



“ The Corporate Parenting of young people in care is the responsibility of all of us. It is unacceptable that any child in care ends up homeless.

It is time to act.

”

Sharon Lovell

National Executive Director NYAS Cymru
(the National Youth Advocacy Service)

Chair of End Youth Homelessness Cymru's
working group examining the links between
the care system and youth homelessness

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About End Youth Homelessness Cymru

End Youth Homelessness Cymru is a coalition, led by [Llamau](#), determined to end youth homelessness; a mission we believe is both vital and achievable.

We cannot do this alone, but by building a national movement and working with partners, we aim to create the systemic and cultural change necessary to prevent and end youth homelessness in Wales.



Foreword

Sharon Lovell

National Executive Director – NYAS Cymru (the National Youth Advocacy Service)

Chair of End Youth Homelessness Cymru's working group examining the links between the care system and youth homelessness

The numbers of care-leavers experiencing youth homelessness in Wales have been steadily increasing in recent years. This important study examines why young, care experienced people are more at risk of becoming homeless and vulnerably housed than their non-care experienced peers. By amplifying young people's voices it shows how the lack of protection from caring families exposes these young people to harm; it shows how they are exposed to further harm when the pavements become their pillows; importantly it shows that the systems we have in place in Wales for these young people need to be reconsidered. The voices and stories presented by young people in this report are heartbreaking.

When I took on the role as Chair for the End Youth Homelessness Group for Care Experienced Young People in 2019, I was clear with colleagues: this group is going

to think big, we are going to aim high – we are going on a journey to END Youth Homelessness. Since the group was established we have put in place an ambitious action plan and worked with Welsh Government and our partners in the Local Authority, Youth Service, Health, Housing, Education and Third sectors, to both highlight the increased vulnerability to homelessness of care experienced young people and to promote preventative solutions. The evidence presented in this report takes us further on that journey, providing the perspective of young people trying to make their ways through the systems we have set up for them, demonstrating both where they've been let down and what is working well. From this evidence, a number of recommendations are presented which we feel need to be implemented and adopted in order to reduce and end these raising figures.

This report was co-produced by young people, as a participatory research study designed with and for care experienced young people as peer researchers. Young people are the experts within this study; they are experts by experience.

I would like to thank the wonderful staff at Llamau for making this study happen – especially Jemma Bridgeman and Hugh Russell. My sincere thanks to all the young people who took part as peer researchers and those who shared their experience. The work achieved on the End Youth Homelessness Cymru group is undertaken by a diverse, energized and committed team, which it is a pleasure to be part of. Thanks to all of them.

“ The Corporate Parenting of young people in care is the responsibility of all of us. It is unacceptable that any child in care ends up homeless.

It is time to act.

”

I therefore ask all who read this to think about what we can do together to make the recommendations within this report a reality, in order to end youth homelessness for care experienced young people.

Collated Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Welsh Government should review the practical implementation of the Barnardo's Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales.

That the numbers of care experienced young people becoming homeless has increased since the Framework's development should trigger a review of its use and effectiveness, including whether local authorities have sufficient resources to make best use of it.

Recommendation 2

A multi-agency review should be undertaken any time a care experienced young person presents to a local authority as homeless or at-risk-of-homelessness.

This would ensure that the young person gets the help they are entitled to but also provide an opportunity for all relevant partners to review and address any flaws within systems, caused by miscommunication, lack of resource or disconnection between services, to ensure that future, similar cases are prevented. This should be led by the director of children's services, or a local authority colleague of equivalent seniority, to ensure that the group's findings can swiftly lead to remedial action.

Recommendation 3

Welsh Government should explore the feasibility of a 'Right to Return to Care' policy.

Care experienced young people need to be able to make mistakes and still be supported by the system, including those who have provided them with care and guidance in the past, to avoid the traumatic experience of homelessness. Young people should be given the option to return to their care placement or another support option, such as Supported Lodgings, if they need it. Other young people are able to return to and receive ongoing support from their parents, in the event of a relationship breakdown for instance. There should be parity for care experienced young people.

Recommendation 4

Welsh Government and Local Authorities should review local connection rules and practice with regard to care experienced young people.

Young people told us that they were declined local connection to areas they had been placed in and felt settled. Care experienced young people placed out-of-county should be able to have the area they have been placed in considered as an additional 'local connection' when moving on – the choice should lie with the young person. This additional flexibility would enable young people to live close to support networks and reduce the loneliness described in this paper.

Recommendation 5

Local authority housing options teams must always proactively seek to establish whether a young person is care experienced, upon presentation as at-risk-of-homelessness.

They must ensure that those who are care experienced are able to access all the support to which they are entitled, in cooperation with social services.

Recommendation 6

Welsh Government should review the capacity and levels of staff turnover in social services, providing additional investment, as necessary.

A review of the size and complexity of social services caseloads is needed, with the input of young people taken into account. Further investment in social services to allow for smaller case-loads could help to minimise the disruptive experiences in care, which young people have suggested were contributory to their later homelessness.

Recommendation 7

Corporate parents need to ensure care leavers' financial capabilities are developed through the pathway planning process and support is given to them from professionals to prepare for financial independence.

The young people we spoke to identified budgeting as the area they needed the most support with. Many felt unprepared for independent living, which contributed to the failure of their tenancies. Every local authority, as a corporate parent, should ensure that their young people have the opportunity to develop these skills while in care.

Recommendation 8

UK Government should bring forward care leavers' exemption from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Universal Credit.

Currently care leavers are only exempted from the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) until they are 22. Once they turn 22 the housing element of Universal Credit is limited to the lower SAR meaning they can only afford to pay for a room in a shared house, which is inappropriate for many and restricts their ability to access settled accommodation. UK Government have pledged to address this in October 2023, but there remains a gap in the system until then which they should close as soon as possible.

Recommendation 9

Local Authorities should review the level of support available to young people in their care making the transition between CAMHS and adult mental health services.

Young people told us that consistency of support through this key transitional period is very important to them. Given the trauma that has been experienced by many young people in care, they should be a high priority for mental health support, whether via CAMHS or adult mental health services.

Recommendation 10

Local Authorities should review the availability of bereavement support to care-experienced and homeless young people.

Evidence from young people spoken to for this report indicates a link between bereavement, mental ill health and homelessness. The ability of care experienced young people to access bereavement support consistently and quickly, when needed, should be reviewed by all local authorities and appropriate action, such as additional staff training on the effects of bereavement and how to offer support, taken.

Recommendation 11

Welsh Government should commit to ensuring that no 16 or 17 year old should be accommodated in unsupported temporary accommodation.

16 and 17 year olds who present to a local authority as homeless, whether care experienced or not, should be found appropriate, supported accommodation, whether via a supported housing project, foster placement, supported lodgings or similar, supported placement. If short term accommodation is required, to allow for assessments to be made and appropriate accommodation found, it must meet the minimum standards set out by young people in this report, with support provided and a timescale provided to the young person for their move to settled accommodation.

Recommendation 12

Welsh Government should deliver a commitment to strictly limit the length of time that any young person over the age of 17 should be expected to remain in temporary accommodation before being found settled housing, as has been done in Scotland.

The term accepted in Scotland is 7 days. This fits with Welsh Government's current stated approach of rapid-rehousing in settled accommodation. This settled accommodation might include youth-focussed, shared supported accommodation, or single-person accommodation (with floating support, as necessary), depending on the needs of the young person.

Recommendation 13

Welsh Government should enforce new, minimum standards of temporary accommodation.

These should be agreed in consultation with young people and informed by the 'golden rules' set out in this paper.

Introduction and Background

This report is based on the voices and experiences of care experienced young people who have been, or are currently, homeless across Wales. The aim of this research is to amplify these young people's voices to highlight the challenges they have faced when homeless and the need for reform of systems which have failed to prevent their homelessness. We appreciate that the experiences of young people presented in this report are by no means representative of the experiences of the majority of care experienced young people in Wales, but a disproportionately high number of looked-after or formerly looked-after young people will recognise their own stories in those presented here.

Interviews with young people took place from October 2019 until March 2020. The participants in the study were aged from 17 to 24 and were living in 10 different local authorities, at the time of interview. We spoke to 11 young women and 16 young men who had been in care and experienced youth homelessness.

The research was co-designed with care experienced young people from across Wales. Young people have been meaningfully involved in the study from set-up to dissemination. We were privileged to work with a group of care experienced peer researchers who have selected themes for the study, co-designed interview questions, attended interviews with us, analysed the findings and disseminated the research. We have also presented our findings to young people across Wales to check they reflect their experiences.

The young people we spoke to had experience of some of the worst forms of homelessness. One of the young people we spoke to had been street homeless. He is now in settled accommodation, with support. He describes what it was like to be street homeless when he was just 18:

“

It was in the middle of winter, we were sat in this tent and it was pitch black. I did not realise I had actually set it next to a grass verge and it had rained like mad at night so the tent and everything just got soaked. I woke up to the point I could barely take a breath, I was so cold and I was soaking wet. I literally had to get up and I thought to myself how can I heat myself up quick. So I started running up to the hospital and without any security seeing me I ran and just stayed in the men's toilets just to keep warm through the night.

Lewys, 20

”

The principal evidence this report's findings and recommendations are based on comes from these interviews, along with discussion of relevant literature and statutory data. The literature demonstrates that care experienced young people have well understood needs (Whalen, 2015). There is, indeed, a wealth of literature on this particular issue and there have been some positive policy developments in recent years, notably the Barnardo's Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework (Barnardo's, 2016) and the introduction of When I'm Ready, a Welsh Government scheme designed to allow young people to stay in foster care until they feel ready to move on. The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework (Barnardo's, 2016) aims to help organisations working with care experienced young people find

suitable accommodation it can also be used by commissioners to inform housing strategies. 'When I'm Ready' supports young people in foster care to remain living with their foster carers after they turn 18. This is designed to enable them to stay with a supportive and nurturing family until they are 21 or 25 if they are in approved education or training (Welsh Government, 2016). However, the evidence provided by those who have experienced youth homelessness suggests that in some cases we are failing to fully support our care experienced young people. In conjunction with data, which shows an increase in numbers entering care and correlating data showing an increase in care experienced young people presenting as homeless, there is a clear case for reconsideration of the systems in place for this group.

Number of Homeless, Care Experienced Young People

As of the 31st of March 2019, there were 6,846 children in the care of local authorities, in Wales, up from 5,660 on 31st March 2016 (Stats Wales, 2019). A similar rise can be seen in Welsh Government's statistics for care-leavers experiencing homelessness, from 69 to 90 between 15/16 and 18/19 (Stats Wales, 2019).

Households found to be eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need during the year:

Categories of priority need by type of household (section 75)

A care leaver or person at particular risk of sexual or financial exploitation, 18 years or over but under the age of 21

Year	Number of households
2018/19	90
2017/18	81
2016/17	69
2015/16	69

As with all forms of official reporting on youth homelessness, these numbers should be read with the understanding that they only reflect those who have presented to local authorities as homeless and have been confirmed as a care leaver, so there is scope for undercounting.

A note of specific caution should be sounded when discussing the figures presented on Stats Wales, which do not allow the reader to fully gauge the extent of the issue. The category under which

data are collected is: 'A care leaver or person at particular risk of sexual or financial exploitation, 18 years or over but under the age of 21', which reflects categorisation in legislation setting out who is to be considered in priority need and groups care leavers with other vulnerable young adults. 16 and 17 year olds are grouped together for the purposes of homelessness data – there is no differentiation between those who are in care and those who are not.

Literature

This study's findings are supported by academic and practitioner research throughout the report. The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) recently completed a literature review, which specifically included the views of children and young people (Park et al, 2020). The review explained that frequent placement moves led to care experienced children and young people finding it difficult to establish relationships (Park et al, 2020). The young people we interviewed spoke of instability and placement moves as 'just part of being in care'. As a consequence of frequent placement moves, young people experience a repeated need to rebuild relationships, which research indicates can lead to social isolation (Action for Children, 2017). In interviews, young people told us they felt lonely and isolated and in some cases, this had led to them associating with people who did not have their best interests at heart, which they felt had contributed to them later experiencing homelessness.

