Supporting care-experienced children in GCSE English

Case studies:

These anonymised case studies exemplify a range of care-experienced children dealing with the challenges that often occur in relation to progress towards GCSE in English. They include a range of questions that might be asked and potential strategies to support each student.

The aim of these case studies is to give ideas about how to personalise support for care-experienced children and to provide discussion points for Foster Carers, Social Workers, Designated Teachers and English teachers in order to encourage collaborative working.

- Sienna – target grade 4 – struggling with executive functioning
- Jessica – target grade 2 – struggling reader
- Dylan – target grade 6 – struggling with anxiety
- Amira – target grade 8 – struggling to express her ideas in writing
- Ahmed – target grade 5 – struggling to make progress

Case Study: Sienna

Sienna is keen to learn and engage in discussions in her English class. She is usually the first to contribute to debates and discussions and can articulate her ideas well verbally. Her class teacher feels that she is making good progress towards her English Language GCSE. Her KS2 teacher assessment has her as working at age appropriate levels, if at the lower end of the expected standard. Her target grade for English Language GCSE is 4.

During some recent marking of class books, it became clear that Sienna is struggling to record her ideas on paper. Sienna's written work is not coherent, and she is struggling to organise her thoughts. Her writing appears to jump from one topic to another and she has repeated herself multiple times. Her class teacher wonders about her executive functioning skills.

Sienna is struggling with some aspects of executive functioning

Executive functions are the skills that underpin learning and form the basis for the problem-solving skills of everyday life. Children who have experienced developmental trauma show delays in their executive functioning, which can have significant consequences for their ability learn and manage in the everyday classroom.

The elements of executive functioning are:

- flexible thinking
- working memory
- self-monitoring
- planning and prioritising
- task initiation
- organisation
- impulse control
- emotional control.

Sienna is actually doing really well in some areas of executive functioning – she is managing her emotions, monitoring and regulating her own behaviour and thinking through questions and ideas flexibly in order to contribute well in lessons. The elements of executive functioning where she finds things more difficult are planning, organisation and self-monitoring. It may be that she also has some issues around working memory and task initiation.

While Sienna's executive functioning may be delayed, this does not mean that she cannot learn the strategies that will help her overcome this; it just means that she needs additional help up-front with her organisation and planning so that she can develop her independence later.

Questions to ask	What this might look like
What strategies are being used to help Sienna capture and remember her ideas?	If Sienna is struggling to record her ideas on paper, it might be because she finds it hard to remember them for long enough. Difficulties with working memory are very common among care-experienced children, meaning that they can struggle to hold in mind multiple pieces of information or ideas. Sienna might benefit from a recordable device that could capture a conversation or ideas as she talks them through, so that she can write them down afterwards. Her teacher might include structured talk opportunities such as *think-pair-share* as a regular ingredient of lessons, so that students have the opportunity to work with a partner who can help capture the ideas that come from a conversation.
What strategies are being used to help Sienna organise her thoughts?	Sienna might benefit from being taught strategies such as Mind-Mapping or from working with straightforward graphic organisers such as tables. If Sienna does not know how to use these approaches (and while the majority of Year 10 students would be comfortable using them, a student who has experienced disruption to their education at an earlier stage and who is struggling with executive functioning might never have mastered how to use them), it would really help her to have an explicit lesson in how to use these strategies where an adult breaks down the process step-by-step and helps her to rehearse what she needs to do. Partially completed examples can be a useful stepping stone. As time goes on and Sienna becomes more familiar with these approaches to capturing and organising her ideas, her English teacher will need to help her to recognise which approaches work best for each question or task in the exam.
What strategies are being used to help Sienna plan her writing?	English Language GCSE tasks are always the same: the questions barely alter; it is the stimulus text that is different each time. This means that Sienna could learn straightforward plans for the response to each task and could revise these so that they eventually become automatic. Her English teacher could provide or help Sienna to devise plans or frameworks that she will use every time until she becomes so confident that she no longer needs them.

Sienna struggles with paragraphing and cohesion in her writing

Organising ideas into paragraphs that focus on a single theme rather than writing as a stream-of-consciousness is a very specific skill that takes the majority of children around four-five years to master, and the main teaching of this skill takes place between Year 3 and Year 6. If Sienna was experiencing significant disruption in her life during this time period, it is very possible that she did not have the mental bandwidth to cope with one of the challenging threshold concepts (a concept that, once understood, changes the way you work) of the KS2 writing curriculum.

It would be a good idea to unpick this aspect of Sienna's writing to see whether she understands the core concepts of what paragraphs are and how they are used. Tracking back through the KS3 and KS2 curriculum to assess where Sienna is working in terms of this one specific element of knowledge and to plan for her next steps could support Sienna to make rapid progress in this aspect of her writing.

Questions to ask	**What this might look like**
What is Sienna's next step in structuring her writing? What scaffolds are being used to help her?	The scaffolds that would be useful depend on what Sienna's next step is. If she is at an early stage of understanding the concept of paragraph organisation, she might benefit from exploring examples of texts that have been cut into sentences and organising the information into groups by theme, perhaps in answer to questions (eg a cut-up text about polar bears could be organised into paragraphs about 'What do polar bears eat?', 'How do polar bears hunt their prey?' and 'What do polar bears do in winter?'). It might be that Sienna has mastered organising paragraphs by theme but struggles with organising narrative writing into paragraphs that are organised by time, place or person, in which case, learning to recognise the phrases that signal a shift (known as discourse markers) and to identify where the paragraphs should be in a block of unparagraphed text might be useful. Developing her understanding of how to link sentences together within a paragraph might be the next step, so explicitly teaching her this skill and providing opportunities to practise with partially completed examples and then increasing independence would be useful. These elements of the KS2 curriculum can be taught explicitly in the context of preparation for GCSE using age-appropriate vocabulary, topics and writing structures, either in normal lessons or through a booster group or 1:1 support. Typically, at GCSE, many students would benefit from practising with both single-paragraph outlines that scaffold the writing of coherent paragraphs and whole-text structures that support students to organise their ideas into a logical sequence, so this is often covered in class. Sienna might need the teacher to make a point of checking in with her when this type of task is part of the lesson.

