The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29 November 2011

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2011, Session 4

CONVENER

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Nick Bell (Scottish Council for Single Homeless)
Rosemary Brotchie (Shelter Scotland)
Suzanne Fitzpatrick (Heriot-Watt University)
Heather Gray (Prince's Trust Scotland)
Yvette Hutcheson (Quarriers)
Dr Paul Monaghan (Highland Homeless Trust)
Sharon Munro (Barnardo's Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 29 November 2011

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:12*]

Homelessness and Young People

The Convener (Claudia Beamish): Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the ninth meeting in session 4 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind everyone who has a mobile device with them that it should be set to silent and connectivity deactivated or turned off in order not to interfere with the broadcast of sound.

I formally note that Margaret Mitchell is no longer a member of the committee; she is now a member of a different committee. On behalf of the committee, I thank Margaret for her previous convenership and for her work on equal opportunities through the years. I am sure that she will go on doing that in other capacities.

I am delighted to welcome Annabel Goldie to her first public meeting of the committee.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, convener.

The Convener: I begin by briefly introducing everyone. My name is Claudia Beamish and I am the committee convener.

At the table but not participating in the discussion are Douglas Thornton, the committee clerk; Nicki Georghiou, who is our researcher; and two members of staff from the official report. At the bottom right of the table, we are joined by a colleague from broadcasting and production services. Thank you to all of you.

Two places to my right, I welcome Yvette Hutcheson, who is here to talk about her experience of using homelessness services. She comes via Quarriers and is accompanied by Kate Sanford from Quarriers, who is immediately to my right.

To continue round to the right, next to Yvette Hutcheson is Dennis Robertson. Unfortunately, Julie Hunter was not able to attend so she has sent apologies from North Lanarkshire Council. We then come to Rosemary Brotchie, who is from Shelter. Next is our deputy convener, Stuart McMillan, who is followed by Heather Gray from the Prince's Trust Scotland, Annabel Goldie, Sharon Munro from Barnardo's Scotland, Nick Bell from the Scottish Council for Single Homeless, John Finnie, Suzanne Fitzpatrick from Heriot-Watt University, and Siobhan McMahon. We then have Dr Paul Monaghan from the Highland Homeless Trust, and Clare Adamson. I hope that I have not left anyone out. I welcome everyone.

Also in the room are Debra Gourlay from the clerking team and colleagues from security. I also welcome observers in the public gallery.

14:15

Agenda item 1—our only item of business today—is a round-table evidence session on homelessness and young people. The purpose of the discussion is to help the committee to set a remit for an inquiry. I will chair the discussion, and I ask participants to indicate to me or to the clerk when they wish to speak. We will take a note of names and try to take people in order. That might mean that there is a bit of a gap between when you indicate that you would like to speak and when you are invited to do so. We will work our way down the list.

The committee has some questions to ask, but if anyone would like to make a start, that would be excellent.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Given the nature of the proceedings, I declare that, as per my entry in the register of interests, I am a director of the Highland Homeless Trust.

The Convener: Thank you, John.

It would be helpful for the committee to know what those who have come here to help us with our thoughts for planning the inquiry think are the key factors that influence homelessness. That is an open question. People can push their microphone buttons—we are eager to hear what you have to say.

Yvette Hutcheson (Quarriers): Kate Sanford and I had a discussion about that last week when we were talking about what we would bring to the table today. We came up with family breakdowns, and addiction issues in those young people who end up homeless and in their parents, or whoever they are living with. Mental health can also be an issue for young people and whoever is caring for them. If there is a family breakdown—especially if it is caused by addiction or mental health issues—the young person cannot really speak to anyone about it, so they take it on their shoulders and a bad situation just becomes worse until they end up in the system. That is when they start to get the help that they need.

Overcrowding in the family home is another factor; when too many people are living in the home, there might be no place for the young person. That ties in with people being put out as soon as they are 16. There are still parents and carers who think that as soon as someone is 16, they are an adult and it is time to go. That ties in

with overcrowding. If there are already too many kids in a house, as soon as a young person hits 16, they are seen as being able to fend for themselves; they are told to go and make their own way in life, and they are left to fall into the system.