Study after study mentions that children in state care are not a homogenous group. Paths into care differ, as with the family experiences that led to individuals being taken into care (Oliver, 2010) and the ages when they were taken into care, reflecting wide and diverse trajectories and backgrounds (Holt, & Kirwan, 2012). This diversity was reflected in the group we interviewed, whose journeys into care, ages they went into care, and placement moves all differed. However, when we look at the outcomes for many care experienced young people, a more consistent picture emerges of disproportionate experiences of homelessness, poor mental health, poor educational achievements, being known to the criminal justice sector, unemployment, teenage parenting and poor social networks (Holt, & Kirwan, 2012). One of the young people we spoke to felt it was unacceptable that care experienced young people disproportionately experience homelessness. He commented:

“

I want to see a decrease of homelessness. I don't want to see an increase of it. I want people from your company to come up to me and say: 'guess what, we've just built a new block of flats now for young care leavers.' So if they are homeless (they have) a nice little refuge. I want them to go into training flats. I don't want a person who has been through the care system begging for money off me. I want them to have a better life than what I had.

Dylan, 23

”

Methodology: Amplifying the Voices of Care Experienced Young People

Peer Researchers

This study has used a participatory research design with care experienced young people acting as peer researchers. Research has shown that peer research is an effective way of empowering young people to develop research skills and knowledge as well as improving services for care experienced young people (Torrönen & Vornanen, 2014). As such, we supported six peer researchers across Wales who were keen to be involved (in a similar fashion to the peer-led work we undertook on [LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness](#) in 2019). All six peer researchers received bespoke training on Research Methods and 'Having a Voice in Welsh Politics' delivered by End Youth Homelessness Cymru's (EYHC) research team.

When conducting research with peer researchers it is important to acknowledge they are experts within their own experience. In order to be effective and inclusive, it is our belief (supported by literature, such as Dixon et al 2015) that peer researchers should take an active and participatory role in the research process from set-up to dissemination and not just be involved in data collection.

Care experienced young people have therefore been meaningfully involved throughout the research process. Two young people in north Wales and one young person in south Wales analysed the themes of the research and co-designed interview questions. Research findings were also fed back to a focus group in north Wales to check whether they agreed with our presentation of them. Peer researchers' expertise was invaluable, particularly when we planned the study and interview questions and when we analysed the data. The study focusses on recent experiences of the care/homelessness systems so by including people with recent, lived experience on the research team, insights were gleaned that might otherwise have been missed.

To ensure recommendations could be applied to the existing legislative context, the study's scope was to examine the experiences of young people who left care after the introduction of the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework in Wales in 2016. The majority of the young people we spoke to in the study had left care since 2016.

Ethics

As with all research undertaken by EYHC, ethical considerations were fundamentally important, given that the research involved such a vulnerable group. Both peer researchers and participants were recruited via partner organisations from around Wales, who were providing support to the young people we worked with. EYHC is a Wales-wide coalition, so it was important that we represented the experiences of young people from across the country. Support staff from partner organisations identified young people who had experienced care and had been or were currently homeless. Interviews with young people were undertaken in spaces where the young people told us they felt comfortable - an appropriate room (e.g. training room/ private lounge) either in the supported housing project they lived in or in an office of the housing or support organisation where they were housed or received support. Holding interviews in these places also meant support was available should they need it, during or after the interview.

A consent form and information sheet were provided. Written in young person-friendly language these forms explained the purpose of the study and ethical guidelines. Participants were reminded their involvement was voluntary, they were told they did not have to answer any questions they didn't want to, and that their responses would be presented anonymously (Torrönen, & Vornanen, 2014). We remained constantly aware of the vulnerable position of participants and were always prepared to guide participants to relevant support.

Care Experienced Interview Participants

We interviewed 27 young people who had been in care and had been or were, at the time, homeless. When the Welsh Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) (2017) were gathering data for their influential report 'Care Experienced Children and Young People' they consulted 30 young people across Wales about their experiences of being in care, so we took our participant target from them. Unfortunately, we had to cut short just before reaching this target as the COVID-19 pandemic made it unsafe to interview face-to-face, in the same style as the other interviews had been undertaken.

Achieving representation from young people who had experienced systems across different local authorities in Wales was an important objective, so we spoke to young people in Caerphilly, Cardiff,

Conwy, Gwynedd, Isle of Anglesey, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Torfaen, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Wrexham.

Of the 27 care experienced young people we spoke to, twelve were living in settled accommodation in a mix of tenures including the private rented sector, local authority and housing association properties. Thirteen were still homeless at the time of the interviews: one participant did not want to reveal her living situation just answering it was 'complicated'. Of the twelve young people living in settled accommodation, two had sofa surfed when they were homeless; four had lived in supported housing; one had stayed in B&B's and five had been street homeless, sleeping in tents, shop doorways or car parks.

Where Participants were Living at the Time of Interview	Number of Participants
Homeless: Sofa surfing	3
Homeless: Night Shelter (including floor space)	5
Homeless: Staying in a Bed & Breakfast (B&B)	1
Homeless: Staying in supported housing	4
Returned to live in the family home	1
Did not disclose	1
Living in settled accommodation	12
Total	27

Age of Participants

The participants in the study were aged from 17 to 24. We included 17 year olds on a case-by-case basis, in conjunction with their support workers. In all we interviewed three 17 year olds, two with support workers present in the interview

and one with a support worker in the next room. Of the other participants two were aged 18, five were aged 19, nine were aged 20, one was aged 21, three were aged 22, two were aged 23 and two were aged 24.

Interviews with Other Homeless Young People

During the data collection process, EYHC also interviewed thirteen young people who had been homeless but did not have direct experience of the care system. The care experienced young people we spoke with often wanted to be interviewed with friends who had experienced homelessness, but had not been in care. Separating the two groups at the time of the interviews, particularly when undertaking them as drop-in sessions, would not have been appropriate. EYHC believe that every young persons' experience is valid, whether directly relevant to this study or not, so although their responses have been left out of the data presented in this report, it is appropriate to mention their experience in this introduction. In each case these young people had similar backgrounds and homelessness experiences to the care-experienced young people but without the same legal protections and financial assistance available to those who had been, or were in care. Bender et al (2015) undertook a large study of

homeless youth, in which they examined the crossover between care leavers and the general youth homeless population. They found few differences between those who had been in foster care and those who had not, finding they shared risk factors including child abuse and neglect, family conflict and poverty (Bender et al, 2015). However, they found that young people who had been in foster care were generally homeless for longer periods than those who had not, suggesting they may become homeless earlier and may be more vulnerable to homelessness and may need homelessness support services for a longer duration than their non-care experienced peers (Bender et al, 2015). There is a strong case to be made that the system of support available to care experienced young people should be accessible to other young people who have been made homeless. They have often experienced comparable trauma and need help to leave their experience of homelessness behind them.

Input of Expert Group

Along with the input of experts-by-experience into this work, we have also been guided throughout by a group of practitioners and academics who work in, or whose research focusses on, the systems explored in this paper. End Youth Homelessness Cymru works by bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds to achieve collective impact. With this in mind, our group has discussed the issues that sit at the heart of the disproportionate likelihood of looked after children going

on to experience homelessness, pulling together an action plan, which informs some of this report's recommendations. Members of the group have also considered and shaped drafts of this report, for which we are most grateful. Further input was secured in identifying good or promising practice examples, which are shared through the report to guide commissioners or practitioners looking for fresh approaches to some of the issues laid out in this paper.

The group membership has changed over c. 18 months of existence but, at the time of this report's preparation, membership is:

Sharon Lovell

Chairperson, National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)

Henry Vaile

Welsh Government

Dr Howard Williamson

University of South Wales

Kate Hollinshead

Vale of Glamorgan Council

Sophie Morris

Team Around the Tenancy (TGP Cymru)

Jay McCabe

Swansea Council

Sarah Wynn

Caerphilly Council

Dr Shelley McCann

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Tim Crahart

Voices From Care Cymru

Elizabeth Flowers

The Office of the Children's Commissioner

Jemma Bridgeman

End Youth Homelessness Cymru

Hugh Russell

End Youth Homelessness Cymru

Understanding why Care Experienced Young People Become Homeless

This chapter examines the structural issues, system failures and relationship breakdowns that can lead to a young person experiencing homelessness.

The evidence suggests care experienced young people are more vulnerable to homelessness than their peers. A Canadian study found 57.8% of homeless youth had been involved in the child welfare system and a UK study found between 22-33% of care experienced young people experienced homelessness within a year of leaving care (Schwan et al, 2018). Care experienced young people often do not have the support networks that other young people have to fall back on when they experience housing insecurity and homelessness (Whalen, 2015). Care experienced young people are also expected to transition to independence at a much earlier age than their peers, on average (Sutherland, 2019). Research describes a 'cliff edge' of care where young people move out when they are 18 whether or not they feel prepared or ready (Whalen, 2015).

Research suggests care experienced young people often have a weak informal support network, with little or no contact with their biological family during their time in care and there is a risk that they will enter adulthood alone, without support when social services are no longer involved (Bengtsson et al, 2018). Bengtsson et al, 2018 suggest this results in a double vulnerability during their transition to adulthood and an increased probability of social exclusion before they have the chance to establish themselves as independent adults.

When researchers have looked at homelessness in the past, they have, in many cases, given the impression that homelessness is random and distributed across the population. This has made it difficult, historically, to either predict or prevent homelessness. More recent research shows that this is not the case – Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018), made a cogent argument that those members of the population who have experienced childhood poverty have a significantly greater likelihood of being made homeless later in life. Expanding on this argument, the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) international review of evidence on preventing youth homelessness lays out the case for a three-tiered set of causal factors (designed by Gaetz and Dej, 2017) explaining why a young person might become homeless (Schwan et al, 2018). Stirling's (2018) mapping of youth homeless interventions for care experienced young people across Wales is structured using the typology of homelessness prevention used by Schwan et al (2018) which is based on Gaetz and Dej's (2017) typology to homelessness.

The WCPP review explains that youth homelessness occurs as a result of an interaction between **structural factors** (such as childhood poverty or the lack of affordable housing), **system failures** (where systems are not designed with a user in mind or fail to communicate with one another to the detriment of the user – the care and housing systems are often a good example) and **individual and relational circumstances** (Gaetz and DeJ, 2017). The latter – personal and relational crises – often occur because the structural and systemic issues in a young person’s life have not been addressed. System failures for care experienced young people include a lack of support when they are transitioning from care and the cliff edge of leaving care when they are just 18 (Schwan et al, 2018). System failures are exacerbated by structural factors such as a lack of affordable housing the vast majority of 18 year olds would not be able to support

themselves to live independently, yet care experienced young people are expected to do just that (Schwan et al, 2018). This helps explain that for any young person experiencing homelessness it is often the cumulative impact of a number of factors rather than a single cause, and that many young people are born into circumstances that make them particularly likely to experience homelessness later in life, without intervention.

In interviews with young people, we asked questions about the causes of their homelessness; specifically, we asked what they felt was the main reason for their homelessness and secondly, we asked how they felt other young people could be prevented from becoming homeless in the future. Their responses, as exemplified below, bore out Gaetz and DeJ’s (2017) causal framing, with experiences of all three causes highlighted by young people as having contributed to their homelessness.

Structural Factors

Structural Factors are broad systematic, economic and societal issues that affect opportunities, social environments and outcomes for individuals e.g. poverty, discrimination and a lack of affordable housing (Gaetz & DeJ, 2017). These tend to underlie systemic and individual issues (e.g. a structural issue like poverty, might lead to a system failure, such as reliance on an insufficient welfare system, which leads to an individual's inability to pay rent, leading to homelessness). Young people felt strongly that structural factors had a major impact on their homelessness, focussing frequently on the undersupply of affordable housing available to them, in particular. To counter this, they suggested building more houses and bringing empty properties back into use.