Sienna struggles to self-monitor

A further aspect of executive functioning that has a particular relevance to writing in English is self-monitoring. Sienna loses her focus during writing tasks and strays from her point,

repeating herself and losing the line of argument or story. Improved planning and awareness of written structure will help with this, but she also needs to develop the habit of checking her work at regular intervals and making sure that she is still on track.

Questions to ask	**What this might look like**
How is Sienna being helped to develop the habit of self-monitoring her writing?	Some light-touch coaching by her teacher or a more structured approach to developing self-monitoring would be useful, depending on how much help Sienna needs to develop these habits. Pausing at the end of each paragraph to re-read what she has written and check that it a) makes sense and b) links well to the task is a helpful strategy. Sienna might need help to keep track of time when she is writing. A timer or small clock or watch on her desk could help her to know how much time she has used and how long she has left. The teacher could remind Sienna to leave herself long enough at the end of a task to read it through and check for sense, moving towards gradual release of responsibility for this time-keeping and self-monitoring to her. In GCSE English Language exams, time is pressured so knowing how long she has for each task and building small amounts of time for checking and self-correction into her mental model of the approach to the exams will be important.
Has Sienna been assessed for access arrangements in exams?	Struggling to organise ideas does not automatically mean that Sienna would qualify for extra time, but if she struggles with processing, she might benefit from additional time. It might be worth following up on assessment for this. If Sienna qualifies for extra time in exams, she might need help to work out the different amounts of time she needs to use for each task and to make a plan for how to plan, monitor and check her work during the exam to make the most of the extension time. These timings would be different from the timings regularly practised in lessons by the majority of students, so this would need explicit attention.

Case Study: Jessica

Jessica struggles to engage in her English lessons. She does not enjoy the subject and finds the work hard. She is on the SEN register at school for SEN Support and finds reading and writing a challenge. Although Jessica did not sit the SATs in Year 6 due to the changes during Covid-19, her Year 6 teacher assessment noted that she was working below the expected standard in both reading and writing.

Jessica can write a simple sentence, but often forgets to include punctuation in her writing. Her spelling is inconsistent, and a dyslexia screening test identified that she is at a high risk of dyslexia. She needs support in class to decode simple text and therefore often struggles to understand what she has read. Her target grade for English Language is 2, but she is currently achieving a grade 1.

Jessica is struggling to read

Because Jessica is struggling to decode simple text, there are a number of steps that the school needs to take to support her. Helping her learn to read will make a huge difference to her progress in every subject, not just English.

It is likely that the school already knows about Jessica's reading struggles because she is on the SEN register for SEN Support. However, it is worth investigating further and ensuring that Jessica is getting the precise intervention that she needs.

As Jessica is struggling to decode texts and is at high risk of dyslexia, it is likely that she is struggling with some aspects of phonics, meaning that there are some sound-spellings (called GPCs, or grapheme-phoneme correspondences) that she does not recognise and that she finds it difficult to build and retain this knowledge.

It might well be that one of the reasons that she struggles with phonics is that she has an underlying difficulty with phonological awareness. Phonological awareness is the ability to tune into distinct sounds and separate them out from one another. This develops in early childhood and continues to develop until children are about 8 or 9 years old. Phonological difficulties are strongly associated with dyslexia.

The development of phonological awareness can be disrupted when early childhood experiences of language are not rich and purposeful. For example, joining in with nursery rhymes and songs, or being read rhythmic, rhyming books such as The Gruffalo when very little can help a child to build their phonological awareness before they ever even try to learn to read. Another reason that phonological awareness development might be disrupted could be to do with hearing: a child who has glue ear or lots of ear infections might struggle to hear the difference between sounds.

If Jessica has experienced neglect at a young age, it may be that her speech and language development has been affected, and that her phonological awareness has never really caught up. If this is the case, it is likely that this has had knock-on effects for all aspects of her reading and writing from early years onwards.

Questions to ask	What might this be like?
Has the school carried out a thorough reading assessment for Jessica this year?	This would be a reading assessment carried out 1:1 with a trained adult, not just an online test. The aim of this assessment would be to find out exactly what Jessica is struggling with. Ideally, the assessment will include listening to Jessica read both words and passages of text, and comprehension questions about passages that Jessica can both listen to and read herself, so that the person carrying out the assessment can work out what she is finding difficult.
If it is clear that Jessica struggles with some aspects of phonics, has this triggered the school to check her phonological awareness?	A phonological awareness assessment would focus on whether Jessica can distinguish between sounds within words that are read to her, rather than Jessica reading the words. There are resources available that can be used to support Jessica to develop her phonological awareness, if this is what she needs, and these can be combined with a phonics intervention package as a warm-up activity.
What interventions are in place for Jessica?	If Jessica needs a phonics intervention to support her to learn to read, this is crucial and should be given a high priority in school. Ideally, this should be 1:1 with an adult and delivered regularly – 3 times per week is ideal. It might be that Jessica has to be withdrawn from lessons for this intervention, but it would be ideal if this could be during tutor time so that Jessica does not have to miss learning time.
How is the school handling the organisation of Jessica's intervention and the communication about this with staff?	All of Jessica's teachers need to know and support the need for her to have reading intervention, making sure that no one expresses frustration if she has to be withdrawn from their lessons and that all teachers are helpful in catching up any learning she misses. Jessica is much more likely to be successful if all adults that she works with are positive and hopeful about the intervention. Literacy difficulties can be a great source of shame and low self-esteem so messages from adults have to be highly positive and focused on the benefits of doing this work.
How is the impact of this intervention being tracked?	Jessica needs to know that she is being successful and that the intervention is making a difference in order to keep up her motivation and build her confidence. Her progress needs to be checked regularly to make sure that the intervention is right for her. Jessica's teachers need to be kept informed at regular intervals about how her reading is coming along, so that they can update their expectations of what she is able to read in class and the help she needs in lessons.

Jessica needs to access texts in English lessons

While Jessica is having reading intervention to help her learn to decode with confidence and become a fully independent reader, GCSE English lessons do not stop to wait for this. In almost every English lesson, Jessica will be expected to access complex texts.

Struggling as she does, it is unlikely that Jessica enjoys reading much and she probably does not read for pleasure outside school very often. This might mean that she has quite a restricted vocabulary.

However, Jessica has years of experience of getting by in lessons despite her literacy difficulties and may well be very good at masking her lack of understanding in class. Her English teachers need to be aware that she is likely to struggle to understand what she has read in order to support her in lessons.