People who cannot stay in their own homes because of abuse might have to leave for their own safety, whether the abuse is mental, physical or sexual. Some people might have moved out and managed to get their own tenancy and a flat, but they do not have the knowledge to keep it.

Leaving care is also a big factor. When I was staying in Quarriers, a lot of people were coming through care and it was like a rite of passage for them. They come through the system of foster carers, foster parents, care homes and sheltered accommodation until they get to 16, after which they are no longer part of that system and they are put into a homeless unit until they are 25. At that point, they are moved on to an adult homeless unit, unless they are one of the lucky ones who get enough support to get and keep their own tenancy.

The Convener: That was helpful.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank Yvette Hutcheson for attending the meeting. It is good to get her insight into the issues under discussion.

I do not want to skew this discussion on general homelessness and young people, but I note that the Education and Culture Committee, of which I am a member, is investigating the attainment levels of looked-after children. Last week, as part of that inquiry, we visited a unit in Glasgow and were made aware of the great pressure on young people in the care system round about exam time because of their expectations and the fact that they do not know where they are going to be. Do we have to do a lot more to help people through that phase? What more can be done to help young people sustain their tenancies?

Yvette Hutcheson: Those who manage to get support at exam time are the very lucky ones. The majority of the people I was living with were, once they were in care, on a downward slope; they missed a lot of school, did not take many exams and did not see themselves as having any kind of future. The kids who manage to do their exams and get results at least have some base in life but, as I have said, the majority of the people I was living with do not get any exam results and are going out into the world with nothing on their back, apart from the support that they might get from Quarriers or related organisations.

Heather Gray (Prince's Trust Scotland): The fact is that we still have not learned fully from Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People's report "Sweet 16? The Age of Leaving Care in Scotland". Young people are leaving care far too early and without the right support.

Clare Adamson asked about educational attainment. These young people's education is being disrupted because they are still getting multiple placements and they are being moved about a huge amount. In Scotland, there is a very inconsistent picture of support for young people before, during and after leaving care and we need to manage transitions much better. I should also mention the impact of unemployment on children and young people and, as a result, on homelessness.

Rosemary Brotchie (Shelter Scotland): I want to emphasise some of Yvette Hutcheson's comments about her experience and the people she has lived with by relating them to the housing statistics and what we know about young people and homelessness across Scotland. Last year, Shelter published a research report on the facts about young people and homelessness. I am happy to share that report with members who might not have received a copy, but it refers to research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicating that the rate of homelessness among young people in Scotland is three times higher than that in England. It is quite clear that there is a particular problem with homelessness in Scotland.

The figures suggest that one of the key reasons for homelessness among young people is the breakdown of relationships, typically with parents or step-parents, as a result of long-term conflict in the home, often involving violence. Although homelessness is a significant problem among young people leaving care, it is not the whole story; we found that nearly half—48 per cent—of young people had been living with their parents or family before they became homeless. There is a big problem with regard to young people in general and even those who are in a family situation are becoming homeless.

It is quite often thought that most homeless young people are men; however, the figures show that more than half of homeless young people are in a household headed by a woman. Although 65 per cent of them are single, 22 per cent are young lone parents and 5 per cent are young couples with children. We ought to bear those figures in mind when looking at the overall picture, but that is not to underestimate the particular problem with young people leaving care and becoming homeless.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I thank Yvette Hutcheson for coming. I will touch on two of the points that you raised. You talked about overcrowding in the family home meaning that, when someone turns 16, they are put out. From your experience and from people that you have

met over the years, how common is that as a reason for people becoming homeless?

You mentioned that some people get a flat, but do not have enough knowledge of how to run it. What would be a good way to help people to run a flat, which is certainly not easy? If an individual has been forced out of their home for whatever reason, we can imagine that other pressures will play a part and they might not be able to think straight and to do what they need to do.

Yvette Hutcheson: As you say, various factors are usually involved when people are put out of the family home at 16. It is fairly common. Where I was living, the majority of people were between 16 and 18. They had turned 16, there were other family issues and the parents turned round and basically said, "Get out." They had been left to get into housing units or care or to find some way to support themselves. That is fairly common. It is sad, because they are just kids.

