

Equal Opportunities Committee

Having and Keeping a Home – follow up inquiry

Who Cares? Scotland's response

May 2014



What is your experience or involvement with youth homelessness?

Who Cares? Scotland supports young people who have care experience up to 26 years of age, by providing on-going support and independent advocacy. We are the only organisation in Scotland to provide this service. As an organisation that represents a very marginalised group of individuals, it is imperative that young people remain at the heart of everything we do. A group of care experienced young people were therefore consulted prior to writing this response to ensure their opinions are held at the centre of this discussion; and this primary evidence, coupled with our advocacy intelligence shows that care experienced young peoples' experience of accessing and sustaining a home after leaving care is not only difficult, but inconsistent depending on which local authority they live in. In addition to this, their association with 'home' whilst in care – moving from placement to placement, in often rushed and unplanned manners, is often detrimental to their aftercare situation. Their interpretation of their own housing experiences can be found in appendix A which displays the transient lifestyles of care leavers in Scotland. For many of these young people, some who are in their mid-20s, sustaining a home is still a very live and troubling issue.

Young people leaving care in Scotland are vastly overrepresented in the homeless population. Research identifies the transitional time between care and independent living as being the most difficult for young people, experiencing significant levels of trauma and rejection¹. This experience often goes on for years, if not decades for these young people – and whilst they are battling to access, 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 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. The new provisions in the Children and Young People Act show potential to tackle this. 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.

Who Cares? Scotland strongly recommends that the Equal Opportunities Committee invite care experienced young people themselves, along with us, to give oral, formal evidence to explain further the realities detailed in the response below. The distinct issues and experiences they have need to be understood fully by this committee, if a comprehensive understanding on how having and sustaining a home for care experienced young people is complex and multi-layered; but something which all corporate parents have the potential to tackle together via the new Children and Young People Act 2014 and the housing and homelessness legislation in place.

¹ Scottish Government. 2013. *Staying Put Scotland: Providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging*. Edinburgh.

Is there more support available for instance, mediation, counselling, supported accommodation or funding?

Of the young people reflected in Homeless Action Scotland's survey, 47.5% successfully returned to the family home following their presentation at homeless services². While mediation with family is identified as being the most effective method of preventing homelessness³, for young people who have experience of the care environment often familial mediation is not a realistic option. Of the young people consulted by Who Cares? Scotland, several spoke about having few options after leaving care and so feeling no option other than to return to their family – often to the same negative environments they were removed from in the first place. Our young people reflected on how relationship breakdown at this stage would lead to long periods of 'couch surfing' - often for care experienced young people, there is little opportunity to embrace mediation supports.

Alternative housing options are often of little benefit to care experienced young people. Firstly, if identified in a planned manner, the use of supported accommodation can be the most appropriate transitional step. However not only is there huge demand for places but the quality of such accommodation significantly differs according to geographical area. In discussing the use of supported accommodation, the young people we consulted spoke of how **unsupported** they felt – several suggested that some examples of supported accommodation were nothing more than children's units for older teenagers. However even for those who had positive experiences of supported living, the need to build new relationships with new staff members and the loss of contact with those they felt closest to in previous placements, was enough to render the placement ineffective. This lack of on-going and trusted support causes significant disruption to care experienced young people – who have spent their lives surrounded by professionals and services and the array of new workers that come with that. Trust, connection and long-term relationships are difficult to secure. This can leave young people who leave care with a feeling of not wanting to engage with new services or their workers at all; often fearful of putting that effort in only for them to go. With the lack of fall-backs that are provided for other young people at this crucial stage in their lives being available (such as from parents and wider family networks), young people can go off the radar; slip through the cracks; and ultimately find themselves on a path dogged with isolation and detachment for much of their early adulthood.

