



End Youth Homelessness Cymru

REVIEW OF

**'DON'T LET ME FALL
THROUGH THE CRACKS'**



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Introduction

In September 2020, End Youth Homelessness Cymru published a report 'Don't Let Me Fall Through the Cracks – Homelessness Amongst Care-Experienced Young People in Wales'. The report was created to amplify the voices of care-experienced young people, highlight the challenges they face when homeless and the need to reform the systems which have failed to prevent their homelessness. In the process, a number of recommendations were developed to improve systems in place and reduce youth homelessness amongst care-experienced young people in Wales.

Almost two years on we decided to carry out this follow up review which aims to:

- **Review the recommendations set out in the original report, identify barriers to implementation and highlight best practice**
- **Assess the progress made since the publication of the report within the care-experienced and youth homelessness sphere**
- **Provide a response to the Universal Basic Income Pilot**
- **Amplify youth voice**

It is impossible to separate the timing of the release of the research, and the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented, from the fact that six months after the release we were living through the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the reality of the situation, the purpose of this review is not to criticise where progress is still required, but rather, to highlight where practice has been made and to remind the sector that there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve genuine equity for care experienced young people. This review has found that several of the recommendations have been implemented and we also welcome the introduction of the Universal Basic Income scheme as a positive step towards improving rights and entitlements for care-experienced young people. We hope that as pandemic eases we can continue to work together to ensure that no care-experienced young person ever falls through the cracks.

Methodology

The original research took on a youth participatory research design and was co-created with experts-by-experience, care-experienced young people who had been at risk of or experienced homelessness who both participated in the research as peer researchers and shared their experiences through interviews and focus groups. The report was also informed by a group of professionals, including practitioners working in the sector and academics whose research focuses on care systems.

In line with the collaborative approach of the original study, this review has been completed with the input of a wide range of stakeholders including: care-experienced young people, practitioners working within local authorities, third-sector organisations, Welsh Government representatives and academics. We are particularly thankful to the members of the EYHC Care-Experienced Young People Group for their valuable contribution as well as their continuous commitment to advocating for the rights of care-experienced young people.

As part of this review we have:

- **Carried out a workshop with the members of the EYHC Care-Experienced Young People Group to review the recommendations, identify barriers to implementation and highlight best practice**
- **Spoke with a representative from the Welsh Government to comment on the recommendations specific to local authorities and the Welsh Government and discuss the developments within the care-experienced sphere**
- **Conducted a workshop with care-experienced young people to discuss the original report and its recommendations and seek young people's views and opinions on matters concerning housing and youth homelessness. We are thankful to Voices from Care Cymru and NYAS for their support in organising the workshop as well as for all of their brilliant work in supporting young people.**

Recommendations

The section below reiterates the originally developed recommendations and brings together the voices of practitioners and young people to provide a picture of the current landscape with regards to housing, youth homelessness and care-experienced young people; gauge the progress achieved over the course of the past two years; highlight best practice and identify barriers to implementation.

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

The Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework aims to help organisations supporting care-experienced young people in making their individual journeys towards leaving care in Wales, and being ready for independent living. The framework, therefore, was written primarily for local authority commissioners, leaving care managers, housing managers and providers of housing and support for young people. Our original report raised issues with regards to the practical implementation and effectiveness of the report as it was noted that the number of care experienced young people becoming homeless has increased since the Framework's development.

Since the publication of our original report Welsh Government commissioned Shelter Cymru to conduct the review of the Framework and make changes to its structure to aid in its practical implementation. The members of EYHC's Care-Experienced Young People Working Group have been involved in reviewing the framework.

We asked Shelter Cymru's Policy and Research Officer, Dewi John, to provide us with a comment on the process:

As part of End Youth Homelessness Cymru's Don't Let Me Fall through the Cracks report it was recommended that the Care Leavers' Accommodation Framework should be reviewed to assess its effectiveness and including whether local authorities had sufficient resources to make best use of it. As a result of this recommendation, Shelter Cymru has worked with sector partners to carry out multiple key revisions to ensure that local authorities can make best use of the Care Leavers' Accommodation Framework. The main revisions are that the document is to be split into four key areas:

- **Easy Read Guide**
- **The Framework**
- **Good Practice Document**
(outlining third sector and local authority good practice examples)
- **Legal Document**
(outlining the legal precedent, which underpins the framework).

Shelter Cymru has also updated the 2016 document to a 2022 context, where we have included relevant pieces of Renting Homes (Wales) Act guidance to ensure that the document is in-line with the implementation of this Act in July 2022. We hope that the document will help to ensure that every care leaver in Wales has a settled and appropriate home, ending the inequalities that exist for care-experienced young people.

At EYHC, we obviously welcome the work of Shelter Cymru on this, and the acceptance from Welsh Government that a review of the framework was required after seemingly patchy implementation of the framework on its first publication across different local authorities. Upon the publication of the revised document, however, there must be a concerted focus from across the sector, led by Welsh Government, to ensure its successful implementation so that the framework is effective in improving the lives and experiences of care experienced young people across Wales.

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 recommendation proposed a reflective and collaborative approach to identify any flaws within the system to ensure that similar youth homelessness cases are prevented in the future. Upon the publication of the report a letter was sent by the Enabling People Director of Social Services and Integration Directorate to the Heads of Children’s Services and Housing Departments across Wales to encourage the implementation of this recommendation. We spoke with a representative from the Welsh Government to find out about any developments in this area since the letter was sent. We have been informed that there have been some positive responses from local authorities, however, as a barrier to implementation it was noted that the letter was sent out at an uncertain time during the pandemic and at the beginning of the new government which negatively contributed to engagement from local authorities.