You asked about a good way to deal with the issue of people being too immature to keep their tenancy. The 16, 17 and 18-year-old kids in Quarriers get support to give them knowledge about how to budget, cook and do the washing and the right way to mop the floor—sometimes, it is as basic as that. A lot of kids leave school and are then kicked out by their parents, but they do not have that knowledge because those things have always been taken care of. However, it would be too strong to say that we should have budgeting lessons and so on in schools. There are cookery lessons, but my sister is at school and she does not want to go to those because she says that she does not need any of that stuff later in life. Some kind of life skills training is needed before people leave school. That could be half an hour a week to tell people how to budget and to make sure that bills are paid. A lot of kids do not have the knowledge. They do not have a clue how to get past the issues, but they are left out there on their own.

Nick Bell (Scottish Council for Single Homeless): To return to an earlier point, we are aware when young people are going to leave care—that transition does not come as a surprise—but, in some local authority areas, young people are still routinely discharged through the homeless route, rather than with a pathway plan that has been worked out for them. We can see the problem and we know that it exists and has existed for some time. Some steps can be taken to improve the situation, but those steps are not taken routinely or uniformly. In a sense, the corporate parent does not actually do very good corporate parenting. Where the children's legislation meets the housing legislation, they have a bit of a handshake, whereas perhaps they should embrace a little more and be a little friendlier. There should be a little more cross-working to ensure that young people get the best outcomes possible.

It is important for young people to be taught in school about leaving home and about housing—Yvette Hutcheson mentioned that—but there is a step before that, which is continuing professional development in those areas for teachers. Teachers cannot teach something that they do not know about, and knowing about housing issues, homelessness and even independent living skills is not just common sense. That knowledge must be acquired. If someone's experience of life has come through the owner-occupier route, their knowledge of social housing might be quite slim. It is important for those skills to be taught at school, but we need to take a step back and teach teachers in order for them to teach the skills.

14:30

Annabel Goldie: I am interested in what Yvette Hutcheson said about reflecting on why young people become homeless. You said that one factor is that young people feel unable to speak to anyone if they are in a difficult situation at home. How might that be addressed? Is there something more that we can do about making young people aware that there are people whom they can speak to, at school or in their community?

Yvette Hutcheson: It would be good if a lot of kids had someone they could go to, but as Nick Bell said, teachers do not have any experience of homelessness and they have not had training to deal with kids who are being abused or kicked out, or experiencing anything in such categories. It would be good if there was someone in the school who the kids could speak to straight off the mark and get the information that they would need if they were going to be kicked out and become homeless. It would be good if there was someone who could tell them, for example, that they could go to the counselling services, or to this place or that place, and to tell them who could put them up and who could help them to get money. It would be much easier if someone could give them a direction to go in. When I became homeless, I did not know where I was supposed to go, who I was supposed to speak to, or what numbers I was supposed to phone—it was really quite hard.

Heather Gray mentioned unemployment and homelessness. That is linked to hidden homelessness. A lot of people are being refused help from their local authority, regardless of their age, because they do not tick the right boxes. I know people who have been refused help because they do not have kids or addiction problems, or because they have a job. I know someone who was fully employed and sleeping on a friend's sofa who went to declare himself

homeless, because his friend's mum and dad had said that he could not stay there any more. Basically, he was told to go elsewhere and to come back when he was unemployed, or when he had kids or had an addiction issue. He was sofa surfing again for another year and a half before he ended up losing his job as a result, then he got the help that he needed.

Sharon Munro (Barnardo's Scotland): I am interested in what people have been saying and I agree with a lot of it. On the reasons for young people not achieving, statistics tell us that the outcomes for looked-after children and young people in care are poor across a range of areas—not just education—and that they do not do as well. They do even more poorly when they are looked after at home, which is a particular issue for me. We are looking at a service to try to provide something for young people who are looked after at home, who tend to fall off the agenda because of resource issues.

We need to look a bit further back, however, and see what preventative work we can do. We need to ask why looked-after young people in residential or foster care are not equipped with the skills, experience and support that they need in order to make their transitions easier. My experience is that young people are sometimes woefully equipped in that regard. We need to do work that prevents the need for further spending down the line, because we know of the impacts on looked-after young people's health, education and employment outcomes, which are very poor. There is also the issue of homelessness. We need to ask why we are not doing a bit more, a bit earlier, to address what young people say are their needs and to ensure that their transitions happen smoothly.

