

Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from the Scottish Care Leavers Covenant

The Scottish Care Leavers Covenant supports Scotland's corporate parents, carers, practitioners, managers and decision makers in fulfilling their duties to improve the life chances of all of Scotland's care leavers. Created by an alliance of stakeholders (comprising Staf, Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS), Who Cares? Scotland, Barnardo's, Life Changes Trust, Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, IRISS and Quarriers) the Covenant calls upon all corporate parents to uphold particular principles in all areas of their work, and commit to actions which, if implemented fully and consistently, will transform culture and practice across all corporate parents.

As of July 2016, there were 15,317 looked after children, and 4,602 care leavers (young people eligible for aftercare services) in Scotland.¹ While the circumstances, needs and views of these children and young people are rich and varied, all have experienced major difficulties in their lives.² Their outcomes are poor across a range of indicators, and these are children and young people in need of society's conscientious support and understanding. Research consistently highlights that care leavers are more likely to become homeless or experience housing instability, due to their vulnerability and limited social and economic resources.³

Due to the level of need and vulnerability of this group of young people, and the state's responsibilities to safeguard their rights and promote their wellbeing, [Part 9: Corporate Parenting of the Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#), (and associated [statutory guidance](#)), requires Scottish Ministers, local authorities and a range of other public sector bodies to uphold particular responsibilities in all areas of their work. Corporate parents must be alert to matters which adversely impact on looked after children and care leavers, promote their interests, and enable them to make use of supports and services they provide. As such, particular attention must be paid to these individual's needs when considering homelessness in Scotland.

Messages from national data

In 2015/16, 1,283 young people over the age of 16 ceased to be looked after (became 'care leavers'). Scottish Government statistics show that 10 of these young people immediately became homeless.⁴ It is deeply concerning that this would be the experience of any young person with an experience of care.

Whilst 52% of the 4,602 young people eligible for aftercare in Scotland have not experienced homelessness according to national statistics, it is concerning that 8%

(377 individuals) have - on one or more occasions. Similarly concerning is that the experiences of the remaining 40% (1,812 individuals) are recorded as 'not known', either because they are not in receipt of aftercare, or for other reasons. Whilst these individuals *could* be accessing stable, settled housing, they could equally be experiencing chaotic and dangerous periods of homelessness. The onus must be on corporate parents to encourage, enable and support care leavers to have positive, sustained relationships with them, so there will be fewer 'unknowns' in our national data, and we can be clearer about the national picture of need.

Similar concerns are raised from national homelessness data. Of the 34,622 homeless applicants in Scotland last year, when asked about previous experience of being looked after 734 individuals identified that they had left care within the last 5 years, and 745 had left care more than 5 years ago. It is concerning that 11,782 applicants did not know, or refused to answer this question.⁵ This suggests improvements are required in the manner in which the question is asked, and we would be happy to support this.

Key issues for care leavers

Accessing and maintaining accommodation can be an incredible challenge for young people leaving care. Although each individual is different, there are a variety of reasons which contribute to care leavers increased vulnerability to homelessness:

- Young people leaving care have invariably experienced trauma, loss or other disadvantage in their background. Many have experienced multiple, significant disadvantages. In addition to pre-existing vulnerabilities, care leavers are often expected to manage **multiple changes** at the same time: moving accommodation, often moving neighbourhoods, and leaving a care setting. Some may be experiencing mental health difficulties, and some may be transitioning from secure care or custody. These are individuals with **complex lives and often limited supports** which impact significantly on their vulnerability.
- Care leavers move on to live more independently at a much younger **age** (average age = 17) than young people in the rest of the population, when they are least equipped to do this successfully. Leaving care at a later stage increases young people's chances of a successful transition.⁶
- Care leavers may not have access to **suitable accommodation options** to meet their individual needs. Inappropriate housing options may include adult hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation, where often young people are vulnerable and do not feel safe. We would advocate that no vulnerable care leaver should be placed in B&B accommodation. In addition to fear and vulnerability, poor accommodation options (for example those geographically

far from normal networks of support) prevent continuity of care for care leavers and disrupt young people's community connections.⁷

