

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Informal discussion with Care Experienced people on PE1958: Extend aftercare for previously looked after young people, and remove the continuing care age cap

As part of the consideration of petition *PE1958: Extend aftercare for previously looked after young people, and remove the continuing care age cap*, Members of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee held an informal, online discussion with Care Experienced individuals on Tuesday 18 April 2023.

Participants were identified through liaison with the petitioner, and included individuals who have engaged with Who Cares? Scotland, Aberlour Children's Charity, and the Scottish Refugee Council.

Committee Members heard directly from Care Experienced individuals and their advocates about their experience of the care system. The following themes were explored during the discussion:

Support available when leaving care:

- Participants commented that there was often no meaningful help when leaving care, and that the process felt like "going off a cliff edge".
- In some cases, the individual hadn't been aware that they were considered to be in care, and therefore were not aware they were entitled to support. This was often the case for individuals who had been in kinship care arrangements. Some in informal kinship care arrangements might have been eligible for some support, but not other support. Others highlighted the lack of support to help maintain or restore relationships with siblings living elsewhere.
- Concern was raised about young people being removed from Compulsory Supervision Orders (CSOs) before their 16th birthday, even against their wishes, which led to already limited support structures being removed, and preventing the Care Experienced individuals from accessing support again in the future. This was a point that was repeated throughout the discussion.
- Where support is available, participants commented this is often discretionary and can vary both between and within local authorities. Advocates from Who Cares? Scotland and Aberlour talked about the significant effort that is required to support individuals and ensure they can access the statutory support that should be being provided to the Care Experienced individual.

Challenges faced when leaving care:

- Loneliness, financial insecurity and accumulating Council Tax debt, mental ill-health as a result of previous trauma, and the bureaucracy encountered when

accessing support were identified as the common challenges individuals face when leaving care.

- Participants highlighted particular challenges that arise following informal care arrangements, for example when kinship care ends. One participant shared their experience of informal care arrangements resulting in a sense of 'falling through the cracks' as no one took responsibility for continuing support.
- If the Care Experienced individual has not been subject to a CSO, or was removed from their CSO before their 16th birthday, they are considered ineligible for aftercare support. While coming off the CSO can be a positive step for the young person, for example by moving out and having more independence, there was a concern that individuals aren't being made aware of the consequences for ongoing support if they are taken off the CSO before they are 16 years old.
- Participants also highlighted the geographical issues Care Experienced people face when trying to access support from different local authorities. Access to housing was a familiar theme, with participants highlighting that housing or homelessness points are only applied if the individual makes an application in the council area where they were first placed into care. It was felt that by applying this approach local authorities risk re-traumatising an individual by restricting opportunities to move away from the area.
- In regard to financial support, one participant spoke about being directed to Jobseeker's Allowance with no additional support being signposted. Other participants talked about relying on advocates from charities to provide support on how to manage their finances and avoid getting into difficult situations. Others highlighted the challenges of accessing Council Tax exemption for care leavers, noting that some local authorities do not add this option to application forms. This was linked to the bureaucracy involved in accessing support, with participants commenting that even when they are aware of their rights, it is not always possible to access them. In some cases, the procedures were deemed dehumanising and traumatising. There was a perception that one needs to "beg" for even the most basic support.

Improvements that could be made to the current care system:

- In very broad terms, participants highlighted the following points when exploring what changes might be required:
 - Simply having someone to reach out to, possibly a teacher or social worker. In relation to support from teachers at school, participants emphasised the need for teachers to be compassionate, and trauma-informed when providing support to Care Experienced young people.
 - Being spoken to as an adult and not being treated like a child when it comes to making decisions about coming off a CSO and leaving care.
 - The need for lifelong support, which recognises that individuals may require support to address their mental health and to access housing and employment at later stages in their life.
 - Need to provide support in maintaining sibling relationships both when in care and when leaving formal care settings.

- There was strong support among participants for removing the arbitrary age cut-off for access to support, with recognition that support should be needs-based and not limited by age. Participants commented that they hadn't been ready to address the impacts of their care experience as teenagers and highlighted the need for access to counselling and other mental health services later in life.
- Participants emphasised a need for consistency in the support that is available to care leavers, as well as making the process easier to navigate. Further work is required to ensure that care leavers are aware of their rights, as well as making sure there are clear routes through which to exercise these rights.
- One idea suggested was about the introduction of more accessible support within communities, for example a 'community larder' where people could check-in on one other and offer practical support on things like how to clean and maintain a home, or the options available for accessing education and employment.
- It was suggested that the Scottish Government, alongside public bodies that operate as corporate parents, should be the "Bank of Mum and Dad" for Care Experienced people, in a similar way to the family support that others in society receive throughout their lives.
- Participants also mentioned a need to raise cultural and racial awareness and sensitivity among social workers.
- It was also highlighted how informal or semi-formal kinship care arrangements can sometimes cause conflict and divisions within family and community. It was said that there should be greater awareness of this issue and consideration of how additional support could be provided to different family and community members. Linked to this was a desire to see greater support provided for siblings who may have been placed in different care settings, particularly in ensuring that siblings can remain in contact both when in care and when they leave formal care arrangements.
- Participants also emphasised a need for giving greater flexibility and discretion for social workers when they make decisions on providing support.

Following the informal session, the CPPP Committee has received information from two participants, 'Advocate D' and 'Advocate M' who were unable to attend on 18th April but still wished to contribute to the consideration of this petition. A summary of the information they provided is included below.

Case Study 1 – Advocate D

'Advocate D' shares their experience of supporting a young woman who had moved in with her boyfriend after things had broken down at home.