One of the main things that will be happening in English lessons throughout the GCSE course is the study of the texts for English Literature GCSE. Teachers tend to read these texts aloud to the class, although there is an expectation that students re-read them independently to know them well in preparation for the exam. If Jessica needs to listen to the text being read aloud in order to take in the story, she may find it difficult to read along at the same speed as the teacher's reading. If the teacher asks students to take on part of the reading, Jessica might find that her understanding is not as strong if the students' reading is not as skilled or as loud as the teacher's.

Questions to ask	**What might this be like?**
How do teachers make sure that Jessica can access the GCSE Literature texts in lessons?	Teachers could consider the seating plan in class carefully to ensure that Jessica can always hear them properly when they are reading aloud, and could make sure that if students are reading aloud, they are speaking loudly and clearly. Regular recaps of the section of the text just read are helpful, and summary notes in exercise books or booklets are also useful. Regular retrieval practice quizzes can help to build stronger memory of elements of the plot and characters.
What additional support could Jessica have to help her get to grips with the GCSE Literature texts?	Some texts have accessible versions: it is possible to buy adapted versions of classic texts that might be more manageable for Jessica to read herself. Visuals can be helpful – graphic novel versions of key texts can make them more memorable and easier to grasp. Jessica could also 're-read' the texts at home by listening to them via audiobook versions. An audiobook version can be played at different speeds to link to Jessica's own reading speed if she is reading along. It is likely that students will be shown film versions of key texts in lessons (particularly the Shakespeare text) and it is useful to re-watch either the same version or a different adaptation of the same text at home.

Jessica needs to access complex texts in the exam

The English Language GCSE exams are based on understanding of extracts from previously unseen texts. Even if Jessica's reading intervention is very successful, there is quite a significant difference between being able to decode and being able to read and understand long texts aimed at adult readers, with confidence, under exam conditions. It will be important, therefore, that Jessica has all the access arrangements in place that will help her to be successful and that she has become confident in using these in time for the exams.

It is quite likely that Jessica will qualify for a reader and scribe for exams because of her literacy difficulties. Because the focus of half of each of the English Language papers is on reading with understanding, she will not be able to have a human reader for the passages on the papers. A reader would only be able to read the instructions aloud, not the passages themselves or the questions linked to the passage. This is because a human reader puts expression and phrasing into their reading and this helps with comprehension – not allowed when comprehension is what is being tested.

However, if Jessica does qualify for a reader for other subjects, she could potentially qualify for a computer reader for English. A computer reader or reading pen can be used in some cases to read the text passages aloud to the student. This is allowed because a computer does not put expression into the text and only helps with decoding the words themselves, rather than conveying the full meaning of the text.

If Jessica qualifies for this form of access arrangements, it is crucial that she practises using the computer reader. Learning to use the software or reading pen takes a little time and finding out how to use it best to make sure that she understands the text will take practice. Adult support and coaching to help her get used to the equipment can be useful here.

For English Literature, a human reader is allowed in exams for those students who qualify. This is because the exam tests students' ability to respond to texts they have already studied, which means that they are already familiar with the meaning of the texts.

Questions to ask	**What might this be like?**
Has Jessica been assessed for access arrangements? What access arrangements is she entitled to?	The school needs to make the case for a student to have access arrangements, and some require an external assessment. Access arrangements can include extra time in the exam, a reader, a scribe, access to a computer reader, different coloured paper or larger print on the exam paper, being allowed to read aloud, the use of a computer to type, a prompter or rest breaks.
How is Jessica being supported to practise with her access arrangements in English?	Access arrangements for English can be different from those used for other subjects (eg using a computer reader) so Jessica will need the opportunity to practise specifically for English and make it more comfortable for her to work in this way. It is also important for Jessica to practise using any extra time she is entitled to, which can be difficult during lessons because they are always the same length. When the

	teacher sets timed tasks, they could consider arranging for Jessica to complete the task in a different location so that she can have extra time without being interrupted by the end of the task for the rest of the class.
If Jessica has a computer reader, has she been trained how to use it?	Specific coaching in how to use a computer reader for English over and above practice in lesson time can be useful. For example, if Jessica is also allowed to read aloud, it can be helpful to listen to the computer reader read part of the text aloud, then to re-read it herself with more expression in order to help make sense of the meaning.

Jessica is struggling to write

It is possible that Jessica may also qualify for a scribe or a word processor in exams. In English Language GCSE, writing is assessed in the second half of each paper. Twenty percent of the marks for the GCSE are for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

If Jessica has a scribe for exams, she will not be able to access the marks for spelling and punctuation unless she dictates the punctuation (she will always be deducted the marks for spelling). Learning to dictate the punctuation (eg *"new line, indent, capital letter The man dashed through the market comma looking this way and that comma crashing into stalls and knocking fruit onto the floor comma stumbling and finally falling to the ground in a heap full stop"*) takes real practice over time. As Jessica often forgets punctuation anyway, it may be that this will be too much of a load on her working memory as she is trying to compose her writing during the exam. Either way, if Jessica qualifies for a scribe, she will need to practise dictating her answers and requesting the scribe to read back what she has written.

If Jessica uses a word processor to type her responses in the exam, she can access the full range of marks because the word processor will have the spelling and grammar checker turned off. This is quite different from how a computer normally works and if Jessica is used to relying on the spelling and grammar check, she may find it difficult to get used to. It is often harder to see your own mistakes on screen so practising re-reading what she has typed will be important. If Jessica knows what her most common mistakes are, she will be more likely to spot them and be able to correct them.

In order to be successful using a computer, Jessica would need to be able to type quite quickly. If the only computer she is used to using is a phone, she may find typing quite slow and laborious, so she will need to get used to the layout of a QWERTY keyboard. Ideally, she would have the chance to practice with an exam laptop so she can also get used to the size of the keyboard under her fingers. Getting used to using the access arrangements she is entitled to is almost as important as being assessed for the access arrangements in the first place.

Questions to ask	**What might this be like?**
How is Jessica being supported to practise writing using her	If Jessica is eligible for a scribe for exams, the school will need to consider how to get her to practise working with a scribe. It will not necessarily always be the same person who scribes for her and Jessica needs to be comfortable dictating to more than one person – if

access arrangements?	a change of scribe knocks her confidence on the day of the exam, this could be worse than having no scribe. If Jessica is going to be using a computer in exams, having the chance to practise typing on the type of computer she is likely to use can be helpful, even more so if she gets to use a similar computer in lessons regularly.