"I think one of the things I would ask for is to build more houses. There are just not enough houses around here at all. There are just not enough places for young people to go"

– Eryn, 20

“

There should be more options on where to go. There is nothing. When you see all them houses that are all boarded up. There is nothing being done with them.

Dafydd, 20

”

Some young people described their anger at the failure to provide sufficient affordable housing for them and their peers, with one noting that they felt like they were being mocked.

"There is a huge building, it used to be (a bank), they are knocking it down to build a restaurant. We don't need another restaurant. Give something to people who need it not another over-priced restaurant that we will never see...because we don't earn enough. It's mocking. It's really, really mocking"

– Bill, 17

Systems Failures

Systems failures that contribute to young people experiencing homelessness include barriers to accessing public systems, failed transitions between institutions and silos and gaps both within and between government funded departments and systems (including not-for-profit agencies). System failures within

social services, health, housing and other areas were repeatedly described during the interviews and clearly contributed to many of the care experienced young people we interviewed becoming homeless. One young woman described how young people can fall between systems:

“

Obviously you have got the people who are homeless sleeping on sofas, you've got other young ones sleeping in B&B's, or the others who are in the middle of the system - 17 turning 18. You've got social services saying: 'they are not my (responsibility), I don't look after them anymore - they are 18, that's housing.' Then housing go 'well they are 17 they are not ours yet'. So you've got the battle (within) the council of who looks after (that young person). Then you've got a PA who has disappeared to get a new job and you are skint and you have no other support.

Eryn, 20

”

The Justice System

One young person described their experience of being discharged from prison into homelessness due to a systems failure:

“

They gave me housing forms (in prison). They were supposed to set me up for a hostel. It's supposed to be a probation hostel for when people come out. I got promised that place and they didn't give me that place when I came out. I went straight to housing options the second I came out. I didn't go for no food. I didn't see none of my cousins, I went straight to housing. I got promised a hostel and I was looking forward to it. Before I went to jail too I was homeless for about two months. Literally staying on the street and when I came out they said go down to the night shelter and I have been waiting for my hostel ever since.

Nick, 20

”

Pierpoint and Hoolachan's (2019) recent evaluation of the Welsh Government's 'National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate' covered some positive examples of how the pathway promotes multi-agency work, with one participant stating:

"We've seen some really good examples of three, four-way partnership based joined up approaches in terms of a young person's need and stuff and often that involving offending behaviour".

– Pierpoint & Hoolachan 2019: 54

However, a strong theme of the review was that the pathway designed to reduce systems failures for the benefit of young people, was undermined by structural issues, notably a lack of available housing:

"...I don't think it's an issue around policy or procedure or guidance. It's an issue of resources available"

– Pierpoint & Hoolachan 2019: 54

The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales

Another pathway, designed by Barnardo's and partners, the 'Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales', exists to guide local authorities in helping young people to transition from care to settled housing (Barnardo's, 2016). The pathway has been designed to be used at both strategic and operational levels: to help support staff to ensure that looked-after children have a smooth transition into settled housing and by commissioners to inform housing strategies (Barnardo's, 2016). This framework provides a potentially valuable tool to help local authorities to overcome the system failures reported by those we interviewed.

The Barnardo's (2016) framework has the following key principles. Young people leaving care should be:

- given as much information, choice and control as possible
- able to make mistakes and never 'fall out' of the framework
- helped to succeed
- offered flexible support that adapts to meet their needs
- offered supportive and unconditional relationships
- the shared responsibility of their corporate parent

Rowlands (2018) analysed the effectiveness of the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales in mitigating care experienced young people's propensity to homelessness. This small-scale, academic review of the pathway's effectiveness in a single local authority found that the framework and its underlying principles were useful (Rowlands, 2018). However, Rowlands' (2018) findings suggest implementation of the framework was inconsistent, particularly in terms of the support and advice given to young people leaving care, which was significantly less comprehensive than suggested in the framework (Rowlands, 2018). In interviews with people working in housing and homelessness he found that the framework was underused, that there was a lack of awareness of the framework, or that staff were unclear as to whether the document was intended for their use (Rowlands, 2018).

Stirling (2018), looking at provision for care-leavers across Wales, found a similar level of inconsistent use with regard to the framework, describing it as *"well used in some local authorities - and little used in others"* (Stirling, 2018).

Rowlands (2018) placed emphasis on the views of the young people themselves as a 'highly marginalised group', interviewing 13 care leavers. He found that where young people were prepared with some practical independent living skills, there was a lack of financial preparedness, a deviation from the approach advocated in the framework. He also found the majority of young people's views did not match the aspirations of the framework. Young people felt they were not being given as much information, choice and control as possible (Rowlands, 2018). Care leavers frequently fed back there was a lack of choice and one young person fed back services should "just do the opposite of what they do now" (Rowlands, 2018). This study concluded that in some cases young people had been let down by their corporate parents.

Clearly, the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales provides a potentially useful tool for local authorities, but the consistency of its application and its relevance in light of recent, COVID-19 related developments must be reviewed.

Discharge into Homelessness from a Mental Health Unit

Research has linked unsupported transitions from healthcare institutions including mental health units to youth homelessness (Schwan et al, 2018). Two young people, from this study, had been discharged into homelessness from a mental health unit. Bill felt he had not received any help; he was 17 when he was discharged from the mental health unit into homelessness, after he attempted suicide following a bereavement. Eryn felt she had a lot of professional support, notably from social services, including a social worker, PA and mental health worker. She was placed in temporary accommodation on discharge from hospital. Eryn was just 17 when she was placed in temporary accommodation. Her experiences of this accommodation, covered in the next chapter, were mixed – some places she described as being very good, others were dirty and the shared living arrangements were inappropriate.

“I drank really through the whole of August. Then I tried to take my own life and then I was in hospital then. I think it was 12 days and then they just kicked me out. I was on the streets till November”.

“When I was put in hospital and they asked me if I had family to go to. ‘No.’ ‘Do you have anywhere to go?’ ‘No.’ They didn’t help me”.

– Bill, 17

“I became homeless through being in a mental health unit and I got made homeless in that unit...umm... from my mum because she just couldn’t look after me. So when I got made homeless there, that was when social services (intervened)”.

“They were like ok we are going to look after her...Because I had a social worker and a PA and my mental health worker so I had a few people”.

– Eryn, 20

“

I think it is all about the support.

I think it is about someone saying ‘I do care I want to help you’. That would have meant more to me because I have no family no friends, nothing. I was in my car.

”

Bill, 17

Individual and Relational Factors

Individual and relational factors refer to the personal circumstances that place people at risk of homelessness. They may include housing insecurity, relationship breakdowns, persistent and disabling conditions, interpersonal violence and trauma (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Fifteen of the 27 care experienced young people we spoke to felt a family or relationship breakdown had contributed to them experiencing youth homelessness. Two had fallen out with grandparents providing kinship care; eleven put their experience of homelessness down to a relationship breakdown with a parent; two young people had become homeless after a relationship breakdown with a partner after they had left care. Another young person had returned to live with his father. He then moved in with his boyfriend, but later became homeless when his partner became abusive. He was provided support and moved into supported housing accommodation. Below are some quotes from young people about the family and relationship breakdowns which contributed to them experiencing youth homelessness.

"I eventually moved in with (my real Dad) under a care order. So technically he was my carer. Then we fell out over money about my PIP and that. Because, I wasn't seeing any of it and I wasn't happy so he said. That's ok then in a bit I will put it in my name and I will leave and I did. It was my decision to go homeless. It was completely spur of the moment and I just did it"

– Osian, 21

"Shit happened with my mum"

– Dafydd, 20

"I was a little shit for my parents and I got kicked out when I was 15"

– Sian, 19

"My family fucking hated me when I came out! First of all they said it was a phase, and it wasn't a phase because I was going out with someone. Then it was: 'you're disgusting', 'you are filthy', getting spat at and slapped, being kicked, getting the shit beat out on me, because we are the same sex".

– Bill, 17

One young woman left residential care and moved straight in with her boyfriend at 18; she felt that following this, the system of support she needed was withdrawn and when she and her boyfriend broke up there was no help to prevent her from becoming homeless. Independent living is often difficult for young people and circumstances like relationship breakdowns can make it seem impossible. Care leavers should be able to make mistakes without feeling as a result they will have no support. Research from Scotland proposes that care leavers should be able to return to care if life doesn't quite go according to plan (Sutherland, 2019).

When leaving care, a high proportion of young people return to their birth family, even if this is for a short period of time (Whalen, 2015). Relationship breakdown was a common theme in our interviews. When there had been a relationship breakdown young people tended to blame themselves. The comment below is from a young person who returned to live with his birth family after exiting care. He subsequently fell out with his dad over money (another example of how structural factors often underlie to individual and relational crises).

"It was 3 o' clock in the morning he (biological father) came in pissed asking for my rent money. I have to wait until the morning until it goes in. He is there at 3 o' clock in the morning saying go and get my money. I said 'I am not getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning and going all the way to the town centre which is miles and miles, just to get your £60'. I said 'it is not happening, there is not a chance in hell'. I said 'wait until the morning' and he was having none of it. Then I was (street) homeless for a month or two"

– Dylan, 23

"Nothing would have prevented my homelessness; it was my decision to go."

– Dylan, 23

The second comment is from a young person who was sleeping on floor-space in a large homelessness hostel, as she did not have a local connection in the local authority (LA) her support network was in.

“Yeah, I was sent back to Bylia¹ not long ago. A relationship breakdown with my mum again... I ended up homeless. But I have no one in Bylia my partner is in Ber Falls so I ended up coming back to Ber Falls. But Ber Falls won't do anything because I've not got a local connection, so...”

Grace, 18

As well as demonstrating the impact that a relationship breakdown can have, this latter example is a clear case of a system failure undermining a young person's ability to find suitable accommodation. As a demonstrably vulnerable young woman, it is an indictment of the system she was trying to progress through that no better option could be found for her than sharing floor-space with other homeless people, because of local connection rules.

Local authorities can apply local connection as one of the criteria to determine if someone is eligible for the 'help to secure' duty under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 (Shelter, 2020a). The authority does not have to secure physical accommodation but it needs to take reasonable steps to ensure the applicant can retain or secure reasonable accommodation. Local connection is discretionary with the intention that local resources are used for local people (Shelter 2020b). The legal definition of local connection is deliberately wide (including that a person is currently residing in the local authority or has done so in the past; is employed there; has family within the area or there are other special circumstances) to reflect its discretionary nature (Shelter, 2020b). Young people placed in care often grow up and form relationships in local authorities other than their places of birth but when they leave care and try to find accommodation, local connection rules can present significant barriers to their ability to settle in areas where they have the personal connections fundamental to successfully transition to adulthood.

¹ Names of places have been anonymised for confidentiality

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Welsh Government should review the practical implementation of the Barnardo's Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework for Wales.

That the numbers of care experienced young people becoming homeless has increased since the Framework's development should trigger a review of its use and effectiveness, including whether local authorities have sufficient resources to make best use of it.

Recommendation 2

A multi-agency review should be undertaken any time a care experienced young person presents to a local authority as homeless or at-risk-of-homelessness.

This would ensure that the young person gets the help they are entitled to but also provide an opportunity for all relevant partners to review and address any flaws within systems, caused by miscommunication, lack of resource or disconnection between services, to ensure that future, similar cases are prevented. This should be led by the director of children's services, or a local authority colleague of equivalent seniority, to ensure that the group's findings can swiftly lead to remedial action.²

Recommendation 3

Welsh Government should explore the feasibility of a 'Right to Return to Care' policy.

Care experienced young people need to be able to make mistakes and still be supported by the system, including those who have provided them with care and guidance in the past, to avoid the traumatic experience of homelessness. Young people should be given the option to return to their care placement or another support option, such as Supported Lodgings, if they need it. Other young people are able to return to and receive ongoing support from their parents, in the event of a relationship breakdown for instance. There should be parity for care experienced young people.