On the point about young people not knowing which door to knock on, there is a particular issue about the transition between children's services and adult services, whether we are talking about health, housing or child and adult protection. Young people aged between 14 and 21 who are in transition cross all those boundaries, but it is difficult to get integrated, holistic approaches across the different areas of practice and across different structures and budgets that meet young people's needs.

The Convener: Is there anything in particular that would help in integrating services or actions?

Sharon Munro: We are trying to move towards integration. There is a good example in Edinburgh with the looked-after children's services. We are looking at how we, as a voluntary sector organisation, can have a place on the adult protection committee to ensure that we are raising young people's issues in that kind of forum. On the ground, there is a lot of evidence that people are trying to work across different boundaries.

The issue is more on the strategic level. As you know, when people are doing the planning, different elements of council budgets—and, I am sure, Scottish Government budgets—are focused on different areas of practice. It is a question of how we ensure that, when strategic planning happens and services are commissioned, young people between 14 and 21 are considered as a group, not as discrete groups based on whether they are a child or an adult. That is where things sometimes fall through the net.

The Convener: Thank you.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick (Heriot-Watt University): I would like to take a slightly longer, broader view of the issues. Most of my recent work has been either in England or at an international level, so I will try to place Scotland in that context. I want to put some positives on the table, as well as mention some threats on the horizon.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I started studying the issue, youth homelessness went through the roof, particularly in London and other urban centres but also in general. The underlying issues were high youth unemployment and welfare reform that cut benefits to young people. There is no doubt that those issues drove up rough sleeping in London and elsewhere.

When colleagues of mine at the University of York did the 2008 study that Rosemary Brotchie talked about—the Joseph Rowntree Foundation review of policies on young homeless people in the United Kingdom—they found a sea change in service improvements over the previous decade. The study covered work across the UK, so it included Scotland. Taking the long view, it found that, as much as there was and is plenty left to be done, things had got a lot better, particularly for care leavers and 16 and 17-year-olds.

Some of the improvements were from statutory reform, particularly in England but also to some extent in Scotland, and the emphasis on homelessness prevention, which in England has focused on young homeless people. That is what the statistical differential that Rosemary Brotchie referred to comes down to. We can argue about the extent to which the real change has been in rates of homelessness or gatekeeping, but it has certainly made a big difference.

We had a terrible problem in the late 1980s and a big improvement over the 1990s, and now there are clearly some big threats on the horizon. The disproportionate impact of rising unemployment in young people is critical. On top of that, welfare reform is disproportionately affecting young people. Increased non-dependant deductions and the single room rent have to be seen as the key

threats, as well as the abolition of education maintenance allowance.

That links with the point that Yvette Hutcheson made about the culture in certain communities and families and the approach that, by the time someone is 16, if they are not bringing money into the household, if they are causing their parents grief and if the house is overcrowded, it is frankly time for them to go. The pressures of unemployment and welfare cuts exacerbate that issue. That is why non-dependant deductions were not raised in line with inflation for more than a decade. The argument was won, but we are now facing some severe problems with it.

My general point is that the UK in general and Scotland in particular have made big strides in addressing youth homelessness. There is a lot of detail that we could put behind that remark but, in international terms, we have done relatively well. We are a good-news story in youth homelessness compared with most other European countries. However, as things stand, we risk losing that progress, not just because of welfare reform and unemployment but because, in the current climate of cuts in Government budgets, non-statutory youth services are often the first to be cut in local authority areas.

There is a lot of what we have that is worth preserving, and there are things that have to be improved, but there are some significant threats on the horizon at a structural level that I suggest that the committee has to take on board along with the detailed issues of policy in practice.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I thank Yvette Hutcheson very much for coming to the meeting. I appreciate that. I have been struck by what you have said so far about your pride in your accommodation. Every person wants to experience that, particularly if they are young and it is their first home.

The rush to meet local authority criteria is coming across. People have to tick the box to get X house, which might not be fair in certain circumstances, I suppose. Have you heard about people getting temporary accommodation on the path to getting a permanent home? A person in temporary accommodation will know that they will be moving on, so they will not really take pride in it and will not be secure or stable in that environment. What can we do to change that so that people get permanent homes and not stop-gap, in-between accommodation because they are trying to tick a box?