Jessica might be overwhelmed

The additional effort that Jessica has to make every day to compensate for her literacy difficulties, coupled with the struggles with processing and understanding spoken language that often (although not always) characterise dyslexia, might mean that Jessica is simply exhausted. It is worth considering how to make the cognitive load of school manageable for her.

Questions to ask	**What might this be like?**
Is studying for the full range of GCSEs in Jessica's best interest?	The school might consider whether Jessica would be more likely to be successful in a smaller number of GCSEs, using the additional time in her timetable for learning support and reading intervention. The temptation would be to withdraw Jessica from English Literature GCSE as this is one that she struggles with and makes significant demands on her reading and writing. However, this would be likely to have an impact on her motivation and attention in English lessons, where a significant proportion of the time is given to the study of the texts and where the skills for English Language GCSE are interwoven with the teaching of the literary texts. Students often find it difficult to understand how English language and literature skills and knowledge can be separated and therefore any withdrawal of attention during lessons that are ostensibly focused on literature has the potential to limit progress towards English Language GCSE. The capacity within the school to provide the amount of additional support indicated needs to be taken into account: if Jessica is withdrawn from one or more subjects, how would this be managed?

Case Study: Dylan

Dylan really enjoys his English lessons and has a natural flair for writing. He is an avid reader and helps in the Library as a School Librarian. His KS2 prior attainment suggests that he should be achieving a grade 6 in English Language. His written work in class is strong and he is able to articulate his thoughts well in a clear and coherent way, writing for purpose and audience. His spelling, punctuation and grammar is a strength, and his target is to extend his range of vocabulary in written answers, which he is working well towards.

Dylan, however, struggles significantly in exams and this has affected his overall outcomes in the recent mock exams, where he achieved a grade 3. Despite English being a strength Dylan panicked and did not complete the exam paper.

Dylan's anxieties around exams are holding him back

Dylan's situation is a difficult one because it is not yet clear what the precise issue is and, although there are plenty of steps that the school can take to support him, it will not be possible to know whether these have been entirely successful until the exams are underway. It may be that because Dylan has never sat formal exams before, having missed his SATs in Year 6 due to lockdown, this issue has not come up before and that this is the first time the school has recognised the impact of exam-stress on Dylan's performance.

Children who have experienced developmental trauma often show delays and difficulties with executive functioning, the skills that underpin learning and problem-solving.

The elements of executive functioning are:

- flexible thinking
- working memory
- self-monitoring
- planning and prioritising
- task initiation
- organisation
- impulse control
- emotional control.

As Dylan is coping very well in lessons and is clearly able to plan and self-monitor when he is writing in class, it is possible that he is struggling with some of the other aspects of executive functioning. It will be important to try to find out what the issues actually are so that the school can support Dylan to develop strategies to overcome them.

Exams are very different experiences from lessons or from working in the library and Dylan may struggle with the flexibility needed to move from one type of environment to another in order to accommodate the exams. The stress of the combination of the change of routine and the importance of the exams may be enough to cause him to lose some of his other strategies, particularly task initiation and planning.

It is possible that there may be reasonable adjustments that the school can make to the arrangements for Dylan to sit his exams. At this point in Year 10, it is likely that Dylan will have at least one more set of mock exams, probably two, before the real thing, and the school will be able to allow Dylan to sit a set of mock exams with adjustments in order to assess the difference in his performance with this level of support.

Questions to ask	**What might this be like?**
Has whether Dylan needs access arrangements for exams been considered?	As a capable student with relatively high prior attainment who is making good progress in lessons, access arrangements may not yet have been considered for Dylan. The need for access arrangements has to be assessed by the school and, in some cases, by an external assessor. General anxiety about exams does not automatically mean that Dylan would qualify for access arrangements, but it is certainly worth asking the school whether this has been considered, and what kind of adjustments could be made. For example, it might be possible for Dylan to sit his exams in a smaller room rather than the exam hall, or it might be possible for him to have supervised rest breaks, or if the noise of other candidates rustling papers distracts him, he might be allowed to wear foam ear plugs during exams to block out noise. As Dylan struggled to engage with the papers and did not complete them, it might be that he spent time drifting. He might benefit from a prompter (an invigilator who, noticing that Dylan is doing nothing, would prompt him by saying something like *"Dylan, focus on the question, you have fifteen minutes left."*). The SENCo would need to consider Dylan's needs and any adjustments that are agreed would need to reflect Dylan's normal way of working, so his English teacher would also need to ensure that he has these adjustments for any in-class assessments. Communication between the Designated Teacher, the SENCo and Dylan's teachers is crucial to make sure that he has any support that he is entitled to.
Has Dylan been taught any calming strategies to help him cope in exams?	Generic calming strategies could include controlling his breathing or rehearsing laying out a planned array of pens and highlighters on the exam desk to get ready for the exam. Becoming very familiar with the look and layout of the real English exam papers is also important, particularly for English Literature GCSE. Most schools do not photocopy the whole of the Literature papers for mock exams because they include so many texts that the candidates have not studied – it would be a huge wasted printing cost. However, a student like Dylan, who could be thrown off track by encountering something unexpected in the exam, really needs to get to know what he will find on his desk. Practice with real past papers in using the contents page and finding the right pages of the exam paper for the texts he has studied will help him to be calm in the exam hall.