Recommendation 4

Welsh Government and Local Authorities should review local connection rules and practice with regard to care experienced young people.

Young people told us that they were declined local connection to areas they had been placed in and felt settled. Care experienced young people placed out-of-county should be able to have the area they have been placed in considered as an additional 'local connection' when moving on – the choice should lie with the young person. This additional flexibility would enable young people to live close to support networks and reduce the loneliness described in this paper.

Recommendation 5

Local authority housing options teams must always proactively seek to establish whether a young person is care experienced, upon presentation as at-risk-of-homelessness.

They must ensure that those who are care experienced are able to access all the support to which they are entitled, in cooperation with social services.

Homeless Young People's Experiences of the Care System

Care experienced young people's vulnerability to homelessness is increased in almost all cases by childhood trauma, (Grey and Woodfine, 2019) but can be mitigated for many by consistent support and a smooth transition via services that meet their 'arguably well understood' needs (Whalen, 2015: 7).

Academic research suggests the qualities and skills possessed by care staff are fundamental in engaging with young people in care and that there is transformative potential in the positive relationships formed between young people in care and their carers (Swan et al, 2018). The continuity of these relationships is particularly important in the transition from care to adult life, with research frequently associating outcomes for young people with the quality of the relationship between the care worker and young person (Swan et al, 2018). Research

indicates the features of a successful move-on from care include the stability of care placements, the forming of secure attachment relationships with trusted adults, and leaving care with educational qualifications (Whalen, 2015). Many of the young people we spoke to felt let down by the systems designed to ensure that they had this kind of stable transition to adulthood. They shared with us a range of experiences within the care system, which they felt, had undermined their abilities to sustainably move on.

Building Relationships: High Caseloads and Staff Turnover

The young people shared a perception that their personal advisors (PAs) and social workers were burdened with high caseloads. One young person commented that they considered their workers to be nice people, but perceived them to be very busy 'as they've got thousands of cases', reinforcing a sense that they were one among many, rather than worthy of attention in their own right. Young people described themselves as feeling resigned to being a tiny part of a larger caseload. They were grateful for the support they received but it came across in interviews

that they did not like asking for help and only really contacted their PA or social worker if there was an emergency. One young person described their response to a request for help as a 'slow burner':

“

You tell them something and they say they will get it done next week or the week after and you are still waiting three or four months later.

Josh, 22

”

They also discussed turnover of staff, which they felt undermined the consistency of their relationships. Some put this down to the level of investment in social work, with one saying 'it's just the funding of it, isn't it?' While unduly high turnover of staff has a significant impact on young people's abilities to build and maintain meaningful relationships, it is also economically inefficient. Research indicates the challenges of staff retention and the frequent staff turnover in many care settings undermines continuity, security and trust - all fundamental to building positive relationships between staff and young people in care (Holt and Kirwan, 2012).

Research consistently demonstrates that children and young people find the process of getting to know a new social worker "frustrating, repetitive and exhausting" (Park et al, 2020: 19). This is an issue that local authorities have clearly responded to: a recent Care Inspectorate Wales report explains that local authorities have been active in addressing workforce pressures, working on recruitment and, increasingly, focussing on retention (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). However, authorities reported that recruiting experienced staff could be challenging and that there was an overreliance on newly qualified staff (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2019). Kinman and Grant (2011) report the high levels of stress and burnout social workers go through has been found to contribute to

a growing retention problem within the profession. The comments below from young people illustrate that such turnover led to them feeling they were not able to build a relationship and so felt unable to ask for help. One young person found herself sofa surfing while she was in the sixth form and felt that no one had been there to help her before she reached this stage. Her PA had gone on maternity leave and, as far as she knew, no other support had been put in place for her.

“

"I tried to get in touch with my PA. She went off on maternity leave and I heard nothing back from them after that. I've struggled in sixth form sleeping on my mate's sofa and it took me a month or two to move into (a supported housing project). I was still doing everything in between and it was a lot.

Carla, 22

”

Another young person talked about feeling a lack of certainty that their social worker had the capacity to support them:

“

From when I was 16 until I was 18 I had three social workers, which was ok because I know they can change more often than that, and now I've got a PA, so now it's changed again, but I barely saw the social workers for about a year. I think she came out twice and I didn't feel like I could call her if I had a problem and I don't think she could have helped anyway.

Lucy, 18

”

Elsewhere a young person talked about their perception of the turnover of social workers in their lives.

“

Um yeah I haven't had the same social worker most of my life. I don't remember most of their names because there is a different one every time they come and see you.

Eryn, 19

”

Another young person described how she feels she lost an excellent PA due to a lack of managerial support and an overly high caseload:

“My PA was amazing. She was absolutely phenomenal but then the council basically worked her to death. They treated her disrespectfully. The sheer misconduct and malpractice... What was going on in the council sent her into a whirlwind of depression... (Her caseload was) extremely high, because for one thing (she) always took the cases no one else would. When I first came into care, everyone refused to work with me because I was so high risk, so dangerous. (She) said 'I'll take her' and that's what they did; they gave every challenging case to (her) and then wondered why her resilience wasn't able to cope with it all”

– Ally, 23

These examples show something of the impact of young people's perceptions of a system that they view as under-resourced.

Paperwork, Trauma and Risk

Young people explained that having to repeat their story was often re-traumatising. Some felt angry that they had been judged all their lives based on risk assessments completed by people who saw them infrequently. They felt this was only 'a paper view' and 'you can't judge somebody off a piece of paper'. They felt the risk assessment was not just a social services issue as the assessment often followed them and informed new risk assessments filled in by housing providers and support agencies. Young people commented:

“ You find you repeat yourself a lot...You go to the same meeting you had a month before because they've forgotten it or haven't read it. So they have forgotten what's happened.

Alys, 22 ”

“They are taking information the wrong way... I couldn't get housed because of my risk assessment... The risk assessment is done everywhere you go. So looked-after children have got a risk assessment and individual housing associations and hostels will have one. No matter what, risk assessments are piled together. It's paper, it's a paper view. You can't judge somebody off a piece of paper”

– Rees, 20

“A LAC review would happen every six months. The strange woman who was my social worker would come and see me, (then) ask the placement how I have been, and she would write the risk assessment based on how they portrayed me. Making decisions about where I was going. My risk assessment was so high everything broke down. There were no carers willing to have me.”

– Alys, 22

This concern about the way different agencies worked together, whether sharing risk assessments or other important personal information, permeated many of the interviews. One young person felt that when agencies did not share information this led to a lack of consistency.

“That's the one thing: I've had about twelve agencies with me but the consistency and the sharing of information... you just keep having to repeat your story over again. Like I said, 'there is a file that should be read, (but) literally it doesn't get read, you just keep dragging up all the shit that has happened to you about ten years ago. You've got to drag it up again”

– Alys, 22

High Frequency of Placement Moves

Research suggests that when children and young people experience several moves of placement and schools it makes it more difficult for them to make friends and maintain friendships (Action for Children, 2017). Following interviews with care experienced young people, Serge et al (2002) found that those who had a more positive experience of care, such as those who had fewer or more stable placements, were less likely to experience youth homelessness. Research consistently stresses the importance of stability for children and young people in care - they want to live in a secure home and be able to build long-term relationships; nevertheless, many still experience frequent placement moves (Park et al, 2020). A frequent need to build and rebuild relationships with carers, social workers, teachers and their peers reinforces a sense of instability amongst looked-after young people and can intensify feelings of isolation (Action for Children, 2017). This is particularly important because, as Whalen suggests, one of the key features of a successful move on from care is having stability in care placements (Whalen, 2015).

The young people we spoke to were used to instability and placement moves. They spoke of mixed emotions: excitement to hear they were moving placements, disappointment when they got to them. Through all of this, a perception of not being in control and not being involved in decision-making came across.

"I was in foster care from the age of 12. Every foster placement I had broke down. I must have been in around fourteen foster placements. Between, the ages of, 12 and 16 I had about 5-6 social workers in that time also. None of the placements would have me, no foster carers. Supported lodgings placements wouldn't have me. So the hostel literally was my last resort"

– Alys, 22

“

Yeah, I was in a few foster placements. I was very unstable so I ended up going from foster placement to foster placement from residential to residential.

Grace, 18

”

“

I went into foster care for about six months. I wasn't that experienced or anything like that but ever since then, ever since I left home. I have moved 21 times. 21.

Josh, 22

”

“Yeah, they kind of just told me you are moving house and I was like in my head, ‘this is going to be sick’ and I just get there and I was like, ‘oh this is worse than the last place I was in’”

– Cai, 20

“Wherever I was put it wasn't my decision. Even when I didn't want to go somewhere they put me there anyway...I feel like that's part of being in care. Not knowing where you are going to be next. That's part of it I guess”

– Osian, 21

Care experienced young people are likely to carry the burden of having lived through traumatic situations, meaning developing and maintaining relationships will be challenging (Furnivall and Grant, 2014). The evidence suggests that when in the care system, frequent placement moves and high staff turnover will further impact young people's abilities to build relationships (Whalen, 2015). The findings of this study suggest this could lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, and, ultimately, impact on young people's ability to sustain housing. Stable relationships and a sense of belonging to a community seem to be key in mitigating the harmful impacts of trauma.

Independent Living Skills

Development of the skills needed for independent living, such as budgeting, maintaining a tenancy and learning to shop and cook, are proven to be fundamental for sustaining housing and moving on from homelessness, developing self-esteem and retaining a home (Helfrich, and Fogg, 2007). The young people who contributed to this research had mixed experiences of support to develop independent living skills. One young person spoke of how beneficial it can be to have adult support with the development of these skills.

“They were straight to the point with me. You do your own cooking, your own washing your own ironing. You cook your own food; you switch things off after you have used them. You knock the light off after you’ve used them, save yourself electric. The other foster carers they would do it all for me and I wasn’t learning as much and I was panicking a bit for the future. What am I going to do when I am on my own when I am independent? But the last set of foster parents I had set me up for that. Here I am today six years down the line doing well for myself”.

– Dylan, 23

Budgeting came up frequently as something young people would like to have been taught more about at school, as part of a suite of independent living skills learning:

“Budgeting would have helped, something basic, how to pay your bills, your electric. How to pay community charges. But that should be a standard thing. That’s what I mean. I didn’t get taught none of this. You should be taught that in school”

– Nick, 20

“I’ve had little or no support when it comes to teaching people about council tax or rent and all that sort of stuff. The actual practical adult stuff. There is very little support to do with that. Like when I lived in the hostel they would take us go karting and stuff like that and yeah that’s great but how am I going to pay my bills? Who am I supposed to get in touch with when I start work and pay council tax? There is not as much practical support”.

– Josh, 22

Some young people felt the independent living skills they learned were too basic. This left them feeling they were on their own, when it came to living independently. They felt they had got to a certain standard but would have liked to learn more. One young person felt that she needed more help to build on her strengths, rather than workers in her residential placement accepting limited progress as sufficient:

“ They give you very, very brief examples on how to do certain things like life skills cooking and that and they will take you to courses where you go and do cooking and like life skills in general. But after you turn 18 it's like you do it all on your own. ”

Carly, 22

“ Well I knew how to use a washing machine. I know all the basic stuff like that. But, it was like 'where do you buy light bulbs from?' Because when my bathroom light bulb went.... I went without a light for weeks because I didn't know what to do and it's the little things like council tax that freaked me out. ”

Ally, 23

Good Practice: Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)

One of the interventions that can be used to move care experienced young people out of homelessness is Housing First for Youth (HF4Y). Housing First is an intensive model of support which includes accommodation and works well as one approach amongst others. The HF4Y model provides much more than housing, or even housing stability, it aims to facilitate a healthy transition to adulthood and it should be viewed as a model of support where housing is provided rather than just housing provision alone (Gaetz, 2017). Gaetz (2017) explains, there should not be arbitrary time limits on HF4Y as a key goal is to support young people to make a successful and healthy transition to adulthood and short-term time limits, such as one or two years, can set unrealistic expectations for young people especially if they have experienced trauma (Gaetz, 2017). Furthermore, this model provides young people with the time they need to build relationships with workers and engage meaningfully in HF4Y support services.