As the young woman was financially dependent on her boyfriend and his mother, 'Advocate D' contacted the local Throughcare team to find out whether she might be eligible for support. The young woman was initially hopeful that Throughcare could

assist in arranging a mobile phone SIM card and providing financial support while her Universal Credit application was being processed. The offer of a SIM card was granted but took too long to be provided, leaving the young woman reliant on her partner's mother getting her one so she could progress her Universal Credit application and be contacted by the Jobcentre. The young woman was also left disappointed to hear from the Throughcare worker that no financial support would be offered, and the advice provided was to request a Universal Credit advance, essentially getting her into debt. The young woman had never been in debt before and was really disappointed that this was the advice being given by Throughcare. She also found the advice confusing having initially being encouraged not to take an advance.

'Advocate D' then supported the young woman to write to the Throughcare manager to share her frustrations and reflections on the decision that has been made, and having felt let down by the response, a request was made to meet the Throughcare manager in person. The manager met with them and was sympathetic and understanding.

The outcome in this situation was that the Throughcare manager provided the young person with a number of daily travel passes and food voucher, enabling her to buy personal items and contribute in some way at home. The Throughcare manager did think it was appropriate to apply for a Universal Credit advance instead of Throughcare providing financial assistance for a few weeks until the first UC payment was made.

'Advocate D' commented "*is this really good enough for our care experienced children and young people? Would we expect our own children to take an advance instead of helping them out for a period to tide them over?*"

Case Study 2 – Advocate M

'Advocate M' has shared the experience of supporting a young man, 'Mr A', who faced being removed from his CSO before turning 16, but thanks to the intervention and support of his advocacy worker, was able to remain on his CSO until his 18th birthday.

Mr A had been living in a residential house for 6 years and had formed good attachments with staff and felt the house was indeed his home. He felt safe and had a strong sense of belonging. He had a good relationship with a social worker who left, and he was, after a while, allocated a new social worker, not that long qualified.

Mr A was approaching 16, and to be honest, gave no cause for any concerns, was attending school and achieving well and had plans for staying on to gain as many qualifications as possible. He had limited family time and caused no issues at all either in the community where he resided most of his time, or when he was with family. He felt that this was mainly due to the solid relationships he had with residential staff, good friends and of course his family and that any issues that arose were sorted very quickly thus enabling Mr A to remain focused on making plans for his future.

The advocacy worker received a call advising that Mr A was very unhappy, confused and extremely anxious. Firstly, he was advised that social work saw no reason for him to be on a CSO due to him basically making really good positive choices and not getting into any bother. Also, his name was not being flagged up to police or social work. He was also told by social work that if he was not on a CSO he would not be able to remain in the residential house that he called home. I can't tell you how this incorrect information affected Mr A – everything he felt safe around for such a long time was to be taken away from him. There was no discussion, no consultation between social work and Mr A and in fact social work managed to convince residential staff that the information they had shared with Mr A was correct, creating for a short time an atmosphere and uncertainty as to what Mr A's options would be.

Thankfully that advocacy worker knew this not to be the case and Mr A felt it was even more important for him to remain on his order as he felt this offered him greater protection – he remained on it until the day before his 18th birthday, was able to continue with his studies in his safe space and when he did actually leave the residential house, it was in a proper planned transition with Mr A at the centre of all plans.

Case Study 3 – Advocate M

'Advocate M' has also shared the experience of a young woman, 'Miss B', and the challenges she faced when seeking social work support throughout her teenage years

Miss B, from the age of 13, floated between family members, sofa surfing – as their parents' health and relationships meant she couldn't stay with them. This left Miss B feeling that she lived out of a suitcase for most of her teen years. This, of course, affected Miss B's own mental health, education, self-esteem and for a long time she had no sense of belonging.

On numerous occasions, Miss B asked social work to take her into care and that way she would always know where she would be living each day, she would get fed, have clean clothes and be given time to be a teenager with her friends. Social work refused to place her in care as both her mum and dad would always be able to "reassure" them that Miss B was either "at it" or completely exaggerating things. Miss B was eventually allocated a named social worker but sadly due to years of her feeling nobody was listening to her she very much felt there was no point in speaking to social work. Just after she turned 16, social work told her they were able to sort everything for her as they had gotten her a council flat in a tenement where she knew nobody. Miss B signed the tenancy as she was desperate to have somewhere to call home, she got the keys, social work took her to the flat and then left. As Miss B was not on an order at her 16th birthday, she was not entitled to support from Through Care/After Care who would normally be able to offer practical help, help with budgeting, work along with a young person to decide what if any additional supports would be required, help with benefits (i.e council tax and housing benefit), further education, ensure she had access to doctor and many other basic requirements but also she would have gotten financial help to furnish her flat - she got the keys and that was it.

The advocacy worker received a call from her as a last resort and visited the house as it was not a home. There was space in the kitchen for a cooker, washing machine etc, a friend had given her a blow-up bed, she had 2 old dirty chairs and 2 blankets, which she used as covering through the night on the blow-up bed, and as curtains through the day if she wanted some privacy. She was advised by social work that, as she was not on an order, her parents should help her, and she could also try and get all she needed second hand.

Just because she had been given her own flat did not mean her anxieties and mental health would be sorted – the effect was completely opposite, and she very quickly got overwhelmed. Being on her order would have made moving to living independently more positive, however, if Miss B had received the help she had been screaming for long before she was 16, this probably would have resulted in her remaining looked after, and definitely not being given the keys to a shell that she tried to make a home when she turned 16.