Can Dylan keep track of time in the exam?	In his Year 10 mock, Dylan did not complete the paper. It might be that Dylan struggles with his awareness of time (an aspect of executive functioning) when he is under stress. On a practical level, the first thing to consider is whether he knows how to read the clock in the exam room: not all teenagers are confident in telling the time on an analogue clock if they are used to a digital display on their phones. It is possible that he might never have learned to tell the time using an analogue clock due to disruption to his home life or his primary education. If Dylan has a watch that he could take off and place on the table next to his paper, he could use the more familiar timepiece to help him keep track of where he has got to. English exams are long and require real stamina from students. The majority of the tasks are extended writing tasks, but different tasks are worth different amounts of marks and Dylan needs to know how long he should be spending on each part of the exam. One strategy that could help him calm himself at the very beginning of the exam would be to write down a list of the question numbers and the time he should give these. He could learn this before the exam and then jot it down at the very beginning when he is allowed to begin. At this point in the exam, Dylan could work out precise times to move on based on the start time of the exam. For example, he should spend the first ten-twelve minutes or so reading and re-reading the text extracts. If the exam starts at 9:02, then he should be ready to move on to the first written task by 9:14. Jotting down a list of times-to-move-on prompts could help him stay on track and avoid getting bogged down in long answers to a lower mark question. He could potentially help himself further by using different colours of highlighter to put boxes around the questions and link these to boxes of the same colour around the part of the text extract that the question links to (eg orange highlighter for question 4 and an orange box around the part of the text he needs to refer to for this question), then highlighting his list of questions and timings in the relevant colours.
Has Dylan been taught a routine for managing himself through his English exams?	Dylan could benefit from support in breaking down the enormous, daunting task of sitting an English exam and rehearsing what he has to do, step-by-step. Dylan's teacher can help with this in lessons as this is likely to benefit all students. However, Dylan would probably benefit from extra rehearsal and a bit of one-to-one support on this too. He does not just need to be told what to do, but to internalise the plan, articulate it himself and physically practise the routines.
Has Dylan's English teacher suggested working on the writing tasks first?	In his Year 10 mocks, Dylan did not complete the paper. This may have been because he became overwhelmed and was unable to cope with the demands of the situation, but it could have been because he struggled to get started and then ran out of time. If time is a factor, it could be worth tackling the writing tasks first.

	In English Language GCSE, 50% of the available marks are for writing and the writing tasks are always in the second half of the paper. Papers are designed this way because the exams are organised with a vague connection of theme between the reading and the writing sections, and the intention is that the reading section will prompt ideas that will help in the writing. Exam boards therefore advise students to tackle the questions in the order they appear. However, as Dylan has a flair for writing and a track record of not completing the paper, it would be a shame for him to miss out on the largest proportion of marks available for a single task. Dylan should discuss this option with his teacher and take advice. It would be worth considering using one of the remaining set of mock exams to experiment with this approach and see whether this helps him to gain higher marks. Discussing and agreeing a sequence of tasks designed to help him settle into the exam and get the maximum number of marks is a straightforward and sensible approach to preparing for the papers.
Does Dylan really know what he needs to do for each task in each paper?	Task plans for each question type could help Dylan because he could memorise these and quiz himself on them. This is a conscious approach to preparation for exams and should help him to be more confident that he can succeed in the papers. Getting pen to paper quickly is important in feeling confident and getting to grips with the paper; having prepared sentence frames can be useful for this. Andy Atherton, the author of *Experiencing English Literature* and the *Codexterous* blog, advocates writing 'When one considers X, one naturally thinks of Y…' as a starting statement for tasks in the reading section – Dylan's English teacher is likely to teach the class different sentence models to use in exams, and these are easy to revise and practise ahead of time. For the writing tasks, learning and rehearsing a structure that can be adapted to fit the task is one of the regular ways that English teachers support students to prepare. It is even possible to prepare more thoroughly for the writing tasks. For example, Dylan could create a character he knows would be interesting to write about and imagine them in detail – what they look like, what their life experiences are, interesting facts about them, their personality and so on. He could prepare phrases that he would use when writing about them such as details of physical description. Then when he practises exam-style writing tasks, he could plan how he could drop this character into the situation set up by the task. Knowing this character so well, he would know how they would behave in whatever situation the task or picture prompt gives him in the exam.

What if we've missed something?

While the suggestions above are relatively likely to get close to helping Dylan overcome anxieties around English exams, there is always the possibility that the issue was

something else. It would be worth someone who knows Dylan and his circumstances well looking over the paper that caused him problems. English, by its very nature, is a subject that focuses on human experiences and emotions, and it is possible that some of the content of the texts or tasks in both English Language and English Literature exams could be potentially triggering for a child who has had traumatic experiences, or not shared in what might be considered almost universal experiences.

For example, over the past few years, English Language exam papers have included texts that focus on parents playing with their young children and describing their love for them, texts that describe near-drowning experiences, texts that describe experiences of poverty, a story that describes a father treating his daughter cruelly and a writing task to write a story with the title ‘Abandoned’.

Almost all the texts widely studied for English Literature contain potentially upsetting themes such as poverty, family conflict and violence within the family, suicide, murder, experiences of trauma and grief.

Perhaps an ELSA could work on helping Dylan to prepare to open the exam paper and strategies to manage his emotions if the content is potentially upsetting. Dylan’s English teacher could be sensitive to this, too, and provide his ELSA with the information needed to support Dylan in his preparation.

Case Study: Amira

Amira enjoys her English lessons and is keen to contribute to class discussions. She is a strong reader, is always engaged with tasks in the lesson and her classwork is detailed. Although Amira did not sit the SATs in Year 6 due to the changes during Covid-19, her Year 6 teacher assessment noted that before lockdown she was on track to achieve or exceed the expected standard, particularly in reading, where she was likely to achieve the higher standard. Her target grade for English Language is 8.

Her class teacher is pleased with her performance. However, during moderation of some mock exam papers, the Head of English identifies that Amira is only achieving grade 5. When looking at her exam script, there are some aspects of her writing that need to be further developed. Although she is a competent writer on the surface, she is not using a range of vocabulary and sentence structures in her written answers. Her class teacher also notices that she is struggling to organise some of her thoughts in a coherent way.

Amira needs support to achieve her very best

Because Amira is already on track to achieve a strong pass, coupled with her positive behaviour and work ethic in English lessons, it would be easy to assume that Amira is doing her best and therefore is not a cause for concern in English. However, the gap between her current level and her target grade is quite significant and it is important to maintain high expectations for Amira.

When a student can be perceived as vulnerable, it can be tempting to recognise and praise small achievements with the aim of meeting social and emotional needs and building self-esteem. However, this can have the paradoxical effect of communicating and reinforcing lower expectations.

A sudden shift in the way that Amira's teacher talks to her or the messages that she is given about her work in English could cause confusion or even shame for Amira, so it will be important to consider carefully how to communicate high expectations positively and plan for her possible responses. Anticipating that Amira may have low or fragile self-esteem, which is very common among care-experienced children, her teachers need to be aware that she may perceive a change of expectations with an implied message that her work – and therefore she herself – is not good enough. She could potentially root her self-image in her academic success and think that if this is not the best it can be, then she is nothing.