In Scotland, the Rock Trust have collaborated with Almond Housing Association to deliver a pioneering HF4Y programme for care leavers. The Rock Trust set up the service because many young people leaving care will have experienced trauma, instability, multiple placement moves, and a lack of security through their childhoods. These experiences mean temporary accommodation becomes an extension of their childhood experiences making it difficult for them to move forward. They also found housing models where they

had to prove their 'readiness' at each stage to be able to move on did not work for many care experienced young people.

The service provides young people with permanent, fully furnished homes alongside the high intensity support needed for them to manage their own household and cope with living independently. The support provided is unique because tenancies are not only permanent they are unconditional, this means young people can stay in their homes once they have achieved independence.

A recent evaluation undertaken by the Housing First Europe Hub, alongside the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York, roundly praised the positive outcomes achieved by the Rock Trust's HF4Y model, which included tenancy sustainment for 11 of the 12 young people involved in the evaluated pilot.

A number of pilots of this method are underway in Wales, funded by Welsh Government's youth homelessness Innovation Fund. EYHC chairs a community of practice, run by Cymorth Cymru, which brings those practitioners piloting the model together to share progress and support one another (the Rock Trust are also members). Despite the difficulties of operating during the pandemic, practitioners report initial success with the model. Evaluation of these Welsh pilots has been delayed by the COVID-19 response, but will eventually provide clarity on the effectiveness of this approach for care experienced young people, with hopes that its outcomes match those achieved in Scotland.

Good Practice: TGP Cymru's Team Around the Tenancy

TGP Cymru's Team Around the Tenancy service has been operating in Conwy and Wrexham since October 2019 with plans to expand across North Wales, following an announcement of expansion funding from the Big Lottery Fund, provided based on positive outcomes initially achieved. This service is another funded by Welsh Government's youth homelessness Innovation Fund, in its initial incarnation.

The Team Around the Tenancy work with care experienced young people aged 18-25 who:

- Are at risk of homelessness
- Are homeless
- Are in a new tenancy
- Have recently lost a tenancy.

The team prioritise helping young people secure a home, recognising the importance of the stability that comes with steady accommodation to all other areas of a person's life. Working restoratively and focussing on young peoples' strengths, they seek to empower individuals to be involved in finding their own solutions to any challenges that they face, working with them, rather than doing to or for them, to ensure a sustainable outcome. They provide tailored advice for the individual and focus on coordinating the systems that young care experienced people are involved with. Small caseloads allow practitioners the time needed to help young people navigate these systems effectively.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6

Welsh Government should review the capacity and levels of staff turnover in social services, providing additional investment, as necessary.

A review of the size and complexity of social services caseloads is needed, with the input of young people taken into account. Further investment in social services to allow for smaller case-loads could help to minimise the disruptive experiences in care, which young people have suggested were contributory to their later homelessness.

Recommendation 7

Corporate parents need to ensure care leavers' financial capabilities are developed through the pathway planning process and support is given to them from professionals to prepare for financial independence.

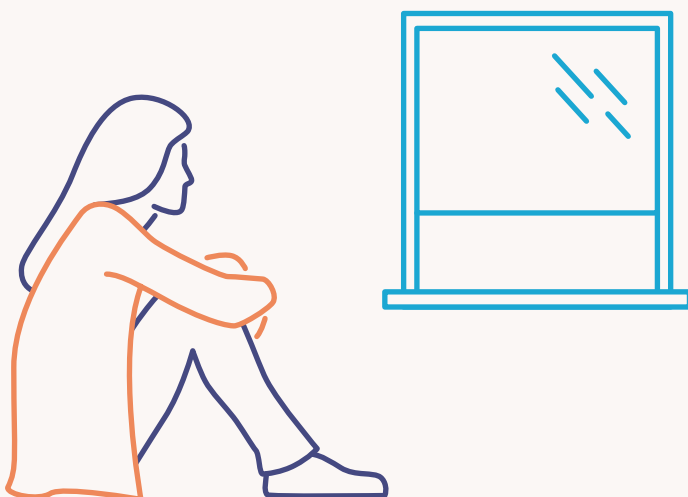
The young people we spoke to identified budgeting as the area they needed the most support with. Many felt unprepared for independent living, which contributed to the failure of their tenancies. Every local authority, as a corporate parent, should ensure that their young people have the opportunity to develop these skills while in care.

Exiting the Care System: Early Independence, Isolation and Loneliness

The average age for a young person to leave home in the UK is 25 (Sutherland, 2019) but in 2018-19 the average age at which care leavers left home in Wales was just 17 (Welsh Government, 2019a).

Research describes the 'cliff edge' of a move out of care for most young people on, or around, their 18th birthday whether or not they feel ready or prepared (Whalen, 2015). The 'When I am Ready' scheme supports some care leavers to stay with ex-foster carers but for many young people, often those at a particularly high risk of homelessness, this is unlikely to be an option (Whalen,

2015). In Sutherland's (2019) study on care experience in Scotland, young people described horrible feelings of isolation and loneliness when they transitioned to independent living. Whalen (2015) reports that many care leavers in Wales feel very lonely when they live alone and that, for many, moving into an independent tenancy at the age of 18 is liable to lead to tenancy-failure.



Turning 18

Before leaving care (usually by 15 years and 9 months), children looked after in Wales should be provided with a personal adviser (PA), who is supposed to provide support with accommodation options and accessing entitlements such as welfare benefits, as well as support with education, training and life-skills. The PA should remain involved until the young person reaches the age of 25 (this is not currently a duty, but an expectation of Welsh Government) regardless of whether they are in education or not. They are intended to provide consistency and oversee the young person's progress along their Pathway Plan, advocating for them and supporting with access to their entitlements. Their role should support a smooth transition to adulthood. Despite this, the young people we spoke to described turning 18 as a point of decline. Some felt that the level of support available to them fell sharply from that point; for some there was a sense that, all of a sudden, there was no-one there for them. One young person told us that no one had told her she was leaving care and everything came at once. Another spoke of how her PA turned up on her birthday amidst the celebrations and asked her to ring the job centre.

“ As soon as I turned 18 there was no more support at all...I just ended up moving on my 18th birthday with my ex-partner. Because of that they did nothing. ”

Grace, 18

“On my 18th Birthday I was still in the hostel. So on that day my PA turned up and amongst all my celebrations for my birthday said ‘do you mind making a phone call to the job centre - you are not going to be on subsistence any more’...Within, three weeks I was in a room. I was 18. I was supposed to get all the support and my PA didn’t even move me in. My PA didn’t even see me on my moving day”

– Alys, 22

“I wasn’t ready to move on from my hostel but I had to go because of my age. I wasn’t ready. I have a 24-year-old social worker, who is still living at home with her mother for support, telling me I’ve got to live on my own. No thank you, love. Go back home to your mother and I’ll stay here”

– Alys, 22

“I had my social worker up to the age of 18 and then that was it”

– Cai, 20

“They stop working with you, after you turn 18, and after that it’s like... you do get a few services but it’s not great”

– Carly, 22

“I was 17 when I moved here. One day, I had support with everything and I was living in the care home and then the next day I was living here with no support”

– Ally, 23

Isolation and Loneliness

Care leavers may need to be supported, emotionally and socially to build relationships and resilience to help them tackle isolation and loneliness. Young people need individualised responses; research has repeatedly found that young people will be more successful making the transition from care when they are ready, rather than at a pre-set age (Oliver, 2010). Coram Voice surveyed 474 care leavers across six local authorities in England. They found 1 in 5 respondents (19%), aged 16-24, felt lonely often or always (Coram Voice, 2019). The evidence suggests young people feel lonely in care and even lonelier when they leave care (Coram Voice, 2019). Academic research has also demonstrated relationship development skills are as important as independent living skills for a successful transition from care (Dinisman and Zeira, 2011) and the loneliness and the social isolation care experienced young people face on their transitions from care (Sulimani-Aidan, 2014). Elsewhere it has been demonstrated that when care-leavers move into their own properties, loneliness is a key factor affecting housing sustainment (Elsley et al 2007).

Research suggests care leavers need more support to maintain and extend their social networks and would like more informal and relationship-orientated support (Oliver, 2010). Ten of the 27 young people we interviewed spoke about the loneliness and isolation they felt. Six of them felt that loneliness was the main reason they had become homeless. Five had challenges managing visitors to their property and had not been able to sustain accommodation because of this. One felt she could not hold a tenancy down because of her feelings

of loneliness. There were no interview questions specifically about loneliness and the figure may well have been higher if we had asked a direct question on isolation and loneliness. Young people in interviews described experiencing loneliness when they were in care, when they were homeless or when they were in independent accommodation.

"It is very, very lonely. You are on your own – that is what it feels like when you are in the care system. You genuinely feel like you are trapped on your own... Don't get me wrong in some of the places I've been I've met some really good friends. Some of the best people I've ever met".

– Rob, 20

"I have always been on my own I don't feel like anyone has ever been there"

– Sally, 19

"People don't really understand what people go through. I don't have family. I don't have friends. I do everything by myself"

– Cai, 20

"Not saying goodnight to anyone its heart wrenching. It grabs you by the balls and twists them not knowing, just lying there and thinking I have no company I am on my own"

– Dylan, 23

"I have got to the point where I am laying alone in a freezing cold fucking house no one is there and I was drinking. Drinking... it helps me fall asleep"

– Bill, 17

Managing Friendship Groups and Visitors to Accommodation

In a number of interviews, young people said that because they were on their own and felt lonely they had become friends with a friendship or peer group, which threatened their ability to sustain their accommodation. In these cases, they felt these relationships directly contributed to them losing their tenancies and becoming homeless. One young person explained, “It is always because someone is lonely that they accept that. They don’t care who it is or what they are doing, its company”. Some young people described how, when they were placed in an area without their support network, this had led to them developing relationships with people who had a profound, negative effect on their lives:

“ When I moved over here I didn’t know anyone. I was a fresh face in (local connection LA) I was getting looks left, right and centre and when I made friends I made friends with the wrong crowd and started getting myself into trouble. I started getting into debt and taking drugs and that wasn’t me. That’s not me. Over (LA with foster parents) I would never have thought of doing anything like that. ”

Dylan, 23

“(I got moved to a hostel) in the most depressing and gloomiest place in the world...there was no support. I couldn’t even get hold of family I was 15 miles away from any family in any direction. My mum couldn’t help me and I just had to suffer it to the point where I attempted (suicide) three times. It got that bad for me that I couldn’t cope with it any more”

– Lewys, 20

He went on to explain that lack of money meant it was difficult for him to prioritise paying for transport when he couldn’t afford to eat, which led to disconnection from his established networks:

“If you don’t have food you’ve got to use the money that social services give you to get food. So I couldn’t get home to see anyone”

– Lewys, 20

Some young people had become homeless because they felt that, having been placed in an isolated situation without support networks, they had been taken advantage of:

"I moved into my flat and then I started meeting new people and then I led them over to my flat and that's when it started all going crazy. People were all smoking crack, sniffing coke, um on hard drugs, robbing people. Beating people up all the time for no reason. I was getting dragged into the wrong crowd and when I was going round with the wrong people. (They said) 'are you gonna do this and that... are you going to rob him, are you going to make all this money, are you going to get all these girls are you going to do this and get like street credit' and all that shit. I thought 'well, this is who I am chilling with, innit', and the more I was there the more it started to seem normal. So in the end I got into that"

– Nick, 20

"If someone phones you up and says 'do you want a party at yours'? And you are the only one, you say 'yeah, come round, of course, come over'. Then you get all these noise complaints and things like that. I was partying and partying because I didn't want to be here alone and I nearly got kicked out. I nearly lost my tenancy for that one... It's just I was lonely and that was it. I didn't care that there was drugs because someone was there and I didn't see how bad it got"

– Ally, 23

“

I didn't realise it at the time. Even though I was 16 I was still a kid. That is a kid, isn't it? Yes I was a kid, innit, so I didn't really know.