- Many young people have **family and friends** who they can turn to when experiencing difficulties; not all young people with care experiences will have this level of emotional and practical support. In times of housing difficulty, it may not be possible or desirable for care leavers to return to stay with biological family (often to the same negative environments they were removed from in the first place), leading to homelessness.
- Care leavers do not have the same opportunities to 'return home' and make mistakes as their peers, which leaves them highly vulnerable. This means it is essential that care leavers are **adequately prepared**, both practically and emotionally, for the transition to adulthood and ultimately independent living, before their care placement ceases.
- **Emotional support** is critical for care leavers living independently for the first time. Young people identify the 'small things' that can matter most – having someone who will listen and access to support 'out of hours' when they are most likely to need it.⁸ Enabling and encouraging positive, enduring relationships with former carers, residential workers or other significant adults is critical to this.⁹ Young people leaving care require holistic, person centred planning and the establishment of reliable, accessible networks of support. In addition, access to appropriate mental health services is vital to supporting emotional well-being.
- **Periods of transition** to supported or independent living are incredibly challenging times for care leavers.¹⁰ Care leavers must be fully involved in holistic, person centred pathways planning, and have opportunities to make carefully planned, staged transitions to new living arrangements that will meet their needs. This process needs to involve all partners' e.g. social work, housing, health, and education/training.
- Accessing timely **financial support** is imperative. There can be confusion about the eligibility to aftercare services due to strict criteria. Practical help to ensure access to all available financial support is vital.
- **Ongoing, flexible support** is needed to ensure that young people can successfully sustain suitable living arrangements. Opportunities for gradual and supported transitions well into adulthood, rather than a focus only on the leaving care event, are necessary for this.¹¹ Accommodation needs to be of good quality with sufficient furnishings. Fundamentally, care leavers need to feel safe and secure, and access to 24 hours support may be necessary.
- There can be additional barriers for care leavers **living in or moving to a local authority area other than their responsible authority**, we are aware of situations where such individuals have not been considered to have the same priority for services.
- A lack of awareness of their rights and entitlements as care leavers can affect individual's ability to access all of the services to which they are entitled. This

can be exacerbated where professionals also do not have a full and accurate awareness of rights, policy, guidance and legislation to advocate on behalf of care leavers.

Implementation of legislation, policy and guidance

A number of policy and legislative commitments recognise the challenges faced by care leavers in terms of housing. [Housing Options Protocols for Care Leavers - Guidance for Corporate Parents: Improving housing and accommodation outcomes for Scotland's care leavers](#) were launched by Scottish Government in October 2013. This practical guidance was designed to assist Community Planning Partnerships and corporate parents to ensure the housing and accommodation needs of care leavers are consistently met to a high standard. Ensuring young people are fully involved in planning, facilitating staged transitions to new living arrangements, and establishing clear and effective communication between corporate parents and individuals are crucial.

The principles and philosophy underlining these protocols are laid out in Scottish Government 2013 guidance [Staying Put Scotland: Providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging](#). Staying Put represents a philosophy of care whereby young people are supported and enabled to remain in care for longer, rather than being expected or encouraged to leave before they are ready. The central elements of Staying Put are the importance of relationship-based practice and extended and graduated transitions in achieving long term positive futures for young people leaving care.

The [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#) (2015) sets out key actions organisations can take to begin to close the outcome gap for care leavers under a number of themes, one of which is Housing and Accommodation. The Covenant calls upon all corporate parents to commit to and uphold particular principles in all areas of their work. Young people should be encouraged and enabled to remain in their care placement until they are ready to move on, graduated and extended transitions from care should be the norm, and practice should be relationship based.

The Housing Options Protocols, Staying Put guidance, and Scottish Care Leavers Covenant all explicitly state that no care leaver should be required to present as homeless in order to be able to access housing. We are aware through our networks that this continues to be common practice in some areas.