Teachers who know Amira well and have a strong relationship with her can talk her through what she needs to do in order to aim even higher. Helping her to regulate her emotions around feeling the that the goalposts keep moving and nothing is ever good enough – very common among all teenagers, not just care-experienced children – while creating the conditions for her to be successful at the next level of academic work will help her to build her resilience and self-belief. Communication between the adults who work with Amira could make all the difference.

Questions to ask	What might this be like?
How does the school plan to support Amira's self-esteem while raising expectations?	Amira might benefit from some specific support around self-esteem from an ELSA as well as sensitive handling of feedback from her English teacher. Thoughtful use of feedback that specifically focuses on ensuring that Amira sees the connection between her effort and application of strategies she has been taught and her increasing success (as opposed to her ability or something external over which she has no control, such a luck or a teacher favouring her) could be useful in building and maintaining purposeful motivation. Holding back grades and numerical scores in favour of comments and next steps on her work could be useful in helping Amira to think about the precise feedback her teacher is giving her and how to act upon it, rather than rushing to see the grade.

Amira's writing needs development to achieve the highest grades

As Amira is already a competent writer, she is ready for some precise work to develop her writing skills in preparation for exams. The key issues that her teacher has identified are:

- range of vocabulary
- variety of sentence structures
- organising her thoughts coherently.

The approaches that would benefit Amira in improving her writing are likely to benefit others in her class, too; her English teacher might decide to shape a sequence of lessons or elements of lessons around what Amira needs to work on, knowing that it will be generally useful. Alternatively, it might be helpful for Amira to work in a small group of students aiming for top grades on the more sophisticated elements of critical and creative writing. Another strategy might be to try writing conferencing, which is an approach in which the teacher and student agree that they will spend a certain amount of time discussing the student's writing together and the student will act on the advice the teacher gives; the student brings the writing to the teacher and identifies precisely what they want to discuss, rather than the teacher giving feedback on every aspect of the writing.

Amira's teachers will know best which of these approaches is most likely to motivate and support her.

Questions to ask	What might this be like?
How will the school help to develop Amira's vocabulary?	One of the most efficient ways to develop students' vocabulary is to focus on root words and affixes (prefixes and suffixes), looking at the ways that affixes change the meanings of words and making connections between different words with the same root meaning. Some intervention packages focus on developing this aspect of language, but this would also be useful knowledge for others in the

	class and therefore might be a beneficial element of lessons, perhaps as a *Do Now* starter task. Key vocabulary that links to the themes and ideas within the texts that the class is studying for literature is a helpful place to start. Being able to write with confidence about aspects of the writer's craft and about aspects of character (particularly about emotion, personality traits and motivation) using precise vocabulary is particularly useful. Higher level responses in transactional writing tasks for English Language Paper 2 tend to include a section where the student writes about the more general application of an idea at a social level and going beyond what is personally applied to them, so the vocabulary linked to the social messages of the literary texts can often be very useful here. It can also be helpful to build vocabulary knowledge around alternatives to commonplace words such as *good, bad, important, a lot,* etc, that can help Amira write more precisely. For English Language Paper 1, where narrative and descriptive writing is assessed, Amira could work with her teacher to develop vocabulary banks around particular areas of sensory description, such as around *colour, texture, shape, smells, sounds, physical sensations*, and around particular images that could be used in metaphors, such as fire, *water, flight, battle, stones and rocks, jewels, wild animals, disease, climbing mountains*, and so on. Learning to use patterns of vocabulary in extended metaphor to connect and develop ideas in her writing for both papers could help Amira to access the top grades. Amira could be encouraged to keep a vocabulary book or journal where she includes lists of linked words using her growing knowledge of roots and affixes, and also the words that she likes and 'magpies' from each text she reads, aiming to build a bigger hoard of words.
How will the school help to develop Amira's sentence structure?	Some explicit instruction in a range of useful sentence structures would be helpful here (probably for the majority of students, so not necessarily just for Amira). Some of the most useful sentence structures to master and practise are: • sentences using fronted adverbials or prepositional phrases, eg *In the far distance, he heard the men's faint, crunching footsteps coming gradually closer.* • sentences using participle clauses that describe the subject of the main clause, eg *Struggling desperately to breathe, she bobbed to the surface again and again, gulping air and water together.* • sentences using relative clauses that give more information about a person (who), thing (which), place (where) or time (when), eg *We must all strive to achieve our common goal,*

	which is nothing more and nothing less than survival in the face of the climate change emergency. • sentences giving a statement followed by a colon and three examples or descriptions, eg *Lady Macbeth is initially presented as a darkly powerful woman: stronger and more ruthless than her husband, openly ambitious for royal power and willing to embrace her own potential for evil* or *There were only three things that I could see in the half-light:* the rocky roof of the cave above me, the rocky floor of the cave under my feet, and the tiny glimmer that could possibly be daylight, a very long way off. Building familiarity with these sentence structures through sequences of teaching where students practise with partially completed examples and then with independence across a range of different texts and topics will help Amira to build her confidence and remember to write in a more varied way.
How will the school support Amira to organise her ideas?	Amira needs some help in getting to grips with planning her writing. In order to achieve grade 8, Amira will need to work on really thinking through what the most important and fruitful points she wants to make in her answer are – it is unlikely that she will be able to cover everything that she could say in the time available and therefore she has to be quite strategic about choosing the points about which she can say the most. Beginning answers to questions with a thesis statement that sets out the overall answer to the question in one or two sentences is often helpful to shape an answer. If Amira uses a statement with a colon + three comments (as above) as a thesis statement, this provides three focuses for the rest of the answer as she can write a section of the response about each of the three areas she has set out in her introduction. Some explicit coaching around this and learning mantras such as 'say three things and link' to guide her to expand in enough detail (eg *The hyena in the extract is described as being 'ugly beyond redemption', suggesting that it has no good or attractive features the phrase 'beyond redemption' suggests that it is almost unholy or demonic in its ugliness, as if its appearance reflects its bad character, which links to the description of it as being like 'no dog anybody would want as a pet', adding to the idea that it is likely to be rejected by everyone and is beyond saving.*) Amira's teacher could help her to explore examples of high-scoring responses to each question and understand how the points within each are linked together to form a coherent argument.

Overall, the most helpful thing Amira can do for herself is to read as much as she can, including both fiction and non-fiction.