Who Cares? Scotland, in connection with the young people we represent, believe that genuine, caring relationships are the best way to help young people in and leaving care; and that these need to be present with them as they progress into their young adulthood. Whilst the new Children and Young People Act offers legislative provisions to enable this from April 2015, via increased Aftercare support and a continuing care option from 16 to 21 years of age – unless services and corporate parents all work together in a collaborative and long-term focussed way **with** the young person at the absolute centre of their planning from as early and for as long as possible, the intentions of the Act will never be realised. In discussing this with young people it is clear that having suffered instability, trauma and rejection - amongst other issues – severely affects an individual's ability to trust and form meaningful relationships. It is these relationships that young people feel are best suited to providing preparation as well as transitional supports. Who Cares? Scotland believes that often the resources already exist within the current care system to provide this preparation. Our young people spoke about opportunities that were not appropriately utilised for example, **"we had a cook and a cleaner but no one taught me how to cook or clean"**. This discussion identified a feeling that staff in children's units were too quick to complete tasks for young people, rather than teaching them to do it for themselves. There was a general agreement amongst the group that had they been encouraged to work alongside staff during tasks, then they may have felt more prepared when living independently.

The young people consulted to inform this response identified that there is poor awareness of available supports to those attempting to avoid homelessness – **"I didn't know where to go. I didn't have a social worker so my sister had to find me help"**. Although they accepted that there may be individual agencies offering support, there was a

² Harleigh-Bell, N. 2013. *Youth Homelessness in Scotland 2013: An overview of youth homelessness and homelessness services*. <http://www.homelessactionscotland.org.uk/uploads/Youth/Youth%20Homelessness%20in%20Scotland%202013.pdf>.

³ Scottish Parliament. 2012. *Having and Keeping a Home*. Equal Opportunities Committee. Edinburgh.

general consensus that the routes out of care do not identify or best allocate such provisions. This view is supported by Homeless Action Scotland who identified that preventative services such as mediation are not recognised as being widely available - only 28.6% of those asked saw an increase in the availability of such services⁴. It is also a reality for these young people, that many need the support of an independent advocate from Who Cares? Scotland, to help negotiate and interpret these options. Sometimes, this advocacy support is also needed to secure them their rights.

How have things changed for young people experiencing homelessness since 2012?

The Scottish Government's aim to provide settled accommodation to all those unintentionally homeless by 2012 was a positive ambition. However this focus does not best support the needs of young people leaving the care system – young people whose actions and experiences often mean they have little control over their outcomes. Through consultation with care experienced young people it is clear that the system deems many to have intentionally created their homeless situation, through addictions issues, inability to live alone and general anxiety surrounding moving from group living and care placement to independence. One young person spoke of feeling so **isolated and alone** in their own home that they could no longer live there. Due to being deemed 'intentionally' homeless, it took 6 months and the use of services including Who Cares? Scotland advocacy, to find more appropriate accommodation.

It is apparent that current housing legislation could be used more effectively to support the long term need of young people leaving care, alongside greater understanding of the issues faced by young people leaving care and how 'intentional' homelessness is often a realistic expectation. To ensure housing services professionals understand such issues, such as the importance of geography in avoiding isolation, unnecessary suffering can be avoided. Who Cares? Scotland recommends that the provisions contained in the Children and Young People Act 2014, need to link properly with the Homelessness legislation and the Housing Bill which is currently progressing through parliament, to ensure that they complement each other and do not contest each other - as it is only the young person that will suffer if it is the later.

Are there additional issues for young people leaving care?

Yes. Young people leaving care face an extremely difficult housing process in comparison to their non-care peers. While Who Cares? Scotland understands there has been progress in terms of homelessness prevention guidance over the past 2 years, legislation increasingly must represent the distinct experiences of young people leaving care; as referred to in our previous answers.

A common theme reflected in our discussions with care experienced young people is that many placement changes early in life connects to transient and unsettled housing in early adulthood. Several of the young people consulted identified with the feeling of never really belonging. One young person spoke about care placements as though **"you are playing a game"** and as though he was a **"passing guest"** in a stranger's house. Another young person spoke about **"keeping a bed warm for the next person to come in"**. This concept of never truly feeling wanted is an idea that young people leaving care frequently feel – an idea that diminishes their self-worth and their perception of what a nurturing home should look like.