Nick, 20

”

Some of the young people felt that their actions were their own responsibility, for example, Nick aged 20 commented “the way I have been acting. I don't think it has helped me through the years”. However, they also reflected they were just children when they had difficulties managing peer associations, friendship groups and visitors to their accommodation.

"Yeah. Well, I was stupid. The reason I ended up with a hidden homelessness story is because I got lonely and scared here on my own. I was a kid"

– Ally, 23

The Little Big Things

One street homeless young person, Nick aged 20, reminisced about “the little things” being important and counting when he was living in a supported housing project, for example, cooking classes, breakfast club and other activities. Similarly, young people we interviewed, currently living in supported housing projects, really valued social activities. Many of these activities were also open to former residents. Carly, aged 22, commented on some of the activities

they did at the supported housing project she was living at.

“We do activities throughout the year. They do rock climbing and that... To be fair though I do appreciate it. It gets us out of our heads for a bit. I just rate the stuff that they do because they don't have to do it. They still do it. I've got to say yeah, they do little things. Every Wednesdays and Fridays, we have a tea club.”

Sharing Accommodation

Some of the young people we spoke to believed that living with others, who share their experiences, would be a good housing option for them. It needs to be acknowledged that this is important for some care experienced young people, but it would be detrimental for others who were clear with us that they need their own space. The first comment below is from a young person who did not want to share with a stranger, but recognised that if a prospective flat-mate had been through similar experiences, it would be helpful for the emotional support. The second comment is from a young person who would rather not share with people.

“Yeah but if I could share a home with a person who has lost their other half, or doesn't like being on their own...I am not used to it. I am not used to going to an empty bed. I am not used to going to a quiet home. It is weird. It's odd”

– Bill, 17

“

Yeah, because the issue of the shared housing is you've got so many different people and you have got a guy upstairs who is slamming the door. If I tell him shut the fuck up... then I am homeless again.

Harry, 24

”

One young person had failed to sustain three tenancies. She commented that she hated living on her own and that was one of the reasons she “can't hold them down”. She explained that it was not about independent living skills, it was about having someone there. She recommended supported housing projects with emotional support.

"It is having someone to speak to even if you don't talk to them all the time, it's having someone... I would open up three or four projects to see how they go for 21-25 year olds. Get them out of the night shelter. Get them through supported housing projects. I want a project for 21-25 year olds so they know they are stable for another three years with support".

– Alys, 22

The evidence clearly suggests that young people leaving care need more than a tenancy. They need support to develop their social networks in a safe way, with shared accommodation an option if they choose it, but not the only option. Loneliness is a very real driver of homelessness and must be taken seriously as a preventable issue for care

experienced young people. This links back to the evidence presented previously about enabling young people to set up homes in areas in which they already have well established links and communities.

UK government is responsible for welfare and is currently moving to address a loophole in the provision of housing costs, which affects care-leavers when they reach 22. At this point, their entitlement reduces to the shared accommodation rate of the housing element of Universal Credit, limiting their ability to find accommodation which suits their needs in areas where they have contacts. The UK Government plan to address this in October 2023 (UK Government 2020) but this will come too late for many who may have already been made homeless via this gap in the system by this point.

Good Practice: Getting Ready

A collaborative project between Children in Wales, Voices from Care Cymru and three local authorities in Wales (Ynys Mon, Carmarthenshire and Rhondda Cynon Taf), Getting Ready seeks to support young people as they prepare to leave the care system, with a focus on considerations around delaying leaving care and reducing the risk of homelessness and housing instability. The Getting Ready team provide direct support, working to increase young

people's knowledge on their rights and entitlements when planning to leave care, including enhancing their financial capabilities. They also work on independent living skills and work with young people on planning to ensure that training, education and employment is not disrupted by the transition from care. The Getting Ready team has produced [online resources](#) to support with this work, which other local authorities may also benefit from.

Recommendations

N.B. Our recommendation below is aimed at UK government but Welsh local authorities might also consider what can be done to ensure the availability of appropriate shared accommodation for care-experienced young people.

Recommendation 8

UK Government should bring forward care leavers' exemption from the Shared Accommodation Rate of Universal Credit.

Currently care leavers are only exempted from the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) until they are 22. Once they turn 22 the housing element of Universal Credit is limited to the lower SAR meaning they can only afford to pay for a room in a shared house, which is inappropriate for many and restricts their ability to access settled accommodation. UK Government have pledged to address this in October 2023, but there remains a gap in the system until then which they should close as soon as possible.

Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

The mental health of care experienced young people who have gone on to endure homelessness is a pressing issue. It is estimated that 50% of children and young people in foster care and 70% of those in residential care across the UK have been diagnosed with a mental health difficulty (Andrew et al, 2013). An even higher number will be deemed to need specialist emotional and behavioural support (Andrew et al, 2013).

The Study of Experiences of Young Homeless People (SEYHoPe), which interviewed 121 young homeless people, revealed that just under 88% of this group met the criteria for a current mental health disorder (Hodgson, 2014). This compares to 32.3% for a current disorder amongst the general population (Hodgson, 2014). Research consistently reports a high prevalence of mental health conditions among homeless

youth including depression, anxiety disorder, substance use, posttraumatic stress disorder, and psychosis (Edidin et al, 2012). Studies suggest that mental health difficulties are both a cause and consequence of youth homelessness (Schwan et al, 2018). In either case, it is unquestionably clear that homelessness has a detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing, and can exacerbate existing difficulties (Reeve et al, 2018).



Accessing Appropriate Help

Research by Sims-Schouten and Hayden (2017) found projects for care leavers in the UK are better at addressing housing and employment issues rather than addressing mental health and emotional wellbeing needs, suggesting this could partly be explained by the stigma around talking about mental health and emotional wellbeing. Housing status and mental health are demonstrably linked, with evidence suggesting difficulty accessing appropriate mental health support can result in challenges accessing and maintaining housing (Schwan et al, 2018). Young people told us how much they valued consistent support to help them navigate the mental health system, which, for some, was a complicated, inaccessible process. One young person described his mental health problems to us and the impact of eventually getting help from a support worker:

“ To be honest I didn't really know about (my mental health difficulty) at first. I just noticed the effects. Um, everything just started to decline. I stopped going out; I couldn't go out, (I felt) people were looking at me and laughing at me, even when they weren't. (My support worker) got me in touch with the mental health team again (and) took me there for an appointment - a couple actually - and after, we engaged with them.

Osian, 21 ”

In a separate discussion, his support worker described how this young person had effectively been lost in the system for a year and a half, until they had intervened. In their opinion, early recognition of the symptoms of this young man's poor mental health by social workers, followed by a GP appointment at the point of leaving care and subsequent regular check-ins from a psychiatric nurse, would have meant a much swifter and more positive resolution.

One participant explained that rather than offering a preventative solution, her doctor told her to return if her emotional wellbeing got worse; she commented:

"They just say if it gets worse come back. It is worse now. It is so stupid."

– Lauren, 17

The evidence suggests care experienced young people are more than three times more likely to attempt suicide than non-care populations (Evans et al, 2017). Four of the 27 care experienced young people we interviewed revealed they had attempted suicide. They described feeling depressed, anxious and in pain. When one young person attempted suicide, he felt the staff in his supported housing project should have been more concerned with his mental health, rather than just his physical health. Even though he needed emergency medical attention and must have been in significant physical pain, for him the pain of his mental health was far worse. The comment below is from this young person who was staying in supported housing accommodation in a rural area of Wales. He had been unable to secure supported housing close to his support networks and he found transport to visit them unaffordable.

"One day... the hostel manager walked in. She just found me on the stairs and my hands were pouring with blood. I just lost it and my hands were just pouring with blood... instead of asking me what was wrong or anything she just said to one of the staff: 'just call for an ambulance' and I was like: 'oh, brilliant support. Just get me gone, out of the way."

– Sid, 20

The next comment is from a young person who attempted suicide after struggling with mental health difficulties.

"I was meant to be on a list for about a year. I tried to kill myself and they saw me straight away then... Because I slit my own wrists in front of my Dad and in the end they seen me after I was put in hospital."

– Lewys, 19

It is apparent from these comments that, despite recent improvements in terms of funding for mental health services and the progress being made in Wales in delivery of psychologically informed services, these young people were not able to access the support they needed, when they needed it.

Research suggests the way mental health services are accessed and provided is incompatible with the needs of homeless young people, who are experiencing crisis, especially as there is a lack of family support for them to access services and attend appointments (Kidd et al, 2018). When services are available young people may avoid them or face barriers to accessing them, such as not having formal diagnoses, substance use, lack of fixed address, unstable housing and long waiting lists (Kidd et al, 2018).

One young person of the 27 we interviewed explained that adult mental health services would not engage with him because of substance misuse issues.

"I had quite a few diagnoses from CAMHS. When I transitioned to adult services they said I couldn't engage because of my drug and alcohol use"

– Rob, 20

This young person's experience goes against guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2016), which states that those providing care should "ensure secondary care mental health services...do not exclude people with severe mental illness because of their substance misuse" (NICE, 2016).

Some of the young people we spoke to, who were currently homeless and not living in supported housing accommodation, were aware that they had mental health difficulties that needed to be addressed. However, as they were homeless they believed that it was not one of their main priorities, and this is why they had not asked for help. Instead, mental ill issues were something they felt they would eventually get around to sorting out. One participant who knew she had a mental health condition had not sought help because she was sleeping on floor space and had more urgent things to consider. Another had not been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

"Yeah, I'm bi-polar (I have had help) but not for the past two years. I haven't even got a doctor."

– Grace, 18

"I do (have poor mental health) but it's not diagnosed and I don't really get no help with nothing."

– Nick, 20

We asked young people if they thought their homelessness had made their mental health worse. One young person commented that navigating the complexity of the homelessness system had been detrimental to his mental health. Others commented that becoming homeless was when their mental health

problems started. Another explained it is difficult to deal with your mental health when you have not got somewhere to live.

"It is way too complicated! You go to one person and then through to another person. You've got to wait like months to find out where you are. All the time your mental health (is being affected)."

– Sam, 20

"That's when my problems started. When I became homeless all my structure just disappeared and I never quite regained it."

– Osian, 21

"Mental health wise, it made me lose my head. I became a person I wasn't. I became someone, I'm not."

– Rob, 20

"All my life I have been in like care and hostels and stuff. Because of my mental health issues, it has just kind of fried my brain to go through it all."

– Cai, 20

“

Everyone has mental health issues, everyone gets depressed and anxious sometimes. But when you have got nowhere to go or nowhere to hide or nothing to distract yourself, all you have got is all these issues. I've not got suitable accommodation. I have not got somewhere safe I can go. Like it makes it worse your depression, your anxiety.

Lucy, 18

”

Bereavements

The evidence suggests bereavements can lead to youth homelessness through either a loss of physical housing and/or a decline in mental health especially after losing a parent or primary care giver (Samuels et al, 2019). In an American study, Samuels et al (2019) interviewed 215 young people to examine their pathways through homelessness and what missed opportunities there were for prevention and intervention. They found 35% of their sample group had experienced the death of a parent or a primary caregiver with none of the young people in the study receiving support in addressing their grief (Samuels et al, 2019). A study by MacDonald and Shildrick (2012) looking at socio-economic disadvantage in the UK found bereavements had a significant impact on young people's health, leading to depression in some cases and representing a negative turning point in the lives of young people.

In interviews we did not ask directly about bereavements. Nevertheless, five of the 27 young people spoke of how experiencing a bereavement had contributed to them becoming homeless. Understandably, they had all experienced mental health difficulties after experiencing a significant bereavement. None of them felt they had received support with their bereavement.