During our conversation we discussed enabling factors and agreed that there is a need to develop a system or process which could be easily adopted by local authorities across Wales to aid in the practical implementation of this recommendation, to ensure that this approach is rolled-out consistently across Wales.

There is an opportunity to strengthen this recommendation by aligning it with the work currently taking place on strengthening corporate parenting responsibilities, as a core tenant to this work is ensuring that no care-experienced young person experiences homelessness. The below approach from Swansea highlights how multi-agency reviews are already taking place, and we’re aware of a number of Local Authorities undertaking similar reviews.

The intention of the original recommendation however, was for agencies to undertake reflective reviews together in the event of a care experienced young person coming into contact with the homelessness system, to retrospectively explore potential gaps in the service and how facing homelessness became part of this young person’s life story. The hope is that through undertaking these multi-agency reviews, lessons can be learnt around what needs to be done differently in the future to prevent more young people having to face homelessness.

Best practice example: Swansea

Swansea Council have recently adopted the approach of undertaking multi-agency review meetings when a young person is at risk of homelessness or threat of eviction is likely.

A representative from Swansea Council explained that they have chosen to pilot this approach to enable them to:

- a) Address issues/challenges much earlier
- b) Explore solutions and identify what support is needed in good time to prevent homelessness from happening
- c) Strengthen relationships with partners
- d) Continue to promote multiagency working
- e) Identify of any issues or risks that may be as a result of external risk factors such as county lines, or exploitation

“This is a pilot approach that we have started using with our Swansea accommodation providers and have found the approach helpful in terms of addressing the young person’s issues much sooner and considering what plans need to be in place for that young person to help prevent the risk of becoming homeless or identifying the next steps of the plan if move on is considered the right thing for the young person.

The biggest challenge is getting all the right people around the table, support post 18 tends to reduce as the young person progresses into independence and we are in the process of working through who the right multi-agency reps should be.

The review process adopts the same principal as a pathway plan review meeting, in that multiagency partners are invited to take part in the review of the accommodation needs. We do also consider the holistic aspect as accommodation cannot be looked at in isolation”.



What made Swansea LA implement the multi-agency review?

“This approach has been developed due to level of need for young people who were receiving a Notice to Quit without a multi-agency response plan. Young people were receiving crisis support for move on rather than any support to prevent breakdowns. This was raised by practitioners, Youth Homelessness Coordinator, and providers”.

Have there been any challenges or barriers to implementation?

“This process has just started however to overcome likely barriers, there has been an appointed Local Authority chair so that these meetings can be coordinated and treated with the same meaningfulness as permanence meetings as if the young person was in foster care”.

What does the multi-agency review look like in practice?

“Cases will be highlighted through our Swansea Accommodation Pathway. Any cases where there are any early identification signs and those where there have been any warnings. The Youth Homelessness Coordinator will request a meeting, this will be set up via support from our clerical support officers. The meetings will be chaired, relevant professionals will attend including targeted housing support workers. A clear plan of support will be implemented. This process will be reviewed and tailored to meet the needs of young people”.

What have been some of the positive outcomes of implementing the multi-agency review?

“Whilst we remain in our infancy, we know that providers feel more supported, and the standard is set that no young person should be issued a Notice to Quit without a multi-agency meeting first unless there are exceptional circumstances”.

What are some lessons learnt or best practice examples that you can share?

“As part of the Youth Homelessness Coordinator’s role, we will be looking at mapping cases where Young People have become homeless and taking lessons learnt from these. This will also include young people’s feedback”.

Advice for LAs

“ We hold providers meetings which is an excellent way of getting feedback on issues/challenges they face, share good practice, information and identify any needs they may have .i.e., contextual safeguarding training ”

Case Study

Amber is a 17 year old female living in supported accommodation which has 24/7 onsite support for complex needs. Amber is a care leaver and has a Personal Advisor (PA). Amber’s case was raised in the Swansea Accommodation Pathway - SAP meeting by the provider under ‘threat of eviction’. The provider advised that Amber had not been staying there very often. Amber has been finding it difficult there and has raised that she has mental health issues. Amber had somewhere else to stay with a friend over the last 3-4 weeks and it is understood that she is no longer with her boyfriend. PA began considering other accommodation provisions with Amber.

This triggered a multi-agency meeting which was instigated by the Local Authority, in attendance was the provider, PA, PA manager, and chaired by a practice lead. Concerns were shared, Amber’s wishes and feelings were considered alongside her needs and a clear plan of support was put into place. This resulted in Amber’s case being taken off the ‘threat of eviction’ agenda and issues being addressed. Amber is staying in the accommodation and no further issues have occurred. A support plan is now in place with the housing support officer to ensure stability.



3. Welsh Government should explore the feasibility of a ‘Right to Return to Care’ policy proposal.

Upon our conversations it was concluded that a pure ‘Right to Return to Care’ policy would not be feasible to implement due to statutory legislation surrounding care, however, there is nonetheless a need to ensure that care-experienced young people have a level of flexibility with regards to housing and access to support from personal advisers and leaving care teams beyond the age of 18.

