

SUBMISSION FROM BARNARDO'S SCOTLAND

Barnardo's Scotland would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to give evidence on this crucial issue, and for the opportunity you gave our 16+ Edinburgh Children's Services Manager, Sharon Munro, to give evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee pre-enquiry evidence panel.

We wish to highlight some of the key areas where our Barnardo's Scotland service experience illustrates the continuing issues around homelessness among young people and the steps required to prevent it. In addition, we believe that the forthcoming UK Welfare Reform Bill provides an opportunity to begin proactive discussions on how work to tackle homelessness among young people in Scotland can be coordinated with the newly devolved responsibilities arising from the UK legislation. However, we have serious concerns around the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill, particularly regarding the speed of its introduction and implementation, and the lack of detail in some areas.

The focus of the following evidence is on homelessness among care leavers, which we believe is appropriate given the large number of homeless people across the UK who have experience of being looked after (over the thirty percent according to Who Cares? UK).

About Barnardo's Scotland

Barnardo's Scotland is a national voluntary organisation and works directly with more than 10,000, children, young people and their families in over 98 specialised services in local communities across Scotland which cover fostering, parenting, substance misuse, offending, homelessness, and abuse. Most of the children and families we work with have some degree of interaction with the welfare system, and this UK legislation will have a profound impact on their lives.

Key issues for Barnardo's Scotland

Our evidence is broken down into the following areas:

- Homelessness triggers for vulnerable young people
- Provision of suitable accommodation
- Welfare reforms and changes in housing support
- Care leavers vulnerability to becoming homeless
- Issues particular to rural areas
- Case study from a Barnardo's Scotland service

Homelessness issues for vulnerable young people

Many young people we work with who are at risk of homelessness do not have a strong family support network and are at a higher risk of suffering from a range of issues including:

- unemployment and socioeconomic marginalisation
- experience of/leaving local authority care
- family disruption in childhood, especially after age 3
- experience of living with a step parent, particularly for young men
- experience of parental neglect, abuse or violence
- strained relationships and relationship breakdown with parents and step-parents
- reliance on insecure accommodation settings, such as staying with friends or relatives
- Being asked to leave or being thrown out of the parental home.

(list based on material in Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness index, www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/publications/PDF/centrepointindex.pdf)

We would recognise these as key risk or trigger factors that make young people vulnerable to homelessness and/or directly cause them to become homeless.

Provision of suitable accommodation

It has been demonstrated that young people who lived in suitable, permanent accommodation are more likely to experience stability, employment, develop positive relationships and establish a healthy lifestyle. However, the options for accommodation for homeless young people are often limited to supported accommodation with 24 hour staff, temporary furnished accommodation and a permanent tenancy in an unfurnished property. The most supported forms of accommodation are usually the most costly and young people who are in employment or who are on training can often find it difficult not to fall into arrears.

For many young people we work with a permanent tenancy is the most desirable outcome. However, permanent accommodation is usually unfurnished, but there is an opportunity for a young person with limited funds to apply for a Community Care Grant. However, Barnardo's Scotland has identified several significant issues with such grants. Applicants are often waiting too long, as accommodation must be secured before application, leaving many young people living in empty flats while waiting for funds. A large number of applications are rejected but then the decision is overturned on appeal, indicating that proper consideration was not given in the first instance. The funds available have also been reduced and it is getting increasingly difficult to furnish a home to a basic standard. There are no safeguarding mechanisms for vulnerable groups so young people living independently for the first time may not understand how to budget and could use the fund incorrectly without guidance. Barnardo's Scotland has made the following recommendations which could be incorporated

into whatever replaces the social fund as responsibilities will be transferred to Scottish Minister under the UK Welfare reform Bill:

1. The Community Care Grant should be replaced with a similar grant that supports people setting up and staying in homes.
2. The system should allow applicants to apply for the grant prior to securing accommodation. Successful applicants would receive their grant on receipt of the keys to their accommodation to ensure no waiting time.
3. The application and approvals process for the new grant scheme should ensure that applicants are not unnecessarily rejected or systematically forced to go down the route of appeal.
4. Rules and criteria should be clear and consistently applied across Scotland.
5. That grant awards are of a sufficient level to allow applicants to properly furnish a home.

Another problem which in our experience results from offering poor quality or the least desirable housing to formerly homeless young people or care leavers is that they are less likely to treat social housing as a home. This leaves such accommodation vulnerable to abandonment, or losing the accommodation because of a poor relationship with neighbours. Accommodation in undesirable areas can lead to vulnerable individuals being exposed to crime, drugs and anti social behaviour, or simply leave them isolated from any support networks.