One participant had been made homeless by his father the day his mother passed away:

“

My dad made me homeless three times. Twice in my town: once was before my mum passed away last year and once on the same day my mum passed away. He kicked me out.

”

Carter, 24

One participant had gone to live with his father, after his mother died, but had become homeless when the relationship broke down. He then described a succession of moves from placement to placement, suggesting a total lack of stability over the subsequent four years.

“Basically my mum passed. So I went to my Dad's and my Dad kicked me out when I was 16 and it went from there really. I went into the first hostel they moved me to and I moved from (care placement) to (support provider) I think. From (support provider) to (care placement), all the care homes in (town) back to (support provider) and then it was (different town). Then it was here.”

– Rob, 20

One young person had lost her mother when she was a child and she was placed in care. She later moved in with her father but when the whole family became homeless she was placed in a supported housing project.

"I was in care when I was a lot younger. I went to a foster family after my mum died. We got taken because she was like a drug user and we were found in like a squat um with like some druggies."

– Lucy, 18

Another had lost his foster mother. They had fallen out when he was a teenager and he was placed in a supported housing project. He later found out she had been battling cancer and had sadly died. He was heartbroken.

"I feel like that's where we are and all these arguments were reoccurring over and over again and even the littlest things would cause a massive argument in the placement. So um eventually I got put into a children's home but then a few months later I found out why she was so angry and agitated all the time, nobody actually told me she had cancer. And she actually passed away when I was in there."

– Sid, 20

A further young person had lost his partner when he was just 17 he felt he had had no support with this bereavement.

“

When I lost my other half no one stood by me. It was like 'fuck you'. If I had a girlfriend that I was burying six feet under, everyone would be jumping on their toes. But no, it's you're a man, it happens life is shit get over it. Nine and a half years I was with him.

Bill, 17

”

Whether directly or indirectly, the high level of incidence of bereavement (both during time in care and before being placed in care) amongst those we spoke to suggests a link between bereavement and homelessness.

Mental Health Services - Transition

Following interviews with care leavers and their workers Dixon (2008) found an increase in mental health needs after young people in England left care, concluding that this could be due to difficulties in transitions from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services. The young people we spoke to explained the transition into adult mental health services was difficult for care experienced young people. They felt there was a lack of consistency in mental health services and felt it took too long to be transferred from CAMHS to adult mental health services. One young person felt he had just been forgotten about and let down by mental health services.

"I only (just heard) from my GP that at 18 I was meant to be transferred from CAMHS...It just didn't happen. So, I had a rough patch. I was going through a rough patch and when I had just turned 19 - I started getting all my stuff in order and everything - that's when I found out they didn't put me over. So, I was on a waiting list. I think I am still on the waiting list for the mental health team."

– Rees, 20

Extended time spent on a waiting list was a common issue. The transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services represents a clear stumbling block for many care-experienced young people.

"I have been to the doctors. I am waiting to see a psychiatrist but the waiting list is six months".

– Sam, 20

“

(I have been) on the waiting list for a few months..... I don't feel listened to. They just rush you. Five minutes and that and they kick you out and you can't really explain properly to them and they don't really give you the right medications.

Tom, 24

”

"I am still on a waiting list at the moment. I have been on it for two years now. (being transferred from CAMHS to adult mental health services) was a shambles."

– Ally, 23

"They said I had bi-polar and that was it. I didn't get put over to adult mental health. I had to do it all myself and I am still not in adult mental health."

– Sally, 19

By contrast, another young person told us the transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services was straightforward.

“ Yeah, I was with CAMHS from the age of 13 to the age of 17 and a half. The transition to adult mental health was fine. Originally, they put me under primary mental health which is the lower mental health and then I got switched up to secondary.

Eryn, 20 ”

Young people told us that they believed that there is a lack of consistent support with mental health difficulties. One of our peer researchers noted that “young people said they would appreciate and feel more comfortable if they had an adult who could help them through the process of transferring from child to adult mental health services.

This is because they said that they find that the process can be very challenging, which is understandable as I personally believe that as someone with anxiety, meeting a new team, for example adult mental health services, can be terrifying when you have no idea what to expect and you have no clue who anybody is”.³ A PA would normally support a young person with the transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services. The young people we interviewed and the peer researchers agreed that this transition between CAMHS and adult mental health services is an area where young people would like more support.

³ This comment was written by one of EYHC's peer researchers when she helped us analyse the data.

Good Practice: Mental Health & PIE Training at Llamau

Llamau is the leading youth homelessness charity in Wales. They have a comprehensive training and support package for staff to enable them to support young people with their mental health and emotional wellbeing. They offer Mental Health First Aid training, which gives staff the confidence to step in and reassure a young person experiencing a mental health difficulty. Suicide First Aid Training is also provided as core training, which teaches staff how to talk about suicide and intervene if necessary if they think a young person is thinking about attempting suicide. All Llamau staff also receive mandatory psychologically informed environment (PIE) training. A psychologically informed environment “is one that takes into account the psychological makeup – the thinking, emotions, personalities and past experience – of its participants in the way that it operates” (Westminster City Council, 2015). It is an approach that supports people out of homelessness particularly those who have experienced complex trauma. PIE training also considers the psychological needs of staff to support them to continue to develop skills and knowledge, increase motivation, job satisfaction and resilience (Westminster City Council, 2015). Following training Llamau’s in house clinical psychologists hold reflective practice sessions to further help and support staff.

Good Practice: Action for Children’s Skills for Living

Skills for Living is a specialist mental health team within Action for Children. To be eligible for the service young people need to be aged 16-24. They work with care leavers to help them with their psychological well-being in their own community. They provide a time limited therapeutic intervention based on Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to improve the emotional and social wellbeing of young people leaving care (Action for Children, no date).

Specifically, they aim to support the young people in developing skills in the following key areas:

- Emotion regulation skills
- Problem solving
- Crisis management
- Tolerating distress
- Relationship and social skills

The service assertively engages young people with mental health difficulties by meeting with them in their communities and prioritising the development of the therapeutic relationship in the initial stages. The service also meets with the professionals and family around the person to support their understanding of the young person and how to work together to create mutually agreed goals.

Good Practice: National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS Cymru): The Newid Project

The Newid Project provides positive wellbeing and mental health support to care experienced young people aged 16-25. As listed below, part of the service involves supporting young people with the move from CAMHS to adult mental health services.

They support young people who:

- Are moving from CAMHS over to adult mental health services
- Are moving from CAMHS into the community
- Need help to access support from mental health services
- Have received help from mental health services but need further support to manage their own health and well-being

The wellbeing support is guided by the young person. Young people are supported to understand the tools and techniques that can improve wellbeing and mental health and find out what works for them (NYAS Cymru, 2020).

Good Practice: MYST

MyST (My Support Team) is a multiagency partnership working to help children who are looked after to remain in their local communities. It works seamlessly across statutory agencies to provide an effective alternative to residential care for children who are looked after with highly complex needs. MyST is commissioned by the Gwent Children and Families Partnership Board. This service is already established in Torfaen and Caerphilly and will be regional across all of Gwent by 2021. They are included in this report due to their focus on a multi-agency approach, which connects all elements of what they refer to as a child's 'ecosystem', in a strengths-based fashion, which is greatly appreciated by the partners they work alongside.

Recommendations

Recommendation 9

Local Authorities should review the level of support available to young people in their care making the transition between CAMHS and adult mental health services.

Young people told us that consistency of support through this key transitional period is very important to them. Given the trauma that has been experienced by many young people in care, they should be a high priority for mental health support, whether via CAMHS or adult mental health services.

Recommendation 10

Local Authorities should review the availability of bereavement support to care-experienced and homeless young people.

Evidence from young people spoken to for this report indicates a link between bereavement, mental ill health and homelessness. The ability of care experienced young people to access bereavement support consistently and quickly, when needed, should be reviewed by all local authorities and appropriate action, such as additional staff training on the effects of bereavement and how to offer support, taken.

Emergency and Temporary Homelessness Accommodation

This section of the report looks specifically at the emergency and temporary homelessness accommodation that vulnerable, care experienced young people told us they had been placed in after they had presented as homeless. Their experiences were predominantly negative and many of those we spoke to had experienced being housed in Bed and Breakfasts (B&Bs), on floor space and with older homeless people, often with harmful substance use issues. Where the term hostel is used, it is intended to mean emergency or temporary accommodation and not supported housing.

Background

Young people can be placed in emergency B&B accommodation under homelessness or social services legislation, though amendments to Welsh Government guidance made in 2016 clarify that this should only ever be as a last resort, due to the risks associated with sharing the same accommodation with adults. Welsh Government has been collecting data on the placement of 16 to 17 year olds and 18 to 21 year old care leavers in emergency B&B accommodation since April 2016. Welsh Government acknowledges the figures are an incomplete picture and are likely to be an undercount (Welsh Government, 2019b). During 2018-19, 16-17 year olds were placed in B&B's on 174 occasions. This consisted of 78 placements under homelessness legislation and 96 placements under social services legislation. During 2018-19, care leavers, aged between 18-21, were placed in B&B's under homelessness legislation on 60 occasions (Welsh Government, 2019b).

Shortly before Welsh Government's change in approach on B&B use, Whalen (2015) looked at the homelessness of care experienced young people in Wales and found there was a shortage of temporary and short stay accommodation in some areas. Whalen found that, while some local authorities were using B&Bs as a last resort, others were using them more routinely (Whalen, 2015).

More recently, Pierpoint and Hoolachan (2019) covered the ongoing use of B&B in an evaluation of homelessness services to young people in the secure estate. Although focussed on young people with a background in a different form of state institution (accepting overlaps between the two groups) the needs of both groups could be fairly described as similar. Their work with stakeholders supporting young people defined three key areas of why B&B use is unsuitable for young people:

“(1) It is typically unsupported accommodation meaning there is nobody to monitor or support the young person closely; (2) there can be adults living in a B&B who might pull a young person back into offending behaviour, substance use or increase their vulnerability in some other way; and (3) the stakeholders do not always know who is living in a B&B which causes difficulties for ensuring a young person is safe” (Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019: 74).

Their work adds further to the evidence of a lack of appropriate, supported accommodation for vulnerable young people, with stakeholders noting:

“I suppose the concern is you can [have] whichever pathway you want, but it purely comes down to provision and if there’s a lack of beds you can have any pathway, any legislation you want, local authorities are not able to provide it” (Pierpoint & Hoolachan, 2019: 51).

Elsewhere in the UK, Scotland has taken steps to severely restrict the length of time that anyone should have to stay in some emergency accommodation, ensuring that no-one is housed in hotels or B&Bs for more than 7 days (Scottish Housing News, 2020). While the young people we spoke to did not always tell us the length of time they had each spent in temporary accommodation, their stays clearly had a marked impact on each of them and undoubtedly a move to steady, settled accommodation, with support as required, immediately

following presentation would have been in their best interests. When arranging the interviews we were told by one member of staff at a third sector organisation that they were supporting a young person who had been in temporary accommodation for over a year, although we were unable to interview that young person to ascertain the details.

One young person told us that she was 17 when she first stayed in B&B accommodation. She described a mixed experience:

“I was in the situation for so long... for nine months I was technically homeless... Some of them were like horrible. One of them was really nice. One of them you pre-ordered breakfast and you could have like a fully cooked breakfast. They cleaned the rooms they changed the beds. So that was a nice one. But the others were like... toilet seats hanging off, no locks on the doors, toilets downstairs. So you had to get up in the middle of the night get dressed and go downstairs. One of the B&B’s I was put into there was a guy and his girlfriend and they just got out of jail. There was another one she had a little one upstairs with her and a really, really old guy was living in the room next to me. So, it was a massively mixed age group.”