There is an opportunity to push for the replication of the flexibility that non-care experienced young people have with regards to housing through the corporate parenting agenda. The agenda should recognise the vulnerability of housing and commit to a flexibility of options for young people to access. Young people should have access to a larger safety net for a longer period of time and Welsh Government should allocate extra funding to local authorities to provide this enhanced support. This could tie in with the proposed amendment to increase the availability of personal advisor to the age 25 for care experienced young people, regardless of their educational or employment situation.

We spoke with young people to gather their views on what a potential ‘Return to Care’ Policy should entail, how it could be made feasible and meet young people’s needs.

The care-experienced young people we spoke with welcomed the option to be able to return to care, however, several questions arose with regards to the logistics of the policy. As a young person said, ‘it needs to be really clear what return to care really means’. It was pointed out that foster placements might not be feasible to return to if the foster family has moved on or taken on new foster children. It is therefore important to explore this policy further and provide detailed guidelines for local authorities to follow, as one young person pointed out ‘a lot of times if policies are made, and they are too broad, then that’s how local authorities won’t follow them’.

Young people expressed various difficulties and shortcomings of the system with regards to accessing PA support and would like for the support to be extended.

“ When I went to uni, basically, I was still entitled to a PA. And then as soon as I went into full time work, I was no longer entitled to a PA, or any financial assistance, any kind of like, just any help at all. And then I returned back to uni, and I was able to get back in contact with a PA and stuff like that. So that was really good. However, when I turned 25, I’m not able to access any of that. And I don’t really understand that at all. Because why should me be in uni dictate whether I get help or not? Why is 25 different to 26? And why is 18 different to 17? ”

The young people emphasised that policies affecting care-leavers need to take on a person-centred approach and work in ways which respect where the young people are at, their needs and preferences.

“ And I think that post 18 care of care leavers should be person centred. I think it should not be at all age dependent. It should not be situation dependent if that individual needs support. As, like, as they have been part of social services, they are still Social Services’ responsibility, regardless of the age, regardless of what, like district or county they’re under as well, it’s social services as a whole in the UK are still responsible for that person that they have supposedly kind of raised within social services ”

It was also important for the young people that there is a clear progression towards independent living. A range of options should therefore be explored in line with a person-centred approach, from foster placements, supported lodgings but also continuous PA and financial support.

Young Person’s Voice

I think it is an excellent idea for the people that this would be suitable for. However, the reality is that many young people, me included, would not be able to return to their original foster placements for many reasons. The carers may have new children they are fostering, the placement may not want to continue fostering etc. Care leavers may also find it difficult to go back into a foster placement with foster carers, especially as an adult.

Personally, I believe that the Right to Return to Care should focus on:

- Ensuring all care leavers have a point of contact (like a website) to be able to gain access to an appointed personal advisor who can help them with financial, housing, mental health, employment, and other life difficulties. This should be available to any care leaver at any age. This should certainly NOT end at 18, 25, or even 30. Many care leavers struggle through these difficulties for their entire life and considering the local authorities name themselves ‘corporate parents’ they should be made aware that parenting responsibilities do not end at 18.
- Ensuring all care leavers who are finding it difficult to live independently have the right to safe, suitable, and affordable accommodation. This means that the bare minimum is no longer acceptable. All accommodation provided to care leavers needs to meet a standard that is liveable and safe. Supported living homes (that are safe, and drug and violence free) for care experienced people should be better funded to ensure that this is always an option to fall back on, especially if council housing or private renting does not work out.
- Ensuring all care leavers have access to financial support during difficult times, especially with the continuously increasing rent prices.
- Ensuring care leavers who become young parents are supported to gain appropriate and safe housing that is suitable for them and their child. Care leavers need to be listened to when they tell the council that their home is unsafe. Again, this is where personal advisors would be helpful to advise and support.



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

The original report made this recommendation on the basis that young people interviewed for the original report told EYHC 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.

Indeed, this extra provision of additional flexibility is outlined in the Code of Guidance for the Housing Act (Wales) 2014, stating:

18.9 In the case of young people in the looked after system who have been placed out of area, where they are leaving care and wish to return to the area to which they were originally connected they should be accepted as having a connection with the area, even where they have been placed for a considerable time elsewhere. In assessing whether an applicant’s household has a local connection with their area, an Authority should also consider whether any person who might reasonably be expected to live with the applicant has such a connection. Care leavers who wish to remain in the area

of placement should also be considered to have a local connection should they meet the local connection test.

It is clear therefore that this additional flexibility should be in place already for Care experienced young people, and importantly applies ‘both ways’ in terms of out-of-county placements ensuring a local connection whilst the code also ensures returns to their original area dependent on what the young person would rather. Indeed, through the Housing Support Network, we have had reassurances, through conversations with Local Authorities, that they are all working to the Code of Guidance and affording that additional flexibility to care experienced young people.

At EYHC however, especially in the context of the forthcoming Green Paper, we would advocate abolishing local connection criteria for care experienced young people, allowing them to access services and support in whichever Local Authority they want. The issue has previously been mentioned in the Senedd by the First Minister who supported the idea that a young person should not need to demonstrate a local connection to access services if they are care-experienced. We believe this is one way in which equity to their non-looked after peers could be progressed.

Although local connection rules continue to be a significant barrier for care-experienced young people, Welsh Government officials have informed us that this recommendation will be implemented once the necessary changes have been made to the relevant legislation, which is a time-consuming process.