Sometimes, people may feel let down when they get their keys if they have not received the community care grant that would allow them to furnish their home. I made a suggestion when I spoke in the housing debate, and the Government was keen to listen; I would like to hear your views on the matter. People should be able to apply for the community care grant while they are waiting for their home so that, when they get the keys for their tenancy, they will have that money in their pocket. Yvette spoke about the life skills that people need. When a person sees their home and thinks about all the things that they need to get, there is pressure on them. Can we do something about that? Would it be a good alternative if people could get their community care grant on the day that they get their keys?

Yvette Hutcheson: Quarriers covered that in our condemned campaign, which we took on a roadshow with the Scottish Council for Single Homeless. What you mention is a big factor. Young people get all the training and support from staff, so they know that, when they get the keys to their first house, they will be able to run it to the best of their ability and they will still have outreach support, but the big shortfall has been in the community care grant.

It is supposed to take seven weeks on average to process a community care grant—for a decision to be made and the money to be sent out—but, in reality, it takes more like 13 weeks. When a person is offered a house, they can go and see it a week later and get their keys and move in a week after that, but there can still be another three and a half months before they get a community care grant to buy basic things such as curtains, carpets and white goods. A few organisations have an affiliation with furniture charities, so people can get a furniture pack for the amount of a community care grant. When they move in, they can therefore have a bed or couch, white goods and perhaps a wee added extra such as a television stand—they might not have a TV to put on it, but they will have a wee something extra. However, the chances of getting that are quite slim. The person needs to know that a community care grant is coming through and how much it is. Obviously, each package costs a certain amount, but people who apply for a community care grant may get £100 with which they are supposed to furnish their entire property. That is nowhere near enough.

There is also a huge issue around asking for the money. I know about one girl who asked for a certain amount. She was on the bottom floor and asked for money for curtains and for white goods, such as a fridge and freezer. She was told that she would not be given money for a washing machine because there was a dry cleaner down the road to which she could take all her washing, but that costs a fortune. She was also told that she would not be given money for a bed, as she had been given money for a couch. It is small things like that. It is unbelievable that people are being denied basic things that they need for their property on the basis that they can go to a

launderette, where they will spend a fiver a time washing their clothes, they can sleep on their couch and therefore do not need a bed, or they do not need curtains, for example. I do not know whether the girl taped up newspaper, but that was the end of that.

There is a huge shortfall, especially for people who are desperately in need. What happens would be fair enough if the person was on jobseekers allowance, was moving from one house to another that was a bit bigger, and needed extra money to get new things, but it is not for young people who are getting their first property and want to take pride in their first home, to have things there, and to be able to say, "I'm doing this and that." If they had the basic things to build on, that would make them stay for longer in the property and give them pride and motivation to get it looking good and how they wanted it. If they move in and have bare floorboards and bare windows, no white goods and no bed to sleep in, it is just somewhere to go to keep dry—it is not a home.

14:45

The Convener: I just want to highlight the video submission from Quarriers, which members might have seen. A lot of the accommodation that is given to young homeless people—and I expect, although I do not know—to homeless people more generally is in a very dilapidated and shockingly bad state. Does anyone who has come here today to advise the committee want to comment on that? Yvette Hutcheson might know about it, but others might want to come in, too.

Yvette Hutcheson: Sorry, I missed the start of your question.

The Convener: I was going on a bit. You mentioned grants. Do you know whether the accommodation that young people are given is up to what it should be or whether there is damp in it, for example?

Yvette Hutcheson: We mention that in our charter, which is for any young homeless person moving into their home. It is a guide for the local housing authorities to take note of. The charter states:

"I will not be offered a house where I do not feel safe or where I am cut off ... I will be given a brochure".

It also says that the house

"will not be damp. It will be clean. It will be painted and any repairs done. It will have working electricity and a working heating system. It will have a working toilet and hot and cold water."

Those points are in the charter because we know people in Quarriers who have moved into their new home and not had those things. They have moved in and found bags of rubbish or found that the toilet has been kicked out or taken out—for whatever reason, it is just not there—and they are expected to be happy with that. They are expected to think, "The council is so good to me," but they do not have running water.