– Eryn, 20

Aside from B&Bs many of the young people we spoke to had stayed in a variety of other forms of emergency or temporary accommodation. Another young person described being placed in a night shelter when he was just 16, telling us that a stay in prison was preferable:

“

I was actually 16 (when) they moved me into the night shelter and that's too young to be in somewhere like the night shelter. I was in a pod. That is not a room that is floor space... I've been at the night shelter about six times now and I have been there twice between the time I was 16 and 18 and that's the worst place I have been, to be honest. I have been to jail and the night shelter is worse than that. I would like to put in a complaint that people can't stay in the night shelter when they are 16 years old.

Nick, 20

”

That any child should be placed at such a risk of harm is an indictment of a system in need of significant change; all the more so when that child is in, or has been in, the care of the state.

Stirling's (2018: 16) work included asking Local Authorities specifically about gaps in provision for young, homeless care-leavers. She found that:

“The most commonly mentioned gaps were (i) an overall shortage of affordable accommodation options for young people, and (ii) provision for young people with complex needs; (iii) securing appropriate and accessible emergency accommodation for young people was also noted as sometimes problematic.”

Welsh Government has recently set out steps to improve this situation in its guidance for Local Authorities and partners following COVID-19, which is considered in more detail below.

Care Experienced Young People's Experiences of Temporary and Emergency Accommodation

The results of our interviews with care experienced young people add to the evidence of the lack of appropriate accommodation for those who become homeless. Those we interviewed spoke, with only a few exceptions, of being placed in environments where they felt uncomfortable, and in many cases at

risk of harm. Their experiences included staying in B&Bs as well as in hostels (including on shared floor space). Many highlighted, in particular, sharing accommodation with older residents with substance use issues. Some young people felt this had led to them having harmful substance use issues themselves:

"There were smack heads going in there, you could smell drugs as well. It was making me sick...I didn't have a TV in my room you had to share a living room which was shut off at 10 o'clock and then you are staring at blank walls."

– Dylan, 23

"Disgusting, it is full of drug users, it's disgusting; you know what I mean? It's dirty... full of men...I am literally the only female there."

– Grace, 18

Kids at the age of 17 or 16 are in the night shelter, it's disgusting...they are making young people suffer...You get involved in that environment, a drug environment – taking or selling – it's hard to get out of."

– Rees, 20

"They shouldn't put anybody except drug and alcohol users in that hostel... if you want to spice yourself up say... crack, whatever... they like get away with it in the (hostel)... I was 17 years old in the (hostel) with crack heads, junkies, heroin addicts, alcoholics, yeah then they question, yeah, why are you involved."

– Rees, 20

"It is not a place to be. Say, if you work there, they have got locks on the door. If you don't work there you are associating with everyone else and people there they just basically inject heroin and the ones that work there can just lock the door."

– Ben, 19

Several young people made the point that the whole reason for them having been

placed in care was to ensure that they were not staying in harmful environments, so the fact that they were ending up in situations like those above was entirely counterproductive. In a focus group, a young person explained:

"It's confusing because your foster carer and social worker tries to take you out of environments that are risk fuelled and are damaging to your health, physically and mentally. What's annoying, you've gone through trauma, you've seen parents take drugs, you've been affected by drugs yourself. It's counterproductive to put you back in the environment that they took you out of. You are supposed to be doing a job, taking us out of environments that are a risk to us. You know that there has been trauma and flashbacks, anxiety, panic attacks; to put them back into that environment well social services might just as well not exist. It seems pointless that they've been with you for ten, twelve years of your life then you become homeless and your back in the same spot you were in, in the first place."

As well as the conditions that they were placed in, two of the young people we talked to said that no-one had made any effort to establish whether they were care experienced, and thus entitled to any additional support, when they presented as at risk of homelessness. If a proactive approach to this issue been taken by local authorities at presentation (with shared data available between social services and homelessness teams) protracted stays in unsuitable accommodation might have been prevented. Both these young people needed support with areas in addition to accommodation: one had a mental health condition and

had described how the experience had been so stressful that he had forgotten to say he was care experienced. He described a life of instability in the care system, and that it 'fried his brain' to go through another move into temporary accommodation. The other young person was fleeing domestic abuse and told us that they had not received the financial support due to them as a care experienced young person. It should be stated that these cases are, thankfully, in the minority; other young people described how they had been able to get their PA or social worker on the phone to explain they were care experienced, which had helped them to progress their situations.

It is clear from the evidence presented by those we interviewed that a more coordinated approach would result in better outcomes and reduction in risk of harm to a very vulnerable group. This is reflected in the recommendations set out later in this report, which call for a multi-agency meeting to be called when a care experienced young person presents as homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Multi-agency meetings of this nature are common practice in other fields when vulnerable people are at risk of harm, and a homelessness presentation is a clear indicator of just such a risk. A good example that could be considered in developing this approach is the Multi-Agency Referral Assessment Conference (MARAC) (Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse, 2020). Pioneered in Wales, MARACs are now standard practice in cases of risk of harm to domestic abuse victims. While adopting this type of approach would principally enable an immediate response to that young person's risk

of homelessness, it would also offer an opportunity to review how it is that a care experienced young person has arrived at the point of presenting to the local authority as homeless. This would enable gaps in the system (such as communication breakdowns between siloed departments) to be addressed, reducing future homelessness presentations.

Conversations with practitioners, which informed our work, indicated that these meetings should be led by the relevant director of children's services, or a local authority colleague of equivalent seniority, to ensure that the group's findings can swiftly lead to action. They should focus first on the immediate issue of addressing the risk of homelessness, then on a serious case review of the circumstances leading to the homelessness presentation. Any flaws or limitations in the systems highlighted by this review should then be addressed.

Multi-agency meetings are already advocated as a response to youth homelessness by Welsh Government homelessness guidance (Welsh Government, 2016b):

"In such instances where an emergency/ temporary placement is made in B&B for 16 and 17 year olds and 18 to 21 year old care leavers, this should quickly trigger a multi-agency planning meeting of local agencies, (including Housing, Children's Services, if relevant Youth Offending Service/CRC/Probation, local supported housing providers, health partners etc.) to agree a planned move to more appropriate accommodation."

The proposal made in this paper would enhance this approach by focussing the meetings on making systems changes, in addition to addressing the young person's immediate needs, so that other young people do not face the same issues.

What Could Be Better

In order to provide as constructive a set of recommendations as possible, we asked the young people we interviewed for their ideas on how to improve the situation.

Some of those we spoke to described wanting to avoid temporary stays altogether and move to secure, permanent accommodation:

"Just literally a tiny little kitchen, a little living room, a gym and a bathroom. I don't even need a garden it would be nice just something that is safe and warm. Or like just a roof over your head. That you are not going to think I am going to get kicked out in a year."

– Lucy, 18

Some noted a desire for youth-specific accommodation, often with a focus on sharing this with young people who had shared similar experiences.

"Can the services be just for the youth, because the only services around here are mixed. So we have no choice but to go in with 40 year old smack heads. I don't mean to put it that way, but that's the way it is"

– Dafydd, 20

"Not necessarily housing with other young people but with young people who have been through the same experiences."

– Eryn, 20

The majority of the young people we spoke to were in severe housing crisis, many were sleeping on floor space at the time of interview, some were street-homeless. Despite their situations, often their suggestions for improvements to temporary accommodation were strikingly modest – facilities that would be considered the very basics in any other circumstances. They included having working locks on doors, access to a kettle, a working toilet and a bed. Some just wanted a clean space for themselves where they could sleep and put their possessions.

EYHC held a workshop with a group of young people in north Wales who were living in supported housing. Many of the young people had been in temporary accommodation prior to moving into supported accommodation and reflected on their own experiences, as well as their wishes and aspirations for others, at this workshop. In the cases that a stay in temporary accommodation was an absolute necessity, they felt that there were some baseline expectations that must be met before it could be considered suitable. The young people described these minimum standards as their Golden Rules.

“

Something with a lock on the door at least. Like (homeless young people) shouldn't be expected to go out in the cold, not in this weather. Just somewhere warm and somewhere where they are able to get their heads down.

”

Cai, 20

Young People's Golden Rules of Temporary Accommodation

Care experienced young people who had been homeless told us that all temporary accommodation needed to offer the following:



1. No damp



7. Kitchen tools

e.g. a kettle and a microwave.



2. Security

a lockable door.



8. Easy access

young people spoke about the need for accommodation to be on a bus route, for them to have a key to the front door and for there to be no curfew.



3. Privacy



9. A window



4. Access to a private shower and toilet



10. First aid

access and first aid trained staff.



5. Hygiene products

e.g. a toothbrush, sanitary products, and a hairbrush.



11. Caring staff who they could talk to



6. Connectivity

This is about being able to access services as well as having access to Wi-Fi.



12. If shared, then not to be shared with older people

Especially if they have harmful substance use issues.

Welsh Government Response to COVID-19 and Homelessness

Welsh Government's response to ensuring homeless people are safe during the crisis has set out clear ambitions to ensure that the progress achieved in recent months translates to long term changes, including Wales' approach to use of temporary accommodation.

Specifically, their guidance for local authorities and partners, released in June 2020, on Phase 2 of their response, 'Planning Guidance for Homelessness and Housing Related Support Services' aims to "ensure the long-term resettlement of every person currently residing in a form of temporary accommodation in Wales" and argues for improvements to quality of temporary accommodation, noting that:

"It is no longer acceptable to offer 'floor space' or 'pods'; we must move rapidly and permanently to provision of new types of short term accommodation that meets minimum expectations and the needs of people facing homelessness in Wales" (Welsh Government, 2020a),

This report goes on to state:

"For young people who need accommodation there should be a range of safe, decent affordable accommodation solutions available to best meet their needs, such as supported accommodation specifically for young people."

The Welsh Government actively advocate for a rapid-rehousing approach, focussed on long-term, settled housing solutions for those who have been helped off the streets and into temporary accommodation during the COVID-19 crisis. The guidance does advocate for longer-term thinking, beyond the crisis, including specific approaches for young people, however, care experienced young people are not mentioned specifically.

The specific risk of homelessness to care leavers is mentioned in the 2nd report of the multi-agency Homelessness Action Group, the recommendations of which were accepted, in principle, by the Welsh Government, for review once the COVID-19 crisis is behind us (Welsh Government, 2020b). Again, this report recommends rapid re-housing in settled accommodation, with tailored support.

Recommendations

Recommendation 11

Welsh Government should commit to ensuring that no 16 or 17 year old should be accommodated in unsupported temporary accommodation.

16 and 17 year olds who present to a local authority as homeless, whether care experienced or not, should be found appropriate, supported accommodation, whether via a supported housing project, foster placement, supported lodgings or similar, supported placement. If short term accommodation is required, to allow for assessments to be made and appropriate accommodation found, it must meet the minimum standards set out by young people in this report, with support provided and a timescale provided to the young person for their move to settled accommodation.

Recommendation 12

Welsh Government should deliver a commitment to strictly limit the length of time that any young person over the age of 17 should be expected to remain in temporary accommodation before being found settled housing, as has been done in Scotland.

The term accepted in Scotland is 7 days. This fits with Welsh Government's current stated approach of rapid-rehousing in settled accommodation. This settled accommodation might include youth-focussed, shared supported accommodation, or single-person accommodation (with floating support, as necessary), depending on the needs of the young person.

Recommendation 13

Welsh Government should enforce new, minimum standards of temporary accommodation.

These should be agreed in consultation with young people and informed by the 'golden rules' set out in this paper.

Conclusion

The young people placed in care deserve the best possible outcomes. Often they have experienced traumatic situations and need all the love, care and help that the state can provide.

Those young people we spoke with, and many others, have not been provided with this: they have been let down by underfunded services, forgotten about when they needed help with their mental health, accommodated with people who have put them at risk of harm and been denied opportunities open to their non-care experienced peers. While many individuals were highlighted by our participants as

having done superb jobs to help them, the systems those individuals work within are currently failing to prevent these young people, who ought to be the most protected in our society, from falling into homelessness. Young people have helped us to formulate a set of recommendations for change, that, if achieved, will address some of those flaws in our systems and, ultimately, contribute to ending youth homelessness in Wales.



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