About Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland supports young people who have care experience up to 26 years of age, by providing on-going support and independent advocacy. We aim to provide looked-after young people with knowledge of their rights and strive to empower them to positively participate in the formal structures they are often subject to as a result of their care experience. At Who Cares? Scotland we utilise the voice of the care experienced population of Scotland to inform everything we do. Most recently we have released a report that sought the views of 87 care experienced young people on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. This research can be accessed here and we would urge the Committee to read it in full.

In 2014, the Committee heard from Who Cares? Scotland, amongst others about how difficult it can be to prevent and experience homelessness from a young person’s point of view. In our response we provided real examples of what care experienced young people told us about leaving care and managing a tenancy. It is our intention to provide the Committee with a similar overview of the realities of experiencing social isolation at a young age.

We strongly recommend that the Committee invite care experienced young people to give oral, formal evidence to explain further the realities detailed in this written response. This would further enhance the Committee’s understanding of the reality of being socially isolated, particularly when transitioning into independent living. By listening to the voice of the care experienced population, all of Scotland’s corporate parents will be better placed in supporting those growing up in care.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Care experienced young people are at risk of social isolation both during their childhood and once they transition into independent living. Children and young people become looked after through no fault of their own. Intervention is required when parents and carers have demonstrated an inability to meet the child’s needs. Their early childhood can be blighted by neglect, abuse and adverse experiences. It is these experiences that can lead to children developing insecure attachments to their primary care givers which in turn can cause difficulty in building good, stable relationships with others. We know through our work with care experienced young people that stable, loving relationships are integral to supporting a young person

through care. They have told us often that these relationships can be the difference between a negative and a positive outcome.

We also know the importance of stability in helping a young person to feel belonging. Our young people inform us that many placement moves, whilst in care, can make it difficult for them to develop a sense of belonging in their communities. It can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, both prior to and following transition out of care. The possibility of experiencing social isolation can be a fear for many care leavers as our report mentioned above, highlights. It found that 35% of participants feared being lonely in the future, 36% feared having nowhere to call home and 51% feared being unhappy. Yet if the correct supports are allocated to young people while in care and follow them once they leave, this worry can be lessened.

A care experienced young person currently preparing for his transition to independent living describes below in his own words how he has been supported to engage in this process and ensure his voice is heard. He speaks of being aware of how isolation has impacted on other care experienced young people and how he has utilised the supports of others to try and prevent his transition from going the same way:

“I am a 20 year old who currently resides in supported accommodation. I have spent most of my childhood in the care system. Soon I will leave my supported carer’s home and go and live in my own tenancy. The tenancy I am moving into is actually the second offer of a house that I have received. I rejected the first offer of a flat due to the fact that the transport links in the area the house was in were really poor. I wouldn’t have been able to go and visit friends or family and would not have been able to get to and from work either. I thought accepting the initial offer would lead to me becoming isolated from my social circle and society in general.

I was only aware that I was able to reject the initial offer of a tenancy because I had support from my Advocacy Worker and my Youth Housing Worker. They made me aware of my rights. They helped me consider my options and think what was best for me. On my behalf they spoke to the Housing and told them that I did not want to take that house. We worked together to explain to the Housing that I needed to be able to stay somewhere I knew and somewhere that meant I could still work and see people. Because of us working together, the Housing has found me somewhere better to stay. I’m pleased to say that now I am going to be moving somewhere suitable for me. I will be able to keep in touch with friends, family and really importantly I will be able to get to my work.

I have seen other people who have left the care system end up in tenancies where they have ended up being all alone. The loneliness has meant they haven’t been

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able to keep up a job or have become homeless after losing touch with those they used to be close to. When they started preparing me for leaving care I was really worried about ending up with no one. I have seen how devastating this has been for people I know. I don’t think the future would look so bright for me if I had just taken the first offer.”

It is essential that when preparing young people for the transition into independent living that efforts are made to reduce the risk of experiencing social isolation. The Pathways Plan is the main resource utilised by practitioners in preparing young people leaving care. Local authorities begin pathways planning with a young person around six months to a year prior to their transition into independent living³. Who Cares? Scotland has previously submitted evidence to this Committee detailing young people’s views on the effectiveness of the use of pathways planning, reflecting that the preparation time for leaving the care system is insufficient and therefore they leave without the necessary supports to integrate effectively into, often new, communities.