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. 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. One of the young people consulted by Who Cares? Scotland spoke to, discussed the disruption in

⁴ Harleigh-Bell, N. 2013. Youth Homelessness in Scotland 2013: An overview of youth homelessness and homelessness services". <http://www.homelessactionscotland.org.uk/uploads/Youth/Youth%20Homelessness%20in%20Scotland%202013.pdf>.

education he faced for 1 year due to being taken into care. He discussed how, despite enjoying and being a success in education prior to care, this unsettled period of life directly affected the opportunities he had access to in the future.

What new approaches have been introduced, and how effective have they been?

For those leaving care, there remains a reliance on Pathways Planning to provide young people with the necessary skills for independent living. Of the 6 young people consulted, only 2 had been taken through this process by a worker – neither of which successfully completed the programme. Currently, local authorities in working to the *Housing Options Protocol for Care Leavers*⁵ begin Pathways Planning between 6 months to a year prior to leaving care. As is reflected in the views of young people, this does not provide an adequate amount of time to develop essential life skills, identify and address personal issues and develop a meaningful future plan. Further, when discussing the effectiveness of such planning, several young people identified the sterile nature of the programme. They suggested that preparation for independent living should reflect that of a nurturing home life, involving natural skill building as is mentioned above.

Who Cares? Scotland, and the young people, believe that the continuing care law contained in the Children and Young People Act 2014, should be actively encouraged to young people who are in a kinship, foster or residential care placement when they reach 16 so that they stay put for up to another 5 years and give themselves the time they need to think about their future, undertake education options or employment opportunities and feel settled at this very vulnerable age and stage.

How well is the housing options approach working towards reducing instances of youth homelessness?

Who Cares? Scotland believes that the housing options approach to reducing youth homelessness is in essence the correct method of identifying appropriate housing options for care leavers. By taking account of the needs of the young people, support can be more appropriately allocated - in turn encouraging better housing outcomes. However in order to ensure that this works effectively, there must be an acceptance and understanding of the **distinct** issues faced by care leavers as is outlined above. Who Cares? Scotland support the position taken by Barnardo's Scotland which suggests that housing opportunities available under the housing options approach can be less likely to suit the individual needs of young people leaving care – particularly in relation to private housing. Housing options teams **must** be better trained and aware of the complex lives young people face in care. This will require better connection with young people's social workers, other corporate parents in their lives and other services that are around them. Whilst the Children and Young People Act 2014 legislates for better planning from all services involved in a young person's life; this must be a reality in practice too. Who Cares? Scotland believes that the need for independent advocacy will continue to be imperative to support young people as they progress into their young adulthood and to ensure the legislative rights they have are truly realised.

Therefore, in order to best utilise the housing options approach, it **must** be a collaborative process with the people who have the most positive relationship with the young person. As discussed above, key relationships are reported by young people as being the most effective way of ensuring the transition from care to independence is successful.

Has the number of young people presenting as homeless changed?

Who Cares? Scotland believes that issues of homelessness are still very much a reality for young people leaving care. Despite the Scottish Government's aim to prevent homelessness for all young people leaving the care environment by ensuring effective partnership amongst key agencies, Who Cares? Scotland Advocacy workers report that homelessness remains a contentious issue. 47% of our advocacy tasks in 2013/14 relate to issues around care

⁵ Scottish Government. 2013. *Housing Options Protocols for Care Leavers*.
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00435939.pdf>.

placements, care planning, representation at formal processes where decisions on the young person are made, leaving care, aftercare issues. All of these tasks have the issue of 'home' and accommodation at the root of them.

It is important to recognise the landscape of homelessness as it exists for young care leavers. As distinct from homelessness statistics which take into account formal presentations at homelessness teams, young people leaving care often experience 'hidden' homelessness. Who Cares? Scotland young people spoke about their homelessness as including sofa surfing and rough sleeping. While at the time, they would not have viewed 'sofa surfing' as a homeless experience, they now are able to reflect on how this experience caused greater uncertainty and instability in their lives. From not knowing where they would be sleeping each night, to being unable to provide an address in college applications, this form of homelessness ultimately prevented their positive reengagement in society.