[The Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) came into force in April 2015. Part 10 of this Act increased the age of eligibility for aftercare support for care leavers up to the age of twenty-six (providing a young person is deemed eligible after assessment). Part 11 of the Act sets out Continuing Care provisions enabling young people who have ceased to be looked after to remain in the same accommodation

and receive the same assistance as when previously looked after. The challenge is in ensuring this new legislation actually translates into a meaningful difference for young people. In practice, the responsibility for requesting support can remain with the young person. Therefore, it is critical that young people up to the age of 26 are aware of their rights and entitlements and are provided with appropriate support to access services. They also need redress mechanisms to fairly challenge decisions where they have been deemed not meet the eligibility criteria.

As noted above, Part 9 of the 2014 Act sets out the duties and responsibilities for Scottish Ministers and public bodies as corporate parents. The provision of a safe, caring and appropriate home for every looked after child and care leaver is a fundamental responsibility, for all young people under the age of 26. As set out in Schedule 4 of the Act, all local authorities and the Scottish Housing Regulator are named as relevant public bodies that have a duty to ensure the wellbeing and address the needs of all looked after children, young people and care leavers. Crucially, corporate parenting requires collaboration and joint working, and it is clear that improvements cannot be made by services working alone.¹² Reporting and accountability for public bodies fulfilling their duties should be determined through reports to Scottish Ministers, which should be subject to careful scrutiny.

The policy and legislative landscape in Scotland provides an enabling context to eliminating homelessness for looked after young people and care leavers, **however concerns remain that the full implementation of policy into practice exists only in pockets**. Continued, concerted attention should be focussed on full and effective implementation on a national scale. This requires ongoing political commitment, and leadership at national and local levels.

Prevention, early intervention and planning

While high quality, ongoing support into adulthood is critical, we know that improving outcomes for care leavers can only be achieved through good, stable, care experiences.¹³

Even before children and young people become looked after - from the moment wellbeing needs arise - failure to respond early, holistically and comprehensively to the needs of children and their families leads to adverse experience compounding adverse experience, with the impact (personal and societal) felt across the life course. Realisation of the [Getting it Right for Every Child](#) policy framework (with its objectives of delivering the right help, at the right time, in the right way to children and families) would contribute much to improving the lives of children and families in all parts of society, and ultimately to reducing negative outcomes for care leavers and issues such as homelessness.

Where children and young people are looked after or are care leavers, corporate parents and Community Planning Partnerships should take a preventative approach to addressing homelessness. Through strategic planning, local areas can identify numbers and circumstances of individuals who may be likely to be ready to move on from their care placements in advance and consider resources early, rather than taking a more reactive approach.

Conclusion

Care leavers should not experience homelessness. The current situation is not acceptable for Scotland's care leavers. Despite the complex issues faced by many, through full and effective implementation of existing policy, relationship based practice, robust planning which takes the views and needs of the individual into account, and joined up working by corporate parents, it is possible to reduce risk and ensure care leavers have a safe and secure place to live.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.

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¹ Scottish Government (2017). [Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland 2015/16](#). Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

² SWIA (2006). *Extraordinary Lives: Creating a positive future for looked after children in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Social Work Inspection Agency.

³ Scottish Care Leavers Covenant (2015) <http://www.scottishcareleaverscovenant.org/covenant/>

⁴ Scottish Government (2017). [Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland 2015/16](#). Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

⁵ Scottish Government (2017) [Homelessness in Scotland: Annual Publication 2015/16 Tables - Table 5](#)

⁶ CELCIS (2015) [Housing Options and Care Leavers: Improving Outcomes into Adulthood](#)

⁷ CELCIS (2015) [Housing Options and Care Leavers: Improving Outcomes into Adulthood](#)

⁸ The Debate Project (2009) ['Life after care': Young people's views on leaving care](#)

⁹ Swain, V. (2016) [Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On](#). TFN; Boddy J (2013) [Understanding permanence for looked after children](#): A review of research for the Care Inquiry. London: The Care Inquiry.

¹⁰ Stein, M. (2012) *Young People Leaving Care*, London: Jessica Kingsley

¹¹ Stein, M. (2010) *Increasing the number of care leavers in 'settled, safe accommodation'*. London: C4EO

¹² Baker, C. (2017) [Care Leaver Transitions](#), Devon: Research in practice

¹³ Scottish Care Leavers Covenant (2015) <http://www.scottishcareleaverscovenant.org/covenant/>