In some of the conferences and roadshows that we have had, people have been astounded that young people are getting offered houses like that, but it is a fact—it is a way of life. The council would not offer houses like that to people who were moving homes. If they were moving from one home to another, they would be offered a house of the same standard or better, so I do not understand why young homeless people are getting the rubbish ones that are left. We are getting offered them only because no one else wants them. They might not have electricity or heating in them, yet we are supposed to say, "Thanks very much. I'll sit in here for five months until you carry out the repairs or until you get my water running." It is an issue.

We can leave copies of our charter.

The Convener: That would be helpful. Thank you.

Sharon Munro: We lease a range of flats from one of our council partners, which we support young people to move into. The flats are fully furnished starter flats, or care leavers flats, for young people leaving the care system. That is part of a collaborative scheme with housing associations. There is an agreed standard for the flats.

On occasions where the young people have not managed the tenancy despite the support provided, it has been because that was not the right option for them at that time and they were clearly not prepared enough for it. Where we have unfortunately had to ask for replacement flats because of damage that has been done to the flats or because of concerns with neighbours, we have struggled to get them. I think that that is genuinely because there is a limited amount of housing stock available. I do not know whether that is young homeless people's experience of the kind of accommodation that they are being offered, but we have certainly struggled. We have had to turn down a few flats that would not be appropriate for care leavers because they are up alleyways that are dangerous or they do not have good facilities.

There is something to be said for young people being in accommodation where they are a bit more supported before they go into flats on their own. I do not know what Yvette Hutcheson's experience is. When young people are inappropriately placed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, that might be safer than where they were, but some bed-and-

breakfast accommodation is unsuitable for young people because of its cost and safety issues.

There is something in having a range of resources, but the pool of accommodation that is available has reduced.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Highland Homeless Trust): Yvette Hutcheson did a fantastic job of highlighting the practical problems that young people confront when they are homeless. A number of colleagues have spoken about the overall strategic approach in Scotland, which has an inherently short-term focus and is ill equipped to deal with the longer-term problems that she highlighted.

I challenge Suzanne Fitzpatrick's view that we in Scotland are dealing with youth homelessness well—that is not the case and we could do a lot better. My experience is that the availability of housing to young people is poor and is getting worse. The housing that is offered to them is typically of very poor quality. The standard of customer care that a homeless and vulnerable young person receives from many agencies is very low, partly because few young people have the ability to complain about or challenge appropriately the services that are provided to them.

In my experience, few young people have a structured young person's plan to guide their development and co-ordinate the resolution of their problems and the holistic work on that. We should therefore not be surprised that outcomes for young people are typically quite poor.

As Sharon Munro said, there is a heavy reliance on temporary emergency accommodation for young people—primarily bed and breakfasts. There are perhaps four reasons for that. The first is demand management. To an extent, putting a young person in bed-and-breakfast accommodation avoids the need to prepare a young person's plan and to conduct regular assessments of the progress that they might be making towards achieving positive outcomes. Local authorities have perverse financial incentives to use temporary emergency accommodation rather than develop resources that can tackle the long-term problems that Yvette highlighted. The use of temporary emergency accommodation enables a short-term approach to be taken that avoids the need to develop appropriate resources that have the capacity to address longer-term problems. Such accommodation provides flexibility, but perhaps that is at the expense of positive outcomes.

People who were looked-after children are represented disproportionately in the homeless community. Generally, young people who find themselves homeless experience impoverished social support networks, if they have such networks at all. Typically, they have an inadequate education. There are many reasons for that, but Nick Bell was right to highlight the training that could be provided to educators and teachers.

Young people who are homeless typically have inadequate social skills and inadequate awareness of social norms. They are often alienated from society, to use the jargon. We in Scotland are in danger of creating a subclass of individuals who do not have the social skills to move forward. Inadequate problem-solving skills and an inadequate ability to manage anger are extremely common, with a consequent inability to access further or higher education, employment and training.

Such young people tend to have a very dependent outlook and a number of them have learned to be helpless, which is unfortunate. Young people—particularly those who were looked after—are disproportionately represented among the offending community and among individuals who have dependencies on drugs and alcohol.

Heather Gray: I would like to go back to the issue of unemployment. I remind the committee that almost half of Scotland's unemployed are under 25 and that 92 per cent of young people who are homeless are unemployed. Employment and training are key issues that we need to tackle in addressing homelessness.