How might the implementation of the C&YP (Scotland) Bill help to tackle youth homelessness?

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. The young people we spoke to highlighted how difficult it can be to build positive relationships and so continual support from care to independence often does not exist. 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. When asked what they believe would have helped them maintain their housing after care, the young people we spoke to identified the need for continual 'family-like' support, not only providing practical support, but also genuine, emotional encouragement. Several young people that Who Cares? Scotland spoke to informed us that on leaving care at the age of 16, they chose to sofa surf or sleep rough rather than presenting as homeless or seeking their own accommodation. However, as with continuing care rights, these aftercare supports need to be fully offered to, 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 horrendous experiences they do just now; despite the enhanced legislative rights they have been afforded from April 2015.

Who Cares? Scotland, alongside Barnardo's Scotland and Aberlour, believe that care experienced young people should have the right to return to care following their move to independent living. Normative family experiences would allow for young people to return to their family home for short periods of time, should independent living prove difficult. For young people leaving the care environment, this currently is not an option. While the 'return to care' provision is not currently included in the new legislation, Who Cares? Scotland is keen to ensure it remains on the Scottish Government's agenda, aiming to provide care experienced young people with a more equal and supportive experience transitioning into adulthood.

Is the GIRFEC helping schools and local authorities to tackle youth homelessness?

Getting it Right for Every Child encourages a coordinated and multiagency led response ensuring young people receive timely support relevant to their circumstance. Who Cares? Scotland care experienced young people spoke about their recent encounters with homelessness – most of which could be characterised with the feeling of being alone, unsupported and unclear on where to seek help. Each young person had spent significant periods of time in local authority care, had statutory local authority support and yet on leaving the care environment, the majority of young people spoken to immediately lost the link to their local authority. Who Cares? Scotland supports GIRFEC in promoting a method of working which holds young people at the centre of every decision; however evidence continues to show that unless practitioners adopt an entirely flexible approach to working with young people experiencing emotional and practical instability, there will be little success in ensuring the path to independent living is managed effectively.

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Appendix A – Young peoples’ interpretations of their transient lifestyles.

<p>1995-1999</p> <p>Lived With Parents at family home in Milton Glasgow</p> <p>Feeling unsettled and scared due to abusive father</p>	<p>2001-2003</p> <p>Moved from Govan to Cumbernauld lived in family house with mother and 2 Brothers</p>	<p>2004-2009</p> <p>Moved from Mitchell Street to Second children’s home Torrance Avenue where I remained until the units were rebuilt in different areas.</p>
<p>1999-2000</p> <p>Moved to Parkhead after leaving father and stayed in high rise flats for 1 year with mum and siblings</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable and angry</p>	<p>2003-2004</p> <p>Social Work placed me and younger brother in care after deeming the family home no longer a safe environment and moved us to first foster care placement in Condorrat which broke down after 3 months</p>	<p>2009-2011</p> <p>After renovations were done on the children’s unit Torrance Avenue moved to Main Street in Cumbernauld where I remained for 2 Years.</p>
<p>2000-2001</p> <p>Due to bullying and stress getting to much for mum lost house in parkhead and moved to BnB in govan</p>	<p>Moved to second foster placement in Renfrewshire which broke down after just 4 months which resulted in move to first children’s home Mitchell Street in Airdrie stayed there for 1 month.</p>	<p>2011-Present</p> <p>Left care after 9 years and moved in with a supported carer in Cumbernauld where I still reside today</p>
<p>How I felt during this time</p> <p>unsettled and scared due to abusive father also</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable and angry</p>	<p>How I felt during this time</p> <p>Confused, scared, uncertain , lost and angry</p>	<p>How I felt during this time and how I feel now</p> <p>Felt Unsure at first and Unsettled but as time went on got settled and felt cared for built great relationships with staff and young people in the unit.</p> <p>At 17 hit a bump in the road where I felt worthless and was gambling but thanks to my social worker and supported carer standing by me I overcame this and now feel happy and feel there is a lot of stability in my life.</p>