The loss of a tenancy, whether because the property was inappropriate or the young person concerned was unable to cope can leave a long-term legacy. As well as rent arrears to be dealt with, they may not be eligible for another grant and often leave what property they do own behind as they have nowhere to store it, this then leaves them with no resources to furnish a new tenancy when they eventually secure it. A useful area of investigation would be to explore how these kinds of on-going problems could be dealt with to ensure that young people do have a second chance after an early failed tenancy.

We believe that the current mechanism for providing social housing to vulnerable young people is not fit for purpose and contributes to the high number of homeless young people in Scotland. The Welfare Reform Bill may give the Scottish Government the opportunity to make improvements in areas such as the Community Care Grant and ensuring that housing is suitable for the tenants needs.

Welfare reforms and changes in housing

The Welfare Reform Bill will lead to significant changes to the housing benefit system in Scotland and we are concerned that the serious impact that this will have on care leavers has not been fully taken into account. We would particularly highlight two areas that will potentially have an impact on youth homelessness: the change from increasing benefits and allowances by CPI and the reduction of housing benefit in cases of under-occupancy.

The uprating of Local Housing Allowance will be calculated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) instead of using the current method of using a sample of local private rents. This is

planned to come into force in 2013. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA) predicts that using CPI will undermine the link between benefits and local changes in rents. In CPI incorporates only a small element of rental costs and historically this has fallen well below private rental inflation. Consequently, it could result in a geographical disparity as rents move at varying speeds in different areas, meaning Universal Credit could be worth more in some areas and price UC recipients in other areas out of the rental market.

In the private sector there is a significant lack of 1-bedroom properties – 44% of working age Housing Association or Housing Co-op tenants need only a one-bedroom property but only 24% occupy one. Across all tenants, 62% require only one bedroom but only 34% have single bedroom properties. This suggests chronic under-supply. This could be an obstacle when those who under-occupy housing are penalised by reducing their housing benefits, as is currently proposed by the UK Welfare Reform Bill. Often under-occupancy is a result of a limited housing stock both in the private and social rented sectors.

The SFHA therefore predicts that we will see a slowing down of housing allocations, with the under-occupancy criteria discouraging some young, single people and couples from accepting a two-bedroom property. Slower allocations may discourage some young people from forming new households, and as a result affect waiting lists for homeless people.

While many young people will live with their parents for longer, this is not an option for many young homeless people who are homeless because they have had to leave the family home, or for young care leavers who, even if there is a family home, may not wish to return to it.

Young people are also a group most likely to have changing circumstances (e.g. pregnancy, employment, moving out from a parental home or care). This means that they will be among the first groups to be switched from existing benefits to universal credit, and we therefore fear that some of our society's most vulnerable people will become 'guinea pigs' for the new system.

Care leaver's vulnerability to becoming homeless

The majority of care leavers are 16 and and therefore are still young for the responsibilities they face, and often at risk. As a vulnerable group they should not be put into just any available accommodation and, therefore, there needs to be a practical assessment of the suitability of potential properties. For example, Barnardo's Scotland has previously turned down tenancies offered to care leavers we work with because of a lack of quality or suitability.

In Barnardo's Scotland's experience Bed and Breakfasts are often used as temporary accommodation and as demonstrated in the attached case study can be detrimental to the young person's welfare. We would argue they are rarely suitable accommodation, even on a short term basis.

Care leavers are also susceptible to poor budget management and the single Universal Credit payment, if managed badly through inexperience, could put care leavers into serious trouble, such as rent arrears. Care leavers with the support from their after care worker should be able to negotiate more regular payments for their most vulnerable clients who are unable to manage money and who are dealing with complex mental health and substance misuse issues.

It is worrying that care leavers are already a group with priority access to social housing and there is still a shortfall in meeting their needs. A lack of suitable accommodation that is available to young care leavers could impact their health, welfare and reduce their chances of moving into education, employment or training.

Specific issues in Rural Areas

The problems caused by the use of inappropriate accommodation are particularly acute in rural areas. What bed and breakfast accommodation is available may well be located at some distance from the young person needing support. For example in Aberdeenshire most B&Bs that offer accommodation for homeless people are in Fraserburgh or Peterhead. We have seen young people from as far away as Stonehaven placed into accommodation in these locations. This is over 2 hours and several buses away from the home community, and therefore offers no way to continue employment and no access to existing support networks. A significant proportion of this B&B accommodation is also located within pubs and hotels, which can be a particularly unsuitable form of accommodation.

However, we recognise that the scattered population of young people requiring support may mean solutions used in large urban centres are not appropriate. If there is no alternative to placing a young person in a B&B the Local Authority should seek to develop relationships with the B&B management to ensure that some kind of informal support is available, and prioritise those venues where such support is provided.

Case study at a Barnardo's Scotland service

Please see the attached case study.

Further information

We are available and willing to provide more detailed information or evidence as the current and predicted homelessness problem with young people in Scotland. Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the opportunity to raise our concerns regarding this issue and urge the Scottish Government to make care leavers a priority on the homelessness agenda.

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