As regards solutions and things that work, I would like to highlight the personal development project or PDP, which involves a group of specialist providers working together to help young people in a much more cohesive, wraparound way that responds to their particular needs. The Scottish Government has supported three pilots in Scotland on the PDP model. It works because it involves organisations working together and finding the best solution for our young people. It is important to remember that a number of positive projects are going on that we can learn from, develop and see positive outcomes from.

The Convener: Could you say a little more about the PDP, please?

Heather Gray: The PDP is working in three cities: Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. It involves a group of specialist providers, including Venture Trust, Venture Scotland and the Prince's Trust. In other words, it is a hubbed approach involving the provider that can offer the best solution for the young person. Referrals come from a number of sources. Rather than working independently, providers work together to provide a wraparound service, with funding that follows the young person, to get the very best outcomes for them.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I begin with the statement that young people seldom choose to be homeless—it usually happens because of circumstances. Yvette Hutcheson skilfully told us what those circumstances are.

Some of the information that we have heard is quite disturbing. It is particularly disturbing that, as Yvette pointed out, when a young person tries to make their own way, the help is not there, and that when they ask for it, they are told to go away because they are expected to be able to cope because they have a job. There seems to be the perception that it is necessary to become a one-parent family, a person with an addiction or someone with a mental illness before the services will be available. That is wrong—it is not right—and we must address it.

On the transitional aspect, young people do not suddenly become 16—we know that they are going to be 16. Young people themselves know that they are going to turn 16. With looked-after children, it is up to the various agencies to ensure that the support and the services are there. I know that Quarriers does that and that there are positive pilot schemes out there, but there are not enough of them.

However, we should never accept a young person who is genuinely desperate to get away from a situation being put into a more desperate situation. The type of housing or accommodation that is offered to our young people is sometimes even more desperate than the situation that they have left, and that cannot be right.

We can say that we do not have sufficient resources and we can point fingers, but the situation did not arise overnight or in the past week; it has not arisen in the past 10 or even the past 20 years. It is an endemic, societal problem in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

I am not sure about the education factor and the role of the school. There is probably room for the curriculum for excellence to do some work on the issue but, in many respects, it is probably an experiential approach that is needed. That could involve people such as Yvette going into schools and working with young people to ensure that they know that, if they believe that they are going to become homeless, or if the situation at home is such that they need to escape from it, a resource will be there for them. We need to put things on social media. We need to have ways to ensure that children can go into a one-stop shop—a hub—where they know that they can get answers and support. It is not good enough to say, "Here is a hovel that you can live in until we are ready for you." That is not acceptable. We should try to ensure that they are never offered a situation that is worse than the one that they have left.

15:00

Sharon Munro: I agree with many of the points that Dennis Robertson made.

There is an issue with the way in which young people can get access to services. From speaking to a colleague in Barnardo's, I am aware that Perth and Kinross Council has a good model that others should look at. It has a one-stop shop that enables young people to access services, whether they are looked after and accommodated or live in the local population. It has a cafe and computers and provides information and advice. I was impressed by that approach.

There is a range of options, some of which get better outcomes than others. A good one involves supported lodgings for carers. As a resource, that is cheaper, and a piece of research that was done in England suggests that the outcomes for people in supported lodgings placements are better than those for people in other types of accommodation. People in those placements, who have previously been looked after either in their family home or in care, receive support in the form of a person who can help them to look after themselves in a new home—someone who can teach them how to do things while they make the transition to a situation in which they take more responsibility for themselves.

From speaking to colleagues across other Barnardo's 16-plus services, I know that there is a particular issue with rural homelessness and how we can make services accessible in rural communities. If you are a young person in a small town or village, being offered homeless accommodation 60 miles away, in the middle of a city where you know no one, is not a great option. The supported lodgings model can provide more local resources in smaller communities, because it uses ordinary, local people who are assisted in opening up their homes to young people who need that kind of resource.

The Convener: Does anyone else have something to say about rural homelessness, in relation to preventative services or support for young homeless people?