“ Talking about things like you can only get council housing within the kind of area that you grew up in, is really impractical and quite unfair and is limiting to care leavers. I think that you should be quite high priority in council housing in any place, that you are in if you’re a care leaver, whether that’s in Newport or Cardiff, wherever. I think that you should have a right to council housing wherever. And also, I think it’s very, very limiting in terms of like, statistically, care leavers come from a lot of low income backgrounds, myself included. So then why should I be limited to a low income area? When you know, this, this council house and everywhere there has to be legally council housing everywhere. So why should I be limited to a certain area? If you know I could be elsewhere? Doing what I want to do? Like, I just think that needs to be something that needs to be addressed as well ”

We know that for care experienced young people, opportunities to access the private rental market are particularly limited as they often lack family networks and are thus very often unable to meet guarantor requirements set by private landlords. Furthermore, the majority cannot rely on informal familial lending and financial support which non-care experienced young people often rely on to pay for the upfront deposits and rents and other ‘hidden’ costs. Given these barriers to accessing the private rented sector and the limitations of local connection rulings, many care experienced young people find themselves in situations where their opportunities are seriously limited. This poses a serious equity issue and calls for a further exploration of the feasibility of relaxing local connection rules for care-experienced young people.



Young Person's Voice

When I started looking for accommodation as a backup before I knew whether I got accepted to university, I was completely disheartened. I come from a low-income area where I have a lot of negative memories associated too. I was limited to applying to council housing in the local authority as this is the only place that I am considered a care leaver. I could not apply for council housing in cities like Cardiff or Swansea where I would have had more opportunities and potentially improved my life, but rather I was stuck in the place that had always been so negative for me to grow up. I feel extremely sad for the care leavers who would also like to move into council housing near their families and friends but are limited due to the local authority they did not choose. Additionally, I could not even apply for private renting as I needed a guarantor, and my foster family would not be able to accommodate that. At 18, my anxiety was sky high. My options were: 1) get into university and move into halls 2) move into a council house in an area that I did not feel safe or happy with. Most young people applying to university are nervous but the added pressure of knowing that if I didn't get in, I would need to move into a council flat was a level of stress that I wouldn't wish upon anyone. Luckily, I got into university and secured a place in halls, I am now studying a master's degree in Cardiff University, and I am 100% sure that if I had to have stayed in my local authority, I would not have had the opportunity to succeed academically as I have.

Communication and links between local authorities should be high priority. I believe, if you are a care leaver, you should be eligible to apply for council housing in any local authority, especially because we are often unable to have our family/parents as guarantors, unlike most other young people. Again, 'corporate parenting', like any parenting, should not end at 18 and therefore, the government have a responsibility as parents to ensure we have access to housing where we feel most comfortable. The least that can be done in the current state of the housing crisis is to allow care leavers to apply to council housing as care leavers wherever they would like to live. Care leavers, of all people should be allowed to leave their past behind them and move away, if they want or need too. Choosing where you live is a necessity for survival, not a luxury.

My final point for this question is that communication between local authorities is appalling. Something needs to change. There are young women and men who have experienced extreme trauma and are then being failed again by a system that was supposed to support them. A young person moving from one authority to the other should not be any more stressful on the individual than it already is. This encompasses ensuring the case file of the individual is transferred safely and with dignity and ensuring that care leavers across the UK have the same level of support regardless of where they are living. I have heard far too many experiences of young people moving between local authorities (often not their choice) who have had such a hard time due to the lack of communication between local authorities.

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.

During our conversations with practitioners it was confirmed that this has become regular practice in some regions of Wales. However, concerns have been raised that without additional resources being allocated to local authorities, practitioners cannot provide suitable support to care-experienced young people presenting as homeless.

This was echoed by the young people we spoke to who told us that despite being identified as care-experienced when presenting at their local authorities, it made little difference to their homelessness and housing journeys, with some of them ending up in unsuitable temporary accommodations nonetheless.

"Yes. So they asked me if I was care experienced. And obviously I said yes. And then they decided to place me in a hostel in my local town, which was basically for prison leavers. And I feel like they failed me as a young person".

Despite these challenges, we continue to encourage local authorities to collect data on the care-experienced status of young people presenting as homeless. This will aid in measuring the extent of the issue in Wales and providing evidence to advocate for additional resources to be provided for care-experienced young people.



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

Our initial report highlighted just how vital consistency of care is in reducing the likelihood of care-experienced young people having to access the homelessness system, when making their transition to adult life. We found an astonishing level of inconsistency and disruption in their lives, that frequently resulted in an overriding sense of powerlessness, as many decisions were made for them, rather than with them. The young people we spoke to explained having numerous changes to social workers throughout their time in care, which resulted in the potentially re-traumatising ask of having to go back through their cases with new staff and agencies, and, in some cases, young people found themselves without support, as a previous social worker or personal advisor had seemingly not been replaced.

It is important to note however, that in the original report, young people shared a perception that, whilst for the most part, their personal advisors (PAs) and social workers were nice people, they were burdened with high caseloads. Which reinforced the sense that they were among many rather than receiving person-centred support.

From our conversations across the sector and with young people themselves, it became apparent that capacity and levels of staff turnover in social services are still a huge issue that is deemed to have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This anecdotal evidence is supported by the findings of the Senedd's research team, who highlighted that staff shortages have reached 'crisis point'; as long-standing problems in recruitment and retention have been worsened by the pandemic, with an increasing number leaving the sector coupled with increased difficulties in recruitment.

