has increased in 2025 to 93% which is broadly in line with the highest figures over the last 5 years.



2.16 IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS 2026-27

The Education Service 3-year Improvement Plan draft priorities have been created collaboratively with Head Teachers of all schools to ensure there is a strategic focus on improving attainment and achievement for all learners and ensuring that learners receive equitable support.

There is a specific section devoted to improving learning outcomes for specific groups, including the care-experienced. For Secondary schools, there will be an increased focus on target-setting for care-experienced learner outcomes, the creation of more collaborative and consistent approaches to tracking and monitoring, improving pedagogical approaches and strengthening learner pathways and curriculum offers.

A virtual Head Teacher will support schools across the service to ensure that attainment outcomes of care-experienced learners continue to be maximised. Stretch aims for care experienced learners will be refreshed and extended to maximise learner outcomes and build on previous successes. Improved monitoring of attainment and achievement at school and authority levels will be a key feature in evaluating improvement priorities and will help to direct targeted resource where required.

3. Proposals

3.1 It is proposed that Cabinet:

- a) Notes the content of the report, including the achievements of care experienced school leavers in qualifications in 2025; and
- b) Notes the continued focus on improving outcomes for care experienced learners in North Ayrshire.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

4.1 None.

Human Resources

4.2 None.

Legal

4.3 None.

Equality/Socio-economic

4.4 Tackling inequality is a key aspect of this report. The Council is committed to a continued focussed approach to improve outcomes for care experienced leavers.

Climate Change and Carbon

4.5 None.

Key Priorities

4.6 Council priorities:

The focus of the Education Service is to align with the Council Plan 2023-28 strategic aim to 'transition to a wellbeing economy, delivering prosperity, wellbeing and resilience for local people' and more specifically 'improving educational attainment and achievement and closing the attainment gap' activities.

Community Wealth Building

4.7 The Council will continue to consider the pillars of community wealth building in any future developments in this area.

Islands Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA)

4.8 None.

United Nations Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

4.9 The focus on improving attainment outcomes for all young people demonstrates our commitment to Children's Rights and our continued work to ensure children's rights are being met.

Consumer Duty

4.10 None.

5. Consultation

5.1 The Education Quality Improvement Team has worked closely with Head Teachers to analyse, interpret and agree next steps towards further improvements in attainment and achievement. That work has formed the basis of this paper.

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For further information please contact **Kathleen McCormick, Executive Manager (Education)**, on **01294 324418**.

Background Papers

None.

Appendix 1

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS USED IN THIS REPORT

Care Experienced:

This term is used to describe anyone who has been looked after at any point in their life, either through being subject to compulsory measures or through informal arrangements. This term can be used to describe them, even after leaving care.

Looked after:

This term is sometimes used to describe any child or young person who is currently in the care system, either through being subject to compulsory measures or through informal arrangements. Children can be “looked after at home” (by family members) or “looked after away from home” (e.g. by foster carers or in a children’s house).

Virtual Comparator:

Virtual comparator (VC) data is constructed from the performance of individual pupils with similar characteristics from schools in other local authorities. For every pupil in a North Ayrshire school, 10 similar pupils are identified from across all schools in other local authorities to be part of the virtual comparator’s data. This allows a comparison based on some key pupil characteristics (gender, deprivation (SIMD decile), additional support needs and stage of leaving) that are linked to educational outcomes.

Average Total Tariff Score:

Each qualification carries a number of tariff points, depending on the level and complexity of award. The system counts the best tariff score the candidate achieves in each qualification (the points are not counted for the same subject twice, so for example, if a candidate achieves National 5 English one year and goes on to achieve Higher English in a subsequent year, only the points for the Higher are counted). The average total tariff score is arrived at by adding the tariff scores of all school leavers and dividing by the number of leavers that year.

SCQF levels:

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is the national framework for categorising all qualifications. The SCQF ranges from Level 1 to Level 12 based on the level of difficulty and complexity of the learning. Levels 1-3 are the most basic levels. Levels 4 and 5 are the equivalent of National 4 and National 5 qualifications. Level 6 is the equivalent to Higher and Level 7 is the equivalent to Advanced Higher. The remaining levels are for further and higher education qualifications, with Level 12 being doctorate level.