Nick Bell: I support Sharon Munro's point. Scotland is not homogeneous. The difference between rural communities and urban communities is vast. Although it is easy to assume that homelessness is just an urban problem, it exists throughout Scotland. Hidden homelessness is an issue for young people in rural communities. It is not picked up by statistics and there are no specific services to deal with it. The services that are available tend to be universal services, such as a citizens advice bureau. Of course, if that is 30 or 40 miles away, that is not very useful, and if it is

shut on the day that you visit, that is not great either.

An issue that ties into that is young people and transport, which also connects to the issue of employment and employability. Young people are not fixed to one spot, and we do not expect them to be. Your postcode is not the only place where you live. In order to address homelessness in rural areas, we also have to consider youth access to transport and education.

We must also consider the possible misuse of resources. We have a joint PhD studentship and one finding from our PhD research student's field research, which includes going out to rural communities, is that, with the best will in the world, young people have been placed in supported accommodation at a point when they do not need it, because that is the approach that is used in that area. That is a misuse of resources. Someone who would perhaps be ready to take an independent tenancy is set back by being in a more chaotic environment than they perhaps need. There is a mismatch. Whereas urban areas sometimes have a comparative richness of support, there is a desperate paucity of it in rural areas.

The Convener: Before I bring in Stuart McMillan, Paul Monaghan wants to comment on the rural issue.

Dr Monaghan: I do not have a great deal to add to what Nick Bell has said, which is spot on. If you live in a remote and rural area, you will suffer from a geographic disadvantage. Resources are heavily centralised, so young people often have to travel long distances to access their rights and the services that they require. In the medium to long term, the centralisation of services in urban areas results in a migration from rural areas to our towns and cities, which puts an additional burden on the services that have been developed to meet urban needs.

Stuart McMillan: Professor Fitzpatrick, you said that Scotland has done relatively well but that there are threats to that progress. What comparisons with other European Union nations can you provide? What follow-up work is under way, bearing in mind the current economic conditions?

My second question is for everyone. Over the past four and a half years people have raised with me frustrations about housing allocations and the people who are given a home when a property that has been redeveloped or a new-build property becomes available. It has been raised with me time and again that, for example, a young individual who has a child will get a home in preference to married people or a couple who have been looking for a home for years. Many people feel that there is an imbalance and that some people get preferential treatment for some homes. I know that housing allocation is not an easy issue anywhere in Scotland, because there is a shortage of rented accommodation in the public sector, but that is the issue that is raised.

Finally, I agree whole-heartedly with Dennis Robertson's comments. This issue has not just arisen; it has been growing for many years. As a society, we have not managed to deal with the housing shortage and the knock-on effects that it has on individuals.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: We carried out a study that compared six EU countries, including the UK and the different parts of the UK, across a range of homeless groups. Young homeless people were one of five homeless groups that we looked at. We examined the responses that were made by providers of the whole range of services to young people. The vignette that we used was a 17-year-old man who was asked to leave the family home by his stepfather.

There was a range of findings from that research, but a key point that emerged was the importance of the statutory homelessness system in the UK—and in Scotland, where it is at its strongest—in giving young people an entitlement to housing. That means that, whether or not a person is allocated housing, the system must take some cognisance of their needs.

In most of the other countries that we studied, a 17-year-old would still be part of the childrens care system and would be a low priority in that system. In our adult homelessness system, a 16 or 17-year-old is a relatively high priority, which makes a big difference. There were other factors too, but our legal framework is much stronger than in virtually all other countries, and it is important that we preserve it.

I will go back to the point about dangers and threats, particularly in a recession. We know from previous recessions that homelessness, and youth homelessness in particular, is a lagged effect. Youth unemployment has been rising very strongly, as we know, and I think that it will have a very strong impact on homelessness in the next couple of years. Once that is coupled with welfare reform, it will enormously increase the pressure on poor families to cope, and make it much more difficult for them to hold those young people in the family home and for the young people to sustain their place there.

I suggest that the committee thinks about how we support those families under pressure, in situations in which it is safe for the young person to remain in the family home although they need some support. Research that has been carried out in England and elsewhere has highlighted the

importance of respite care for young people, who might just need a break from their family or vice versa. That emerged as a very strong recommendation in some work that we did recently for Centrepoint in England. Support to help and develop the parenting skills of people who are looking after and coping with teenagers rather than babies is also important.

The committee cannot necessarily make major changes