Similar issues around caseload and staff-wellbeing are also present in the housing sector. A report undertaken by the Housing Support Network into the experiences of operational staff during the Covid-19 pandemic found that:

- 90.9% of Local Authority staff stated that their caseload had gone up during the Covid-19 period, with many stating that their caseloads had doubled or even tripled. A number stated their caseload was in excess of 100.
- As a result of this increase, many felt that "This led many staff to feeling like they couldn't 'complete meaningful work with everybody' and that 'we are not able to keep in regular contact with customers'. Several staff expressed the idea of 'firefighting' every day, and that 'everything is reactive, never proactive'; staff wanted to do more for clients by building genuine relationships and providing preventative advice, but simply were not able to because of their caseloads".
- The impact of this increased caseload coupled with Covid pressure is evident in the fact that 47% of staff stated that they did not feel a sense of satisfaction from their work; "with an inadequate supply of affordable housing I am at a loss – how can we resolve people homelessness? Satisfaction comes from positive outcomes".
- Similarly, 77% of staff stated that work negatively impacted their wellbeing, again, primarily as a result of the 'constant pressure' which left many unable to 'switch off' from work at the end of the day. With 54% stating that they had considered leaving their role since March 2020.

Given the aforementioned importance for young people of consistency of care, the above makes for sobering reading from both a social services and housing point of view. It is plain that more support needs to be made available, whether that's increased resources for departments, higher levels of remuneration for staff, or an increased provision of reflective practice, so that frontline workers can effectively and sustainably support the young people in their care.

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 told us that they received very little or none financial education whilst in care, however, some praised the work done by third sector organisations such as Voices from Care Cymru in preparing them for independence.

“ Well, with me, I never learned anything about finance in care, if it wasn't for Voices from Care, providing the 'When I'm Ready' scheme, and doing financial care with that, I would have no idea to this day of finance ”

There is a clear information failure, as young people had very little knowledge of grants and financial support available to them. They would have liked for there to be a readily available, accessible and continuously updated place where they could access information about support available to care leavers. They also would have liked for personal advisors to be up to date with this knowledge and make sure they pass on this information on to young people.

“ I'm still at 23 years old finding out now that there's, you know, certain grants that are available that are specific to care-leavers. And I literally, I had no idea of this. I was 18. And then there are people who have no PA, who have no support from social services. How on earth are they going to find out about these things? You know, care leavers who are not even in NYAS, or Voices or somewhere like that. And the ones that are just slipping through the net, and nobody knows about it. It's like, well, how do they know about the grants and things? If we don't even know about them? ”

Because of the lack of financial education, many young people end up in vulnerable positions once living independently. One young person told us how they ended up in debt, which they are still having to deal with now, when they got their first property at the age of 17 whilst having very little knowledge around budgeting and bills.

“ I'll be honest, I had my first ever property at 17. I didn't have any support with like budgeting or being told about certain bills. And because of that, I've still got debt on me now, because there was a young 17 year old girl, who obviously didn't understand quite as much about bills than that. And then it all built up and it finally caught up to me ”

Care-experienced young people are in particularly vulnerable situations as they cannot rely on their parents or family members to provide a safety net.

“ But I think that needs to be recognised that a lot of the time parents can bail people out of situations and can help them, but care leavers don't have that. And I think perhaps if there was something there for, you know, emergency financial support for when people are going through these times, then perhaps people won't miss their rent payments or things like that, and people will be able to afford gas and electric, and just get themselves out of those situations, even if it's some sort of loan or something from, you know, the local authority or just some sort of fund that they can dip into when they are in those situations ”

In the context of the current cost of living crisis, this is an increasingly pertinent issue and it is evident from the experiences of the young people that we spoke to that financial education and access to financial support is still a huge issue for care-experienced young people. We do welcome the introduction of the Universal Basic Income trial for care-leavers (please see the section below for further commentary). However, we would also like to see more commitment to developing care-leavers financial capabilities through financial education. Where capacity is limited, local authorities should aim to commission third-sector organisations to provide training and educational resources to young people.

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

Since the publication of our original report, the UK Government extended the care leavers' exemption from 22 up to 25 as specified by The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit (Care leavers and Homeless) Amendment Regulations 2021 (SI 2021/546). The amendments extended 'the existing qualifying criteria for exemptions from the shared accommodation rate for both care leavers and those who have spent at least 3 months in a hostel for homeless people'.

Whilst extending the exemption of the Shared Accommodation Rate has been a positive development, the young people we spoke to still expressed many concerns with regards to housing affordability and the benefit system. A particular issue that was mentioned is the high marginal rate of benefit withdrawal which prevents many care-experienced young people from taking on employment in fear of no longer being able to cover their rent and ending up being no better off or even worse off working than staying unemployed.

“ But the problem we've got is we're both scared to go and get a full time job, because currently, our rent is covered by the council. So it gets paid for us. And we look at each other. And we're like, we would both love to get a job. But we look at our finances, and we look at ourselves. And we're like, if we go off benefits and go and get a job, are we going to be financially stable enough to keep the property to look after ourselves? And to keep living the life we want to live? Or are we going to end up losing the property because we can't financially pay for it? ”

Another problem is the lack of employment opportunities for care-experienced young people, including well-paid apprenticeships and traineeships.