A young person who leaves the care system ill-equipped will undoubtedly be at risk of social isolation, regardless of living in either a rural or urban area. Young people who have found transitioning out of care easier than some of their peers describe being well supported and being provided accommodation that is close to friends and family. It is imperative that we ensure the care experienced population are enabled to develop a good support network for living independently or the risk of experiencing social isolation will only increase. Young people’s preparation for leaving care should always provide opportunities to enhance their skills, develop new competencies, build upon their resilience and promote their wellbeing. Good preparation for transition better enables young people to develop good attachments to their community, extend their network of support naturally and require minimum intervention, decreasing the risk of experiencing social isolation.

**Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness and ill-health**

Social isolation can negatively impact on the mental and physical health of those affected⁴. However for those with care experience, the impact of social isolation on their health and wellbeing can often be exacerbated by the trauma and instability they have experienced in their care journey. One care leaver we met with spoke eloquently about the reality of this:

“I left my foster placement of almost 10 years at the age of 18. It was never what I wanted to happen but certain things had come into play that meant it was no longer my choice. After this I lived in a flat for almost 3 months and during that time I locked

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myself away from society through feelings of hopelessness – feeling I had no-one to turn too.

I got in with a crowd that would drink and take drugs with me at the weekends. On Christmas Eve of the same year something happened with this group which meant I spent all of Christmas day in the cells. When I was released I went on a three day drink and drug binge. I thought moving would help and decided to move to my hometown, where I tried to reconcile the broken relationship with my paternal family. This never worked out as my father was still not able to be a dad to me.

I was now without my foster family and without my Dad. I was completely alone. At this time I was able to look after myself physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually I was not ok! The only real human contact I had was with those I was caring for at work. I became increasingly more isolated and depressed. I would never show this to anyone. I didn’t want people to feel sorry for me and felt ashamed at having no one – because people don’t think it’s normal to be all on your own when young.

I ended up signed off sick from my job after injuring myself one day. Since childhood I suffered from high anxiety, but now this was even worse and I began to be fearful of leaving home. In the end I realized there was nothing I could do and returned to live with my Mum, whom I had no relationship with at all. My throughcare worker eventually put me in contact with Who Cares? Scotland where I met my Advocacy Worker. Her faith and trust in me enabled me to gain control of my life. Now I am in my own tenancy, employment and beginning to deal with my past in a better way.”

This example demonstrates how even a relatively stable, long term placement will not prevent risk of social isolation, if it does not continue meaningfully into life after care. Those with the most complex needs are still at risk of disengaging from all formal support at the earliest possible stage. We must ensure that relationship based supports are involved early and are able to help that young person make the right choices when leaving the care system by staying involved.

**Best practice ideas that could be shared across Scotland**

At Who Cares? Scotland we believe that looked after young people and care leavers across Scotland should have a right to independent professional advocacy. The role of an advocate is to support and empower young people to be able to articulate their views around matters which influence their lives. If an adult is involved in formal systems which can potentially impact on their lives, they would seek support from someone independent of the decision makers. Many adults seek independent remedy when involved in formal or legal processes. This is clear from the case studies above – the independent advocate in their lives has been crucial to their progress. One young person we spoke to expressed passionately how this type of
relationship based support can help them progress in life, even once they have left care:

“When I moved out of care I found it extremely difficult to cope. I felt really lonely and isolated, despite having a worker and a group of friends. To try and help with the emotional pain I ended up turning to drugs and drink. I was misusing drink and drugs for periods of time. At my lowest point I was under the influence for 10 days straight. This didn’t actually help and I began blocking out everyone I had left. Some others turned their back on me because they looked down on me for always drinking and that. No one seemed to understand how lonely and sad I was. I began shutting others off because I didn’t want them to be disappointed in me for the things I was now doing.

