

## **Local Government and Communities Committee**

### **Homelessness**

#### **Submission from the Advisory Group at the Life Changes Trust**

##### **Introduction and Background**

We are members of the care experienced advisory group at the Life Changes Trust. We come from a variety of care experienced backgrounds, ranging from kinship care to residential care. As we all have had our own diverse experience of the care system, our advisory group consists of many individuals that have had their own experiences of being homeless after leaving care that occurred before their 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. Their experience of homelessness ranges from a period of a few months, to being in and out of homelessness over the course of a few years. For example, one member of our group left care at 17 to be placed straight into homeless accommodation. Since then, she has been in and out of a variety of homeless accommodation seven times between the ages of 17 – 21 with a new-born baby. As examples like ours are occurring all over Scotland daily, we feel that the local government should be raising awareness and making care experienced young people a priority ensuring that the correct support is put into place for those care experienced young people that are currently homeless, or are at risk of becoming homeless.

The Life Changes Trust developed their Care Experienced Advisory Group to ensure care experienced young people were at the heart of the Trust's decision making. Since the launch of the advisory group we, as care experienced advisors, are helping to develop a variety of funding initiatives, one of which is the concept of 'home'. From the scoping stage of this initiative, we were able to use our own experiences to cover the main aspects of 'home' that we all value, and feel many others out-with our group will agree. This has led us to acknowledge that homelessness is a huge part of our care experienced identity, even if some of us have not experienced it ourselves, as many vulnerable care experienced young people are faced with homelessness on a daily basis.

##### **Main Points**

Homelessness disproportionately affects young people who have experience of the care system. The Scottish Government has committed to improving their lives and yet this a fundamental way in which they consistently fall through the cracks. We believe clear leadership from the Scottish Government is needed and that local authorities should be encouraged to address this issue. The Life Changes Trust is attempting to do this through their funded Champions Boards where corporate parents and young people are working together to address these kinds of issues. We call on the Scottish Government to:

- Endorse the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant.
- Require Local Authorities to ensure they make provision for their care experienced young people.
- Ensure that all Local Authority Areas are providing effective supports to all care experienced young people presenting as homeless, and those at risk of presenting as homeless.

At the Rock Trust; Ending Youth Homelessness Conference, one of the questions raised was: 'How can you present as homeless when the authority is your parent'. This is fundamentally the basis to our argument as, in our opinion, care experienced young people should not be leaving care to go straight into homeless accommodation. With the use of National data, of the 1,283 care leavers between 2015/16, 10 young people had nowhere to go and immediately became homeless (Scottish Government 2017a). Although this number can be seen as relatively small, these 10 individuals are not getting the support we feel should be put in place for every single care experienced individual by their local authorities and corporate parents. This figure also does not include those that applied for homeless accommodation after leaving their care placement. Of the 34,622 homeless applicants applying for homelessness last year, 1,479 have disclosed they have had care experience at some point in their lives, with a further 11,782 applicants responding with 'unknown', or refused to answer this question (Scottish Government 2017b). We feel that extra steps should be implemented to ensure care experienced young people do not present as homeless at any point before they are 26 years old, and if in the event they do, the correct support is in place. Our suggestion follows the lines of guidance such as: The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, The Housing Options Protocols, and Staying Put Guidance, as each explicitly state that no care leaver should ever need to present as homeless to be able to access housing. The fact that so many care leavers do present as homeless calls into question both the role of corporate parenting at a Local Government level and SHANARRI, as presenting as homelessness, prior to your 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, violates many of these indicators that were put in place by The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act in 2014 as an expansion on wellbeing from the GIRFEC approach (Scottish Government 2015).

### **Temporary accommodation**

We feel all local authorities should work closely with landlords to provide safe and suitable temporary accommodation for all care experienced young people who are at risk of presenting as homeless. One of our advisors that has experienced negative temporary accommodation herself, shares:

*I got placed in a homeless unit with adults who had drug and alcohol addictions. This accommodation wasn't appropriate for me or my new born daughter as the surrounding environment were awful for her to be raised. It was also negative for myself as I was 17 at the time and looking back as I was vulnerable, and susceptible to the*

*negative influences that were surrounding my life due to the bad placement.*

Our advisor's story is unfortunately not an uncommon occurrence, as inappropriate accommodation is also shown in a study by MacLennan (2008) where young individuals were placed in a variety of dangerous housing placements, including a B&B with a convicted murder who also resided there at the same time. When care experienced young people get placed into supported or homeless accommodation that is not suitable for them, it can have a major impact on their mental health and wellbeing, as many homeless accommodations are not suitable places for young people to live and feel safe in - which is shown clearly in the examples above. This again can be seen to question the SHANARRI indicators calling into question what is in place for young people, especially those who are in the most vulnerable categories at risk of presenting as homeless.

When speaking to young people from different local authorities, one young person stated that he was placed in a temporary flat for three months. His flat had no television ariel which he felt isolated him further. If this young person wanted to watch television, he would have had to pay for an ariel even though this was not his permanent address. Although this is a basic example of problems, which arise within temporary accommodation, it should not be easily dismissed, as this is something that is deemed very important to this young person. By giving care experienced young people a home that they can say is theirs, creates a sense of ownership, and like many other situations out-with their control, their home should be something that no-one can take away from them.

