

# Care Experienced Student Bursary Guidance for Colleges



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## Introduction

This guidance document is for staff working in Scotland's colleges to ensure they feel confident in the consideration and processing of the Care Experienced Student Bursary. It is intended to complement and augment the guidance the SFC provides on the administration of the bursary: [National Policy for Further Education Bursaries](#).

The findings of the Independent Care Review, [The Promise](#), outlines the negative impact poverty and financial difficulty can have on children and families and urges those surrounding Care Experienced people to consider how to alleviate financial pressures:

***“There must be significant, ongoing and persistent commitment to ending poverty and mitigating its impacts for Scotland’s children, families and communities.” (p.18)***

The Care Experienced Student Bursary can support this ambition, and the effective administration of it can make a significant difference in a Care Experienced person's learner journey. This guidance specifically addresses what we know about eligibility criteria, attendance and how Corporate Parenting, The Promise and trauma-informed practice can support colleges to effectively administer the bursary.



## Context

The bursary was introduced in response to evidence that financial problems and the accompanying stress and worry was a major barrier for Care Experienced people hoping to engage with post-16 education.

Data gathered via the [Who Cares? Scotland Helpline](#) tells us that a common ask from Care Experienced people contacting the Helpline is for support to apply for, or to appeal rejections to, the Care Experienced Student Bursary. It is clear that the bursary has been a positive support in the lives of Care Experienced learners, however there remains some challenges for those in receipt of it that we hope can be easily rectified.

## Scottish Funding Council Guidance

The Scottish Funding Council has released [robust guidance](#) for colleges that have been allocated further education bursary funds. This guidance is reviewed and updated each academic year, and there are some important developments that college staff should feel confident with:

- **Informal Care Experience:** As part of the ongoing work to align with Student Award Agency Scotland (SAAS) policies and procedures where possible, students in informal care arrangements can now access the Care Experienced bursary. To evidence their care experience, the student can utilise the evidence form, provided by the college, and approach their local authority or social work department to complete it. Students may require some support from the college during this process.
- **Longer duration:** Students should be supported for the duration of their FE studies if they are continually progressing between levels (within SCQF levels 1 to 6). Students may be supported to repeat levels if the college judges that this is the appropriate academic pathway.
- **Plus 1:** Colleges will be able to support students for one additional year at the same SCQF level, if required. In line with SAAS policy, students can use their 'plus one' year for a change of course or repeat year for academic, health or compassionate reasons.
- **Returners:** Colleges will also have the discretion to support returning students. This includes students who have previously completed study at further or higher education level and want to re-train in a different subject starting from a lower level. It also includes those who need to upskill in their existing subject.

The Hub for SUCCESS also has [useful guidance documents](#).





## Eligibility

When assessing an application for the Care Experienced Student Bursary, a useful place to start is with the 'assumption of entitlement'. Corporate Parents (which all colleges in Scotland are named as within the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#)) should assume all students who declare themselves as Care Experienced are entitled to services, support and opportunities unless it becomes evident they are not Care Experienced. If a student states that they require financial assistance, it is likely that they need it and support should continue to find the right package of support to ensure their needs are met.



## 'Residential School' - clarification of terminology

Who Cares? Scotland has also become aware through our advocacy work that the SFC guidance states that students who attend residential or boarding schools would not be eligible for the Care Experienced Student Bursary. However, there have been instances where this has been misinterpreted as meaning those living in residential care. Please note that **any student living in residential care is entitled to receive the bursary**. We are aware that, due to this misinterpretation, some students have not been successful in their applications for the bursary.

The guidance on ineligibility relating to residential and boarding schools refers to students who attend a 'private' residential school or boarding school, who were placed there voluntarily by family, rather than those placed in residential schools by a Children's Panel or local authority because of a care concern.



## Attendance

It is important to note that colleges are not expected to operate a 100% attendance requirement. Bursary awards should be made based on students 'engaging appropriately in their studies'. This is made clear in [National Policy for FE Bursaries – Fund Management and Audit Information](#). There is detailed guidance on this in sections 42-55.

Engagement is defined in the guidance as students attending classes (face to face, or online), and that attendance should be monitored. However, colleges should also accept that students may need to take leaves of absence for a range of reasons.

At Who Cares? Scotland, we often hear about the reasons Care Experienced people may have for being unable to attend college. Some examples include poor mental health, childcare responsibilities and turbulence in their lives outside of education – such as moving placement or experiencing homelessness. This could also include mandatory meetings and appointments relating to their care experience, e.g. children's hearings which are scheduled during college hours.

Colleges should be especially mindful of their [Corporate Parenting duties](#) when considering whether to withhold any bursary payment. In particular, whether the non-payment of the bursary could directly contravene the duty to 'be alert to matters which, or which might, adversely affect the wellbeing of Care Experienced people'.

We have heard from many Care Experienced learners about the ongoing challenges they can face as they progress through their studies – challenges that can be exacerbated by financial difficulty.

Guidance from SFC aligns with ambitions within The Promise – colleges should work to the principle that students who are having difficulties in meeting attendance criteria should be offered pastoral care and support **before** punitive and/or disciplinary measures (including reductions in student support) are put in place.

"Where students have unauthorised absences or have exceeded the college policy on authorised absence, colleges should also have regard to whether the student has taken reasonable steps to engage in their studies, despite their absence from class, before making deductions to the student's bursary." [National Policy for FE Bursaries – Fund Management and Audit Information, p.9](#)

The guidance makes some suggestions as to what can be considered as reasonable steps to engage in their studies and we would urge colleges to thoroughly consider this before ever withholding payment.

## Trauma-Informed Practice

We would encourage colleges to explore what [trauma-informed practice](#) can look like in the processing of bursary claims. Many Care Experienced people will have experienced complex trauma – a wide range of traumatic, abusive or neglectful events or series of events and are experienced as being emotionally or physically harmful or life threatening. In practice, this can mean that Care Experienced people can find engaging with those they haven't yet built a relationship with triggering which can invoke a stress response. Trauma can often mean that a Care Experienced person feels of a loss of power and autonomy – and this can especially be the case when declaring their care experience to be in receipt of financial support. Following trauma-informed principles when assessing and processing the bursary can be a useful tool as a Corporate Parent:





## Next Steps

Who Cares? Scotland has heard, first hand, the positive impact the bursary has had on many student lives. However, we have also heard of the detrimental effect it can have when the process of applying and receiving the bursary does not go smoothly. The key takeaways from this are:

1. It is imperative to carefully consider the impact of evidencing care experience on a Care Experienced person. Providing evidence to receive the bursary should always be simple, trauma-informed and start with a presumption of entitlement.
2. Attendance and the bursary **should not be inextricably linked**. Withholding payment of the bursary can have a severe, detrimental effect on a Care Experienced student and should always be a last resort – if a resort at all.

All colleges in Scotland are entitled to receive fully-funded support from the Education and Engagement team at Who Cares? Scotland. To read more about the support on offer please see our [Education and Engagement Offer Pack 2023-24](#).

If you have any queries about the contents of this guidance document or would like to discuss it further, please contact [corporateparenting@whocaresScotland.org](mailto:corporateparenting@whocaresScotland.org)