For me, loneliness was a huge part of my life. At times even when I was with people I still felt lonely, company didn’t seem to help. At times it felt like I was in a court with the world judging me, but no one understanding what I had been through, or understanding what it was like to have no close family. I’ve never been close to my family because of the way they treated me before I went into care. I didn’t realise how difficult life was without your family until I left care.

I am in a better place now, because a worker seemed to get what I was going through. She didn’t judge me and tell me she was disappointed in me. I had always tried to make the adult in my life happy and those telling me they were disappointed always made me feel really terrible. She made me believe that life didn’t have to be like this. She knew I could achieve good things and helped me believe it too. I have come on so much since then and I have a good group of people I am close too. Not being isolated has made me feel less stressed, happier and now I am at college. I don’t think I could have coped with college if I still felt as isolated as I did.”

Relationships are important to young people growing up in care. They want to know that they can rely on someone who genuinely cares for them and has their best interests at heart. In our report looking at young people’s views of the Children and Young People Act, the importance of relationships was clear. We must ensure all looked after young people are given the opportunity to develop meaningful and stable relationships with people and professionals involved in their lives.

**Ideas for improvement and influencing policy**

In 2013 the Scottish Government introduced guidance to local authorities which aims to tackle the negative outcomes experienced by care leavers, such as social isolation. Staying Put Scotland aims to provide care leavers with “connectedness and belonging”\(^5\). This guidance recognises that numerous placement moves

negatively impacts on a young person’s development, affecting future life chances and making it difficult to establish support networks.

The ‘staying put’ approach also intends to ensure that those leaving care are ready for independent living and are supported in a holistic way. However this would be unlikely to benefit those with the most complex needs or those that have had multiple placement changes. This is because those who have moved frequently whilst in care tend to leave the care system earliest\(^6\). The publication of the guidance will have undoubtedly had a positive impact on some of those in receipt of support however its benefits will not be universally accessible until the Children and Young People Act comes into effect and puts legislative strength behind the intention.

Young people inform us that they are not always involved in the process that determines where they are placed. They believe that if they had the chance to be involved in their placement allocation, their outcomes would improve. Invitation to attend such a forum would also better enable them to advocate their views. Inclusion in all the decision making processes that impact on a young person’s life may reduce the risk of social isolation, as the young person’s voice will always be heard throughout, ensuring their needs and wants are not neglected.

Care experienced young people’s contribution to the shaping of the Children and Young People Act has been widely acknowledged and praised. It is also an example of where decision makers have truly enabled those supported to share their views and perspectives in order to try and create transformational change for vulnerable people within Scotland. The experiences of a looked after child can be complex, as are the formal structures they have to navigate while in care. To truly understand their experiences we have to listen to them at every opportunity, not solely when and where the state dictates.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

Stigma and discrimination are still very live issues for care experienced young people in Scotland. There is a lack of understanding towards how this group of young people can at times find themselves facing personal, structural or cultural oppression. We know this is partly down to a lack of knowledge and awareness, but we also know care experienced young people can at times try and hide their care identity. The discrimination they experience can make them feel ashamed of their experiences and embarrassed that they do not live within a traditional family setting. They hide this in order to avoid drawing attention to the perceived difference between them and other young people.

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Stigma and discrimination stem from fear and ignorance. At Who Cares? Scotland, we are aware of recent attempts to prevent the building of necessary children’s homes in two separate local authorities. The residents involved in petitioning against the children’s homes largely shared the perception that the home would bring trouble or disharmony to the area. This misinformed idea simply comes from a lack of knowledge of the care sector and care experience, however if left unchallenged can result in children’s homes being built in secluded areas with little community connection. This community integration is essential for helping looked after young people experience stability and a connectedness to an area that they may live in once they have left care.

Who Cares? Scotland believes that for awareness-raising to be effective, communities need to be educated in the circumstances that lead to being in care, the issues that then grow from it and the impact that love and understanding can have on a young person’s life. This needs to come from a variety of places: members of the public; professionals in the sector; families of young people in care; but most importantly it must come from the voice of those with care experience.

In Scotland it is possible to get it right for every child, including the care experienced child. In order to ensure Scotland is the best place for all children to grow up, we must share the responsibility of challenging such discrimination.

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Who Cares? Scotland
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