The school can help by recommending books, articles and by lending her interesting reading materials, making sure that she has books of her own in her foster placement and a bag or shelf in which to keep them.

Amira needs to revise thoroughly and may need help to organise her revision

Amira's teacher should talk to her about the practicalities of revision, both at school and at home. If Amira lives with a busy family or shares a room, she may not have much quiet space in which to revise; she might not have a desk or the resources at home to help with her revision. It could be useful to have someone who takes responsibility for helping Amira to find practical solutions to any barriers to revision and coaching her to form good revision habits.

Many students believe that *"you can't revise for English Language",* which is not true; revision for English Literature is arguably more purposeful, particularly for someone like Amira, aiming for higher grades, but it is perfectly possible to revise effectively for English Language. Revision of vocabulary, sentence structures and structural plans for different tasks are all useful, as is the revision of the subject-specific language that is likely to be useful in responses. Practising exam questions using past papers and studying successful answers to questions shared by the exam board in order to get a strong sense of what quality looks like in responses are also good approaches to revision for Language GCSE.

Amira can also prepare for the writing sections of the two papers by developing her own prepared ideas that can be adapted to meet the demands of the tasks, such as preparing a character with an interesting back story who could be dropped into the situation as hinted at in the exam task, or researching common areas that are often linked, broadly, to the types of task in the non-fiction writing questions, such as travel and journeys; wildlife and the environment; social media, fame and celebrity culture; identity and mental health; sports, physical health and competition; unusual forms of transport; celebrations, rites of passage and growing up; role models and figures of respect. Wide reading to build her general knowledge would be useful (particularly reading the sort of magazine that has this sort of material, such as the Saturday and Sunday supplements of newspapers such as The Guardian and The Times, National Geographic, travel magazines, health magazines and so on). Reading examples of essays/editorial articles by writers who make arguments in their columns (again, Saturday and Sunday supplements are ideal for this) is also helpful – if Amira can unpick the thread of argument through these articles and see how the main point is developed with description and examples, this can help her with her own planning. Most of these reading materials can be accessed for free using a library card through the Hampshire Library Service, and are available online through the e-press archive so help to create a library account would be helpful, as would online access at school if Amira does not have a computer or tablet access at home.

Amira would benefit from some one-to-one coaching on specific aspects of her work from her own teacher as well as planning out her revision with someone who will help her to break down her revision into manageable chunks and make a plan.

Case Study: Ahmed

Ahmed's English teacher reports that he is well behaved in class and does engage in some learning tasks. His teacher doesn't have any significant concerns; however, he is reluctant to participate in class discussions or read aloud. His written answers lack depth and despite teacher feedback and support, he is not making much progress with these aspects.

Ahmed's KS2 teacher assessments place him towards the lower end of age-related expectations. He is targeted a grade 5 for English Language.

Ahmed's progress is slowing

Ahmed is something of a mystery: while his behaviour and engagement are not causing concern, he is not making the progress that he should and is slipping further away from his target. His teacher has already provided feedback and support with his written work but this has not made the difference needed.

Ahmed's reluctance to participate in discussion or read in class may stem from a lack of self-confidence rooted in greater difficulties with reading comprehension than previously identified by his teachers. With a teacher assessment at the lower end of the expected standard at KS2, Ahmed may have been making reasonable progress in Year 6 but may not have developed the fluency in reading or the confidence in making inferences that would have helped him to achieve the expected standard in the SATs papers at KS2. Of course, as Ahmed was in Year 6 in 2020, he did not experience the SATs due to lockdown, and therefore his reading comprehension could potentially have been overestimated due to his responses to questions in class, as opposed to having to commit his ideas to writing with complete independence.

Care-experienced children are disproportionately vulnerable to progress struggles at points of transition, and the transition from primary to secondary school for the Covid cohort was particularly disrupted, making the step change to secondary particularly challenging. With the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on both pupil and teacher attendance and the interruptions of further periods of lockdown, Ahmed may have experienced more than usual disruption during Years 7 and 8, and therefore not made the gains that might have been expected at KS3.

Questions to ask	What this might look like
How fluent is Ahmed's reading? Has this been assessed?	The school could assess Ahmed's reading fluency to see whether his reading is as accurate, smooth, expressive and well-paced as it needs to be. When reading texts at the level required for GCSE, such as extracts from the English Language papers, or from the texts studied for English Literature, Ahmed should be able to read at a pace of 150 words per minute or more (roughly the pace at which audiobooks are read) with a good level of accuracy – no more than 1-2 stumbles per

	hundred words. He should be able to read in a way that sounds quite like natural speech so that the way he reads phrases helps to bring out the meaning of the text. If Ahmed's reading is not fully fluent, this may be a barrier to understanding the text and a focused fluency intervention may help to build up his confidence and comprehension.
How well can Ahmed comprehend the text? Has this been assessed?	English Language and English Literature GCSE both assume that the student has understood the text and is able to use their understanding to answer more complex questions. However, if Ahmed does not fully comprehend the text, he may not feel confident to answer questions or join in discussions. His English teacher could assess his reading comprehension by asking questions that require him to find information in the text, summarise parts of the text and connect information from different parts of the text. If Ahmed's comprehension is not where it needs to be, reading fluency support may well make the difference, but the school should also look at building up his vocabulary knowledge and helping him to develop strategies to get to grips with unfamiliar texts in preparation for exams.

Building Ahmed's reading fluency and comprehension

Reading fluency-focused small group or one-to-one coaching, depending on which works best for Ahmed, could be a game-changer here. Unlike other reading interventions, which usually take the student back to easier texts, the point of reading fluency support is to build confidence in reading texts at the level of challenge of the GCSEs.

Although in the GCSE exams (and in most lessons) the expectation is that Ahmed will read silently, reading fluency support focuses on reading aloud. The reason for this is that research shows that oral reading fluency helps students to develop silent reading fluency rather than the other way around, and it is unlikely that Ahmed gets enough practice in reading aloud across the curriculum in Year 10, particularly if he is reluctant to read in front of others.

Over a series of sessions, an adult working with Ahmed could introduce him to a range of challenging texts and help him to get used to fluency strategies. In these sessions, the adult could read through the text aloud and encourage Ahmed to read along, getting the general gist of the text. They could then encourage him to find and underline unfamiliar words, which they then practise reading aloud so that pronunciation of these words is not an issue.

