

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM WHO CARES? SCOTLAND

Who Cares? Scotland supports young people who have care experience up to 26 years of age, by providing independent advocacy and engagement opportunities. We are the only organisation in Scotland to provide this unique service. Who Cares? Scotland aims to provide looked-after young people in Scotland with knowledge of their rights. We strive to empower them to positively participate in the formal structures they are often subject to solely as a result of their care experience. At Who Cares? Scotland we utilise the voice of the care experienced population of Scotland to inform everything we do as an organisation. Most recently we have published a report that sought care experienced young people's views of the new Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. 87 care experienced young people contributed to the research and it can be accessed [here](#).

Overview

Our advocacy experience informs us that many care experienced young people transition into independent living relying, initially at least, on welfare provision. Those we support believe that in general gender inequality results in women being most disadvantaged by any changes to the welfare system. Care experienced young people believe that as the state supports them to transition into independent living by utilising welfare support, it is important for the Scottish Government to understand how welfare impacts on their everyday experiences and how it may impact on their pursuit of improved social mobility.

For the purpose of this call for evidence, we spoke to three female care-experienced young people about their experiences of the welfare system. Their articulation of their experiences, along with our advocacy experience, will influence this response.

The three women involved were aged 18, 21 and 23. They all had experience of throughcare and aftercare support after leaving their care placements and had all recently made the transition from receiving financial support from their throughcare team, to the adult welfare system. Young people who have left care but are under the age of 18 are entitled to financial support under Section 29 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The transition between this to support from the Department of Work and Pensions can be fraught with difficulties and so our response will be focussed on this.

What is your (or your client) experience of being on benefits or employment support?

One young woman who contributed to this call for evidence stated that when she secured part time employment, of 16 hours a week, she was financially worse off in

comparison to when she solely relied on welfare. She sought financial advice and was advised that due to the eligibility criteria of job seekers allowance, she reduced her hours of work to 13 per week in order to increase the financial support she received. The young person felt frustrated by this, but thought it was essential to ensure that she was financially able to meet her basic needs.

Our advocacy experience informs that this can be a common dilemma for those we support. It also tells us that it can be difficult for care experienced young people to navigate the welfare system. Care experienced young people can experience financial hardship in their pursuit of employment, training and education. Our advocates explain that opportunities that other young people may ordinarily welcome may be perceived as posing a potential financial risk to them, and may result in young people not taking up such opportunities. If these experiences are not fully understood, structural barriers will continue to impede on this group of young people's pursuit of a life independent of state support.

All three of the young woman stressed that the main difficulty they experience, in relation to the provision of welfare support, was the lack of preparation they received to prepare them for independent living. Their corporate parents failed to adequately prepare them to manage their own finances or inform them of the reality of having to live on state benefits. Each of the women stated that engagement with the Department of Work and Pensions could be particularly difficult due to the lack of preparation afforded to them prior to turning 18. This lack of preparation included lack of bank accounts or formal identification which when made receiving their benefits, particularly difficult. They described feeling judged by DWP staff when they explained they did not possess any formal identification, or that they did not have a bank account. The embarrassment they felt as a result appeared to impact the young people more than the greater difficulty of pursuing receipt of entitled support. It was suggested that a Job Centre, or a Skills Development Scotland advisor, should be allocated to each care leaver when they are preparing to transition out of the care system. This dedicated transition support would ensure greater awareness of the experiences of this population.

At Who Cares? Scotland the views expressed by the three young people would appear to be consistent with the experiences of our advocacy workers. Our advocacy workers state that the transition from the care system can be extremely difficult for a young person to go through. At times it can be rushed and too often young people leave ill prepared for independent living. Females can, at times, be more vulnerable if this transition is not managed effectively. We have learned from our advocates that these young women can be at risk of further difficulties if they seek or find support from unsuitable groups or adults. Serious case reviews continually highlight the vulnerability of care experienced females, and the risk they may be exposed to if they are not appropriately supported by the state.

All three women involved went on to explain that young care experienced women need to be able to source support from one dedicated, caring worker who can help them through the transition period; and also enable them to make informed decisions in relation to welfare support.

How has your (or your clients) experience with the benefit system changed in recent years since the introduction of welfare reforms?

The young women we spoke to state that they were not aware of the recent changes in to the benefit system. They felt that the greatest difficulty for care experienced young people was that they had to almost certainly rely on state benefits in order to be able to support themselves, once they were living independently.

Advocacy workers continually speak of young people's frustration and embarrassment that their circumstances appear to dictate that, for at least a period of time, they will be financially supported by state benefits. Young people express that corporate parents should enable them to achieve a more positive future and a promising adulthood.

What would be your priorities for change when certain benefits / elements of employment support are devolved to Scotland?

It was expressed by the young women we spoke to that it would be beneficial for DWP staff to have an understanding of the experiences of those growing up in care; and how difficult the transition out of care can be.

Our advocacy workers inform us that many young people feel disillusioned with employment support. They explain that often young people describe being encouraged to accept any form of training or employment; without anyone getting to assist them in planning for a career or a life not dependent on either welfare support or the minimum wage.

Young people and advocacy workers separately expressed a view that any devolved government body that will, in the future, deliver employment support is named as a corporate parent under Part 9 (Corporate Parenting) of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. This would ensure that young people are not sanctioned as a result of the failings of their corporate parents, for example ensuring care experienced young people are equipped with the necessary skills to engage with the labour market prior to transitioning into independent living.

Do you have any suggestions of practical improvements that you would like to see when certain benefits/elements of employment support are under Scottish control?

By bringing benefits and employment support under Corporate Parenting legislation, those designing the service would have the responsibility of working in partnership

with current corporate parents to ensure young people are properly prepared to enter further training or education and the labour market.

All care experienced young people should be encouraged by corporate parents to achieve the best they possibly can. Care experienced young people inform us that they often perceive that they are only expected by those that support them to transition from the care system into a life reliant on welfare. The young women we spoke to believed that greater efforts need to be made to ensure that young care experienced females are aware that the future does not have to be solely focused on having a caring role for others, whether that be children or family members.

They also stated that young females have to be given information on how to protect themselves from financial abuse. Our advocacy workers provide numerous examples where young women have struggled to identify their vulnerability and protect themselves from this kind of abuse. In some instances this has led to young women becoming involved in crime to mitigate their losses from financial abuse. The young women we spoke with stated that they struggled not to emulate the caring role for other family members; a role that they have witnessed other females, in their family, taking up. The caring role they speak of includes ensuring that family members have enough money to meet their needs. Through discussion with these young women, and through our advocacy experience, we are aware of examples where they have neglected their own needs to provide financial assistance to other family members, sometimes even to meet addiction needs of others in their family.

Our advocacy workers state that assuming such a role like this can leave these young females at risk. They have had experiences of supporting young care experienced females who have assumed a maternal role for siblings, who are not necessarily younger than them, with the expectation that they will financially support others. In a small number of instances advocacy workers have been aware of young women resorting to crime in order to meet the requirements such a role imposes on them. We believe young women in the care system have to be supported to be able to live independently, without the risk of being obliged to meet the needs of others. Young women within the care system can be some of our most vulnerable young people in Scotland. Any further discussion must ensure it is informed by this unique and often marginalised group of young people.

Who Cares? Scotland would encourage the Welfare Reform Committee to hear evidence directly from care experienced young women. Ensuring these voices are heard will help Scotland to provide a welfare system which learns from real life experience.

Carly Edgar
Senior Policy Development Officer
Who Cares? Scotland

Thomas Timlin

Policy Development Officer
Who Cares? Scotland
1 May 2015