### **Other Areas of Concern**

We feel there is not enough supported accommodation options for care experienced young people. For example, East Renfrewshire only has one supported accommodation unit for all homeless young people, meaning vulnerable care experienced young people, under the age of 26, won't necessarily get the support they need. By having supported units predominantly targeting care experienced young people within all local authorities allows those most vulnerable to get the support they need.

Housing and discretionary benefits only affect poorer areas and from our own experiences 16-18 year olds find these benefits harder to receive in particular. In our experience housing options are very limited and is looked upon as a postcode lottery. Although there are now more measures put into place than before there are still huge problems with homelessness preventions. Local authorities should have more housing options for young people who have left care, and for those that have been in placements that have suddenly broken down, as we have found that homeless accommodation units are for everyone and are often filled with individuals that have drug and alcohol problems. Care experienced young people are

particularly vulnerable to such environments and this overall has negative impacts on their general health and also their physical and mental wellbeing.

Austerity affects care experienced young people disproportionately because they often come from the most deprived and poverty stricken areas. Any cuts to welfare and a dehumanised benefit systems directly impacts us, and all other vulnerable care experienced young people, which will also contribute to the high numbers of care experienced young people experiencing homelessness prior to their 26<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Supporting Evidence:**

While care leavers have only been mentioned briefly within the evidence that has been previously submitted to the committee, homelessness among young people that have experience in care has been a concern for years, and all of the above arguments are supported by decades of research and evidence. Research has consistently shown that care leavers are most likely to become homeless and/or experience housing instability as a result of their previous experiences and their vulnerability as they have limited resources and support compared to their peers (Scottish Care Leavers Covenant 2015).

Research has also shown recurring themes, such as leaving care too soon, lack of support, and inappropriate placements, have caused up to 5% of care experienced young people to become homeless as soon as they leave care, with as many as 35% of the care experienced population presenting as homeless to their local authorities before their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday (Duncalf 2009; Dixon and Stein 2003). With the legal age of an individual leaving care currently standing at 16 years old, eight times as many 16 year olds are leaving care as at 18. With the average age of leaving care currently at 17- this in comparison is younger than their peers. Many of these care experienced young people are leaving at a young age unequipped and unsupported for their transition into adulthood when moving from their placement into their own accommodation (CELCIS 2015). According to the Centre for Social Justice, 44% of care leavers stating they left care too early, and 57% were unable to manage their money and other basic living skills (The Centre for Social Justice 2015).

A study by Dixon and Stein (2003) has shown that from a focus group of 107 care experienced individuals, just over one third (35%) of individuals were homeless or had been homeless at some point since leaving care; with homelessness being defined as those sleeping rough, couch surfing, placed in a homeless hostel, or having no choice but to stay with friends or family.

### **Recommendations:**

We believe the Local Governments should provide more housing options and support services in all local authority areas, which has the ability to be tailored to

each individual's needs. This includes the likes of supported services providing vulnerable care experienced young people with crucial living skills such as: how to handle their money, tax and utilities, and how to care for a home. We feel like this will cause a positive ripple effect which has the potential of preventing young people from building up debt which in the long run will prevent them from presenting as homeless before they turn 26 years old. Our idea would be beneficial to young people such as those presented in the study above by The Centre for Social Justice. We feel like this added support providing crucial learning of basic living skills, could have potentially prevented many of the 57% of young individuals presenting as homeless due to lack of skills and knowledge in The Centre for Social Justice's study (The Centre for Social Justice 2015). Our recommendation of transitional support is also recommended by Daining and DePanfilis (2007) as providing transitional support as an option to care experienced young people, especially those most at risk of presenting as homeless, allows those individuals time to learn to manage their money, finish their education, and hopefully gain appropriate employment, all of which aids their self-sufficiency. It has also been shown that leaving care at a later stage increases the likelihood of a more successful transition as individuals will have had more time to receive basic living skills, and other fundamental skills (CELCIS 2015). If all of this extra support is set by the Local Government when working with other Committees (such as Equalities and Human Rights Committee) by providing clear guidance and examples of good practice for all Local Authorities to follow, we feel that in the long run, this will help reduce the numbers of vulnerable young people presenting to their local authority as homeless in the future.

We also believe that the government should investigate all bad practise by developing a team of designated housing officers, including a care experienced worker, that will work across all local authorities to ensure that care experienced young people are looked after by housing associations and their local authorities, as it is their duty as corporate parents to provide safe and accessible accommodation. This will be possible by creating more resources in terms of housing and support for care experienced young people. Doing so will put pressure on housing associations to fulfil their duties as corporate parents, and provide adequate housing in safer, better areas to those care experienced young people that need it. Overall, these care experienced young people are among the most vulnerable and they need to be placed within a safe environment when extra support is needed, surrounded by positive influences, for any chance to succeed in their future.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope our insight has been helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspects in further detail.

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