Once the vocabulary in a text has been explored, other fluency strategies such as echo reading (where the adult models reading fluently and the student echoes the reading, aiming to imitate phrasing, tone, emphasis, volume and pace) and repeated reading (where the student reads the piece repeatedly until confident that it flows well and is expressive) can be practised.

Once the piece of text has been read fluently, comprehension questions or other tasks such as summary or retelling can be used to check understanding. The beauty of fluency practice is that Ahmed could make a really significant improvement in his reading and understanding of a piece of text within a half hour session of focused practice, but also that these gains are transferrable – by improving the fluency of reading one piece of text, the understanding Ahmed will have gained of how to read more fluently and expressively can be used to improve the reading of a different piece of text, meaning that he can make rapid progress in reading over a short period of time.

Questions to ask	**What this might look like**
What support does the school provide for Ahmed's reading fluency?	If reading fluency is a key area for Ahmed to develop, this might be developed in a small group intervention or 1:1 with an adult. Some computer-based intervention packages also focus on reading fluency. Fluency support focuses on a range of different areas: • pace and accuracy • phrasing • smoothness • expression Alternatively, Ahmed's teacher may feel that fluency-focused work might be needed by a number of students in the class and may include elements of reading fluency practice in normal lessons for everyone, initiated by Ahmed's need but benefiting the whole class.
What support does the school provide for Ahmed's reading comprehension?	If comprehension is the key area for Ahmed, fluency will help, as will vocabulary and practice in active reading. A short burst of sessions focusing on drawing attention to and practising comprehension strategies such as asking himself questions about the text and reading on to look for answers, or summarising regularly as he reads. However, Ahmed is more likely to benefit from reading a wide range of unfamiliar texts with a goal in mind: to monitor whether he is understanding, and if not, to look back and try to work out where he has gone wrong. The school could offer this support in lessons – reading challenging unfamiliar texts is, after all, one of the key components of English Language GCSE and work on this will benefit everyone. The school could also offer some individual or small group support using an age-appropriate intervention programme.
What support is the school provide to develop Ahmed's vocabulary?	Working through strategies for finding the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary can be useful in English but equally useful all across the full range of subjects. Building ready recognition and knowledge of the meanings of prefixes and suffixes (eg *-tion, auto-, -ment, -ify*) can be very helpful to students who are less confident in their reading because it focuses them on making sense of multi-syllable words that might otherwise cause them a problem. Learning to recognise root words and make a range of words from a single root by adding different prefixes and suffixes is a useful approach to building vocabulary knowledge.

Ahmed doesn't want to participate in class discussion

Ahmed may feel panic when put on the spot with questions in class and experience a freeze response linked to disproportionate feelings of shame around the idea of being wrong. Teachers could create more helpful conditions for Ahmed to participate in discussion by using structured talk tasks such as think-pair-share where the contribution to class discussion is to tell the class what his partner thinks based on the paired talk part of the sequence. Alternatively, the teacher could prompt Ahmed to contribute a particular comment that they have heard from paired talk while circulating round the room.

The teacher could create opportunities for Ahmed to contribute using even more heavily structured talk where students are asked to repeat what a peer or the teacher has said, or where a very restrictive question makes it almost impossible for him to get the answer wrong. These strategies can be used to build up confidence to speak in class over time by making it very likely for Ahmed to experience success at a small scale very regularly.

Ahmed's written answers lack depth

Usually, when written responses lack depth and detail, it is because the student does not understand the material as well as they need to. Working on Ahmed's fluency and comprehension of both unseen material and the texts he is studying for English Literature GCSE is likely to help with the depth of his written answers.

Ahmed might also benefit from more scaffolded practice of writing, particularly focusing on expanding his points. Prompt questions that he can ask himself (such as *What exactly is that like?* and *What, specifically?* and *Can I say one more thing about that?*) after every statement he makes could be particularly useful. He could start by using a list of questions, and then put the list aside when he

In terms of Ahmed's own writing for the English Language papers, as opposed to his answers to the reading questions, the same questions could prompt him to add additional detail. However, he could also learn single-paragraph structured plans that are easily remembered to help him build detail in his writing.

For example, a strong paragraph for a piece of creative writing might go:

- *action sentence*
- *sensory sentence*
- *physical feeling sentence*
- *thought sentence*
- *action sentence.*

A strong paragraph for a piece of persuasive writing might go:

- *rhetorical question or instruction to the reader, challenging them to think about a topic*
- *statement of opinion*
- *evidence, example or description linked to this idea*
- *emotional connection to the reader*

- *link back to the topic/task*.

Ahmed's teacher is likely to teach the class a clear overall structure for their writing in English Language exams. It is worth considering whether Ahmed has understood and remembered this structure, and if he has, whether he has ever fully completed one of the tasks – it might be that his writing stamina is not very strong and that he has lots of experience of not quite finishing or of rushing the last couple of paragraphs. If this is the case, he might be good at writing the beginnings of pieces of writing but not sustaining them – it is likely that he would benefit from deliberately practising writing the middle and/or end of a piece of writing, following on from a partially completed opening piece.

It would be good to build Ahmed's speed and stamina. A very simple question to explore would be whether he has a good and comfortable pen, and whether different types of pen work better for him. Trial runs with different pens either composing or copying pieces of writing could be useful to see which pen he feels confident he can write most with. Building up his pace until he knows he can write a side of A4 in ten minutes can be reassuring and build his confidence.

Finally, one of the issues that Ahmed might face that could result in underdeveloped writing might be a limited knowledge of the world based on narrow experiences. Building his general knowledge and his experiences of stories would be helpful and this is something that his Foster Carers can help with at home – even spending time watching a range of factual TV programmes or dramas can help, as can reading widely and getting out and about into unfamiliar places, experiencing different landscapes and forms of transport. Discussing values and developing opinions through talk is key.

Questions to ask	**What this might look like**
What is the plan to support Ahmed with his writing? How will we know if it is working?	The teacher might review a collection of Ahmed's writing to work out where the issues are and identify two or three of the support strategies that look likeliest to work for him. It is unlikely that any strategy or scaffold will work immediately and Ahmed will need time to get used to any additional approaches so that they become part of his normal way of working. Ahmed's teacher will need to monitor how his writing is (or is not) improving over time, so the school could agree on a timescale for an *assess-plan-do-review* cycle, after which they could make tweaks to the approach.