“ A few years ago, before I transitioned into work, and my first paid job then, before I started, the job I'm doing now was on a traineeship. And even though I already had a property, obviously, when I swapped over to go onto the traineeship, I then became liable for my own rent. Now I wasn't even earning the national minimum wage.

So it was very, very unaffordable for me and I actually ended up in debt with my rent, that even after three years of employment, I'm still working to pay off. When I spoke to my 16+ worker, because I was now earning in my own way, they would actually refuse any financial support. Or they wouldn't even help me access like food banks when I was struggling, because obviously it's trying to cover the rent, which wasn't really affordable within what I was earning.

So I think there is a big gap there. Where the, you know, I'll be honest with you, at one point, I was contemplating going back onto benefits because I was actually financially better off because my rent was covered and I wasn't at risk of losing my home. So yeah, so, you know, that was that and there was no incentive.

The incentive for me was just a better future. But I know for some young people that they are not as lucky as me, I've managed to get employment, full employment after a year whereas some young people don't manage to get to that point or takes them the two years. And by the time those two years wrap, it might mean that they've either lost the property or they've had to go back onto benefits in order to be able to support themselves ”

This case study highlights the need to invest in high-quality, well paid traineeships and apprenticeships for care-experienced young people that do not put them in precarious situations but provide opportunities to better their lives. Although this lies beyond the scope of Welsh Government's remit, there is a need to look into the adverse effects that the welfare system is having in dis-incentivising employment for young people. The welfare state should support young people into employment and better their lives, rather than creating more precarity.

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

This recommendation has been identified as a huge issue by the young people we spoke with which has not achieved a lot of progress. It was heart-breaking to hear the awful experiences that young people had when trying to access mental health services in general. Many of the young people we spoke with experienced trauma, multiple suicide attempts and struggled with various mental health problems. Despite their vulnerability they were unable to access mental health support, and when they did they were faced with long waiting times, poor quality support and lack of understanding from practitioners.

“When I was 14, my foster mom took me and I told them that when I go home, I’m probably going to try and hang myself. Sorry to be graphic. But they turned around said, ‘Well, if you were actually going to do that, you would never tell anyone’. And that was the end of that. So they discharged me”

“You’re either put on a two year waiting list, which really isn’t that good enough. Or they just don’t care”

“Yeah, I’ve had mental health issues as far as back as I was eight, I have quite a traumatic childhood. And I went to my social workers and even my carers at the time and telling them that I’m not doing good, I think I need help. And, and I even went to school with this and they all kept telling me to just grow up you’re man you’re not supposed to be... you’re supposed to just fight through it. And I’ve been going on until I hit the age of 20 where now I’ve taken it into my own hands. And now I’m on medication for it for my depression”

Some of the young people were also afraid to seek help due to the stigma they face as care leavers.



“Well, it’s gotten to the point where I’m too scared to even contact my own doctor’s because I am a parent myself. And I’ve got my own little girl and I’m scared that they’re going to judge me for who I am because of my background. Because there’s so much stigma out there for young parents who are care leavers. And we’re all just too scared to you know, talk to someone about it because we feel like we are failing as parents and it shouldn’t be like that”

One young person pointed out that mental health support for care-experienced young people should be a preventative measure:

“And, it should almost be a preventative measure rather than like after the fact. It should be, you know, this, this young person, every young person in care has experienced some sort of trauma. So this should be a preventive measure of this young person has definitely experienced trauma, we need to give them help early on. It shouldn’t be a thing of okay, we’ll see if comes, we’ll deal with them. No, there should be something internal, within social services within local communities that help young people as a preventative measure rather than an after the fact and rather than just saying, Oh, well, you know, they are care-leavers and that explains why they have these issues. That’s not good enough. Yes, they are a care leaver, and that is likely linked to why they have these issues, but you don’t just brush them off, they still have these issues that they’re likely going to have to deal with into adulthood, which then just feeds into the whole homelessness thing again, and it’s just a vicious cycle”

The local authority practitioners we spoke to expressed frustration as they lacked the resources to provide adequate mental health provisions and support for their care-leavers. This is an area which requires particular attention and there is a need for a greater allocation of resources to support young people with trauma and mental health.

Young Person's Voice

Where to begin with this question. Like most people who enter foster care, I was exposed to trauma at a very young age. I struggled with extremely low mood throughout my childhood, and this was exacerbated throughout my adolescence. I became self-destructive and saw no purpose in my life. I attempted to take my own life when I was 14 years old resulting in a hospital trip. After I talked to a CAMHS worker for all of 5 minutes, she told me that because I was in foster care it was expected that I felt the way I did. Essentially, I was told that it was 'normal' to feel the way I did. It was like suicide attempts and self-harm is just a prerequisite for being a child in care. That was my diagnosis, 'foster kid'. I don't believe it is ever okay for a 14-year-old to attempt suicide but that's all it took for her to sign her piece of paper and send me on my way. I was never offered any psychological help following my attempt. I strongly believe that the only reason I am alive today is because I was told that my sister who has learning disabilities was asking where I was when I was in hospital. I realised that I had been selfish and that I need to be here for her, no matter how I felt. Without that, CAMHS would have failed yet another young person in care. I continued to struggle with self-harm, yet it was never 'severe enough' to be referred to CAMHS. I strongly believe

