

SUBMISSION FROM QUARRIERS

Quarriers is pleased to submit the following evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee inquiry in homelessness and young people. Quarriers is a major Scottish charity providing practical care and support every day to thousands of people. Through more than 120 services for Adult Disability, Children and Families, Epilepsy and Young Adults in Scotland, and a growing number of services in parts of England, we challenge inequality of opportunity and choice, to bring about positive change in people's lives.

Quarriers supports around 250 young people in 9 different youth housing projects. These young people, many of whom have previously been in care, are either homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, and are some of the most vulnerable and excluded young people within our society.

Many of them have a range of support needs including addiction issues, mental health problems, offending, and limited literacy skills. Many of them also lack confidence, have low self-esteem and have limited life skills. However, with the right support most of these young people are able to move on to their own accommodation and live independently.

Causes of youth homelessness and preventative measures

Quarriers welcomed the opportunity for Yvette Hutcherson, one of the young people we support, to participate in the initial roundtable discussion on youth people and homelessness. At that oral evidence session, Yvette identified a range of different issues that contributed to young people becoming homeless, including:

- Family breakdown
- Addiction issues affecting young people and/or parents
- Mental health issues affecting young people and/or parents
- Overcrowding in the family home
- Being made to leave the family home at 16, as a part of normal practice
- Leaving care
- Being unable to remain safely in the family home because of abuse
- Moving into a flat and then being evicted because the young person is too immature to cope with it

Leaving care is a major cause of homelessness for young people, and often the only route for care leavers to secure a tenancy is to present as homeless. It is well recognised that care leavers are vulnerable because of their age, lack of life skills, and the myriad of issues that caused them to be in care in the first place.

But consideration also needs to be given to the extent of hidden homelessness and the difficulty that some young people can experience in accessing local authority support services at an early stage, because they don't "tick the right boxes". In one particular instance, a young person was in a relatively stable

situation, with a good job, but had to leave the family home because of relationship breakdown cause mainly by parental addiction issues. Although the young person had no permanent place to stay, was sleeping on a succession of friends' sofas and was carrying his possessions around with him every day, he was refused access to support services because he was not deemed a priority. He subsequently lost his job and ended up sleeping rough, resulting in a significant deterioration in his physical and mental health. At this point he became entitled to local authority support, and a place in supported accommodation was eventually found for him. However, if he had been given help with housing at an earlier stage, he may not have needed such intensive and expensive support, including medical treatment, later on, and may have been able to sustain his employment.

There is a lack of mediation services that might help young people and their families avoid relationship breakdowns, which in turn might help prevent young people from becoming homeless. As Yvette stated in oral evidence, "if there is someone that they can approach knowing that there is a good possibility of getting their issues resolved, it can only be a good thing".

So, whilst we would agree that leaving care is a major issue and a significant contributory factor in youth homelessness, we would ask that the Committee does not disregard the many other causes, and it seeks to find ways of getting help to those who need it, at the earliest possible stage.

Moving on

Young people speak consistently about difficulties with the transition from supported accommodation to independent tenancies. Some of this relates to practical aspects, such as the lengthy wait for community care grants with which to furnish their homes. This results in young people either having to move into an empty tenancy or accumulate rent arrears.

But equally important is the sense of isolation and loneliness that can be experienced by some young people. They go from being surrounded by other people, with support available whenever required, to being on their own. Sometimes this can lead to young people having problems with door-keeping or with alcohol or substance misuse, in an attempt to avoid loneliness, and often leaves young people vulnerable to exploitation from others. What they say would help is a "friend on the end of the phone" – a buddy or mentor who can offer advice and encouragement, and who can provide some continuity as the young person moves into adulthood.

Youth employment – marginalisation of homeless people

And the need for a "buddy" as consistent source of guidance is an equally important factor in helping the young people we support to find and sustain employment.

The majority of these young people desperately want to work, and although they are all at different stages along the employment pathway, many of them are at

the point of considering what their training or employment opportunities are. However, they can face a range of challenges and structural barriers including few job opportunities, low pay, lack of training and qualifications and a complex Welfare Benefits system that does not necessarily make employment affordable. In addition, Housing Benefit is not payable to young people attending college full-time, therefore the young people we support are denied the opportunity to acquire the skills and training they need to find work that pays enough to enable them to pay rent and live independently.

However, even those young people who are apparently job ready and find employment, often find it difficult to sustain employment for a range of different reasons including because lack of any experience of work, limited life skills, have unrealistic expectations of what work entails and may come from backgrounds where their family has never worked.

In order to overcome some of these challenges, Quarriers and the OYA+ Buddy programme have developed a partnership to match young people with suitably experienced, skilled and enthusiastic buddies, to provide what we see as a crucial element in enabling young people to sustain employment.

Quarriers Way to Work

This will be particularly important in providing a continuum of support for young people who are undertaking a specialised employability programme that has recently been established with an EU partner. A 9 week training and work experience programme has been developed, in partnership with a Dutch organisation, facilitated by the Scottish Government, and funded by the EU Leonardo Mobility programme. Young people supported by Quarriers travel to the Netherlands, where they are placed with a Dutch training provider, *Werkcenter*. During the period of their work experience, they receive support via a Life Coach and a job Coach/Mentor. To gain access to the programme, the young people had to undergo a rigorous recruitment process and received extensive preparation training.

On their return, the young people will be given the opportunity to link with the OYA+ Buddy initiative. This will keep the momentum going for these young people and build on their positive work and training experiences while also giving them the best possible opportunity to access and sustain meaningful employment.

Rural housing for young people

Young people in rural areas face a substantial shortage of affordable housing, with a lack of social rented housing exacerbated by the prevalence of second or holiday homes. Many of the young homeless people we support in rural areas successfully undertake and complete a housing support programme which enables them to sustain and maintain an independent tenancy, only to be unable to access a suitable house. They then have to either remain in supported housing long after it is necessary or to re-enter the homelessness system, often using B & B accommodation.

Young people's aspirations and ideals – Our Charter

Young people in the Quarriers VIP group, a collective advocacy group for young people who use our housing support services, developed the *Condemned* campaign, which seeks to raise awareness of different issues relating to the provision of housing and the benefits system, which focused on four key themes:

- The use of substandard housing in less desirable areas for young people
- Difficulties with Community Care grants, resulting in young people either having to move into empty houses with no furniture, or accumulate rent arrears
- A benefits system that is hugely complex, that fails to offer adequate support for those who can work and seems to be increasingly concerned with sanctions rather than support.
- The significant lack of affordable housing in rural areas

As the next step, the young people developed a Charter for young homeless people, which sets out their aspirations and ideals, and which they think will help overcome some of those challenges. It covers the areas of:

- Information
- My house
- When I move in
- The way I am treated
- Support

Some of this happens now, but not all of it, and not always. We do recognise that there are some areas of very good practice but, equally, there is often room for improvement. We want to make sure that all young homeless people are supported to achieve their full potential, and to move into adulthood in a positive way. A copy of Our Charter is attached as part of this evidence.

Evidence from young people and supporting their inclusion

In addition, the members of the Committee might find it helpful to meet young people experiencing homelessness and hear directly from them in a less formal setting. We would be pleased to facilitate an informal meeting of this kind in one of our services, and to work with other agencies to ensure a broad range of young people were invited to participate.

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