

## *Renfrewshire's Tackling Poverty Commission*

Who Cares? Scotland's response to the causes and impact of child poverty in Renfrewshire

August 2014



Who Cares? Scotland works with young people with care experience up to the age of 26 by providing support and independent advocacy. We are the only organisation in Scotland to provide this dedicated service and specifically WC?S currently provides independent advocacy to looked after or previously looked after children and young people in Renfrewshire. WC?S are conscious of the link between looked after status and poverty as a cyclical problem, with care leading to poverty and poverty leading to children being taken into care. This is an issue which needs to be addressed and WC?S welcome the opportunity to provide information to Renfrewshire's Tackling Poverty Commission.

### **What are the main causes of child poverty?**

For looked after children and young people, poverty is a common experience. This experience however, can be dependent on a number of factors including type of looked after status, what point the individual was taken into care and at what stage they began their transition to independent living. For many who begin their life in poverty, the added pressure on families can lead to many young people ending up in the care system. Additionally, for many in the care system, their experiences growing up can lead them to end up living in poverty as young adults.

In regards to looked after status, those living in residential care environments may have their material needs met whilst in care however it is the lack of preparation during this time which leads many to quickly experience poverty once they have left care. Lack of life skill development and opportunities to engage meaningfully in education or training are two such issues and are discussed further below.

However, it is interesting to note that while the number of children and young people being looked after is rising, they are increasingly in kinship and foster care, as well as being looked after at home<sup>1</sup>. For those young people living in kinship care the distinction between formal and informal care arrangement is crucial to their experience of poverty. Those living in informal kinship care are not entitled to financial support from their local authority, despite the fact that kinship carers are often retired, forced to give up working and living in overcrowded housing. As a result many kinship carers and the young people they care for experience financial difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government. 2010. Tackling Child Poverty in Scotland: A Discussion Paper. Edinburgh.

### **What should the priorities of a child poverty strategy be and why?**

Looked after children and young people should be a priority group. Their life experiences can be different to their non-care peers and they are often more vulnerable and in need of dedicated support to help them succeed in life. In order to reflect the needs of looked after children, the distinct issues and experiences they face need to be understood fully by this commission and reflected in the child poverty strategy. The lives of looked after children and young people are complex and multi-layered but all corporate parents have the potential to better the experiences of so many together via the new Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. For a child poverty strategy to best reflect the needs of looked after young people, it should take account of the developments under this new legislation.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act will provide young people currently in care with increasingly positive future prospects. The creation of the Continuing Care Law (part 11 of the C&YP Act) will mean that young people will have the opportunity to remain in their care placement until the age of 21 if appropriate. This is important in not only allowing those in care time to engage with future planning processes and to feel cared for, but also in allowing them to build relationships with key members of staff who can then in turn support the transition to independent living. We believe that this option has to be adequately promoted, explained and encouraged for young people in kinship, foster and residential care placements on their 16th birthday to take up. Staying put in this way would help young people focus on their futures in a more coordinated and supported way.

Similarly, changes to Aftercare provision (part 10 of the C&YP Act) should ensure that young people leaving care continue to receive support from their local authority until the age of 26. Who Cares? Scotland, in speaking directly to care experienced young people, are discouraged to hear accounts of care leavers losing contact with their care placements and other supports immediately after leaving. With the new Aftercare provision it is hoped that those leaving care will experience greater support, for longer. However, as with continuing care rights, these aftercare supports need to be fully offered, explained and continuously promoted to young people so that they are able to access them and rely on them as intended. For this to happen, a truly collaborative and young person centred approach to aftercare must be realised in practice. If this does not happen, then young people who leave care will continue to face the often poverty stricken experiences they do just now; despite the enhanced legislative rights they have been afforded from April 2015.

### **What are the key issues that affect people's ability to get out of poverty?**

Research identifies the transitional time between care and independent living as being the most difficult for young people, experiencing significant levels of trauma and rejection<sup>2</sup>. This experience often goes on for years, if not decades for these young people – and all whilst they are battling to access employment, sustain a home and put down roots. Throughout their early adulthood, they are unable to think about their futures (what skills to learn, what job to do, how to look after their

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<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government. 2013. Staying Put Scotland: Providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging. Edinburgh.

health etc.). Long term, this leaves them as one group of overall young people who are most likely to begin and end their lives in poverty.

One of the main issues faced by WC?S advocacy workers currently within the Renfrewshire area is the poor connection between care leavers and education. This experience of poor education/employment outcomes, coupled with difficult transitions from care to independent living is linked to future experiences of poverty. The number of young people leaving care with few life skills and little in the way of opportunities is concerning and links to an over reliance on the welfare system as well as increased likelihood of experiencing sanctions through poor compliance with Job Centre Plus expectations.

Similarly, opportunities to engage in education for young people in care are not reflective of their non-care peers. As a result, many young people spend their teenage lives feeling as though they do not fit in to the education system. Long-term, this reduces their options and chances of being an active citizen in our society – and living a life which they have control over, free from poverty. This leaves them dependent on statutory services and welfare provision to live day to day. This is despite our view that these young people are just as, if not more resilient and capable of learning than most of their peers.

### **Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?**

The new provisions in the Children and Young People Act show potential to tackle the problem of poverty amongst this distinct population. However, for that to happen, young people in their kinship, foster or residential care placement must be encouraged to ‘stay put’ when they are 16 for as long as it takes up until they are 21, to truly plan and look forward to their future. This is what Scotland’s parents want for their own children and young people – and this is what Scotland must secure in reality for those who are taken into the care of the state, through no fault of their own. By remaining in their placements for as long as possible, the services working with looked after young people can have more time to help develop their life skills and engage them in opportunities which means they can ultimately live fruitful lives as active citizens in their communities.

If you wish to discuss the above further please contact:

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