that every child in care should have access to psychological support as a requirement of social services. CAMHS is simply overrun and underfunded but this does not mean that care experienced children should be slipping through the cracks. Again, as 'corporate parents' shouldn't they be responsible for ensuring the psychological wellbeing of their children? We need to hold these 'corporate parents' responsible for all the young people who did not have access to mental health support because they are care experienced. Care experienced young people have often already been failed by their biological parents and they are continuing to be failed by their corporate parents too, so how do we hold them accountable too? It should already be a necessity that children in care have access to any psychological help they need, it the absolute bare minimum needed to support the young people in the UK who have gone through the most trauma. No child in care should be on a waiting list for psychological help. It simply isn't good enough after all the trauma they have already experienced. Early intervention is always the best possible route for supporting mental wellbeing in children, yet this is not being practiced in the biggest system that supports the most vulnerable children in the UK.

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

Unfortunately there has been very little progress in this area that we're aware of. It appears that across Wales the picture is very patchy with no uniform approach applied. We recommend that local authorities partner with third-sector organisation to be able to offer bereavement support to care-experienced young people. From conversations with young people, we know just how important this extra support can be to them in ensuring they can deal with traumatic events in their lives. The below experience highlights just how crucial it is that we create a coherent system that works together instead of solely in their own silos.

“

I don't feel like there's much support out there. Me, myself, I suffered with anxiety and depression really bad. And it's become worse when I lost my auntie who was like my mother back in 2018. And I've been really struggling like, even now I'm still struggling.

And I'm assuming you didn't get any bereavement support when your auntie passed away either?

No, like, I'm still waiting for my doctors to send me an appointment for counselling. It's been a while now and I keep chasing them up and they just keep telling me I got to wait because they were giving me medication and they will all make me feel really sick. And so they said the next option is counselling while I'm still waiting for that as well

”

One scheme worth highlighting however, is that of Gisda's partnership with the Betsi Cadwalader Health Board and their ICan Hwbs. The Gisda ICan Hwb provides therapeutic, easy and early support for 16 to 25-year-old young people struggling with their mental health and wellbeing supporting and complementing NHS services. Through the ICan Hwb, workshops and accreditations are available for young people, including bereavement support.

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

From our consultations with practitioners, it became apparent that local authorities still struggle to provide young people with adequate placements. There is no desire to place vulnerable children or young people in unsupported accommodation, however, the number of suitable supported accommodations is not high enough for all young people to quickly find a placement, which often leaves local authorities with no other options. Suitable accommodation should be seen as a principle and fundamental right for care-experienced young people in particular. Indeed, EYHC was formed off the back of a campaign against this very act, placing 16 and 17 year olds in unsupported temporary accommodation.

Numerous reports have highlighted the traumatising impacts on young people of being placed in such situations, where they have reported feeling uncomfortable, and frequently, reported feeling at risk of harm:

“

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

”

“

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

”

“

I was 17 years old in the (hostel) with crack heads, junkies, heroin addicts, alcoholics, yeah then they question, yeah, why are you involved

”

The recent Michael Sheen led BBC documentary, ‘Lifting the lid on the care system’, explored the current situation in more detail and found that 16 and 17 year olds are still being placed in unsupported BnBs and hostels. Through a freedom of information request to all councils in Wales, the documentary also uncovered at least 50 young people were placed in B&Bs, hostels and budget hotels in the past financial year, with at least 285 in other accommodation which is not regulated by the care watchdog; with a small number of these young people being under the age of 16.

The onset of the pandemic has evidently had a detrimental effect on this recommendation, with far fewer accommodation options than ever before. As can be seen from the data below, the number of 16 to 17 year olds, as well as the number of 18 to 21 year old care leavers placed in bed and breakfasts has significantly increased over the course of the pandemic.

Total placements in bed and breakfasts*

	Of which are single person household: Aged 16 to 17, accommodated by the current Homelessness legislation	Of which are single person household: Aged 16 to 17, Accommodated by Children’s Social Services	Of which are care leavers only, aged 18 to 21, accommodated by the current Homelessness legislation	Total
Jan 2019 – March 2020	30	15	24	66
Jan 2020 – March 2021	75	42	69	189
Jan 2021 – March 2022	96	21	114	231

*Source - Total placements in bed and breakfasts during the quarter, by length of stay and provision (gov.wales)

There is a need for the Welsh Government to collect further data on how widely unsupported temporary accommodation are used and what are the reasons why they are used to look systematically at what needs to be addressed. If more resource is needed, then more resource must be made available. This is a systematic issue, rather than the fault of individuals working in the sector, but we cannot continue to be placing children in these unsuitable placements that are both potentially dangerous and re-traumatising.

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.

In our conversation with practitioners it was recognised that the pandemic impacted the progress of this recommendations. Some of the local authorities’ representatives reported bottlenecks with young people getting stuck in temporary accommodation for longer as Welsh Government’s ‘everybody in’ policy meant that the demand from young people outstripped the supply of long-term, adequate accommodation that young people could move on to.

With the Welsh Government’s commitment to Rapid Re-Housing now well established, however, it is hoped that as pandemic pressures eases off, this commitment, and transformational change to the housing system can ensure that young people do not remain in temporary accommodation for any longer than necessary. It is essential, however, that young people’s voices are listened to so that the plans and strategies developed reflect the wants and needs of young people.



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

The young people we spoke to told us about their frightening experiences of being placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation. Young were put in dangerous situations, housed in hostels with prison leavers and drug users, which significantly affected their mental health and wellbeing.

“ No, they just chucked me in the hostel, which was full of like prison leavers, drug users and even my 16+ keyworker allowed it to happen. And obviously, I had to stay there until I got offered a property... I was there for two weeks and then my partner’s mother took me in then because of the stuff I was going through there. Like it was horrible, but I experienced quite a lot of stuff which affected me mentally as well ”

“ Very similar as well because I was in a When I’m Ready placement when I turned 18 but that placement crashed within four weeks after me turning 18. It wasn’t working out because I wasn’t getting the independency I needed to learn financially and how to become an adult. So I left but because they had nowhere to offer me, I was put in a hostel where there were drug users, a lot of police and things like that. I was there all of a month and because of how uncomfortable I got, I left the hostel. And I moved in with one of my partners’ mates. And I stayed there for about four months and then we both became homeless. But because we both became homeless, my mum and dad who lived in XXX then took us both in ”

The various stakeholders we have spoken to during this review, recognised the importance of ensuring adequate standards of temporary accommodation and agreed with the ‘golden rules’ set out in the original report. However, throughout our consultations it became apparent that a lot of the progress in this area came to halt with the onset of the pandemic. The priority for local authorities was to ensure that every young person was quickly housed, however, this at times meant that young people were put up in temporary accommodation of substandard quality.

EYHC’s comment on Universal Basic Income

On 15th February 2022, the Welsh Government announced a Universal Basic Income pilot for care leavers in Wales. As part of the pilot, around 500 young people leaving care will be eligible to receive a monthly basic income payment of £1600 for a duration of 24 months. As part of this review’s consultations we have carried out discussions with practitioners around the implementation of the basic income scheme. It has been widely agreed that the pilot is a great development and we welcome Welsh Government’s focus on care-experienced young people and commitment to extending their rights and entitlements. There are however several reservations which if addressed would ensure that the effectiveness of the scheme is maximised. Below are some of the key issues which have been raised during our discussions:

Holistic approach:

It is noted that UBI is often introduced in lieu of other entitlements and services for young people. It is therefore important that UBI comes as part of a package rather than a solution in its own entirety and that young people can access youth services, education, employment and other opportunities that help them thrive, beyond financial entitlements.

Safeguarding:

Any care-experienced young people are in vulnerable positions. Young people in receipt of the UBI could potentially find themselves a target of exploitation – steps need to be taken to ensure that young people are safeguarded.

Financial education:

In line with Recommendation 7 of our original report there is a need for financial education for young people in the lead up to the receipt of the UBI to ensure that young people are confident to manage their money and have an understanding of their duties and responsibilities.

Dissemination:

Questions remain about the mechanisms through which the UBI will be disseminated to young people and how its receipt will interact with the wider benefit system and affect other entitlements. Young people taking part in the pilot need to be monitored and given an option to opt out if the UBI is not working for them.

Housing payments:

It was recognised that many young people live in supported accommodation or are in receipt of housing benefits where payments go directly to the service provider or landlord. There is concern that supported accommodation will no longer be affordable for many young people. There is a risk that young people might end up vulnerably housed if direct payments are no longer made to service providers.

Exit strategy:

Concerns have been raised with regards to the exit strategy upon the end of the pilot. It was recognised that many young people will lack the educational attainment necessary to pursue jobs which salaries would amount to or exceed the £1600 UBI monthly payment. Robust plans must therefore be in place to smooth the transition out of the UBI scheme to ensure that the safety net is not taken away from young people, as well as further investments in high quality traineeships and apprenticeships for care-leavers.

Third sector involvement – the practitioners we have spoken to would have liked for there to have been greater involvement of third sector organisations in the planning stages of the pilot so that issues and concerns could have been addressed prior to the announcement of the pilot to avoid any unintended consequences arising as a result of the trial.

Despite these reservations, we do remain positive and hopeful that through the exploration of this pilot, further developments for-care experienced young people will follow.

Conclusion

As has been reiterated throughout, the purpose of this review has not been to look to apportion blame onto particular stakeholders working within the sector, as we cannot separate the release of the original report from the reality of the pandemic that hit six months later. As we come out of the pandemic however, and numerous strategies and action plans are formed and implemented, at both local authority and Welsh Government level, we must, as a society ensure that we are doing our utmost to put an end to look after children's increased propensity to homelessness, providing genuine equity to their non-looked after peers.

- EYHC's working group on care-experienced young people have identified a number of key areas that need to be improved on over the course of the Senedd term to tackle care experienced young people's propensity to homelessness;
- Ensuring that more appropriate accommodation is provided for care experienced young people, allowing for a greater choice of both accommodation type and location to aid with tenancy sustainment.
- Strengthening corporate parenting responsibilities across all local authority departments and across society more broadly. A renewed commitment is needed to ensure improved outcomes for care-experienced young people; never accepting an outcome for them which would be unacceptable in any other parent-child relationship.
- Data collection needs to be much improved; a uniform national data-recording template should be mandated by Welsh Government to be completed for all care-experienced young people who present as homeless, to enable an improved understanding of the links between the two experiences and the support required.
- Young people need to be made aware of their Right's and Entitlement's, and LA's need to pro-active in meeting these; the onus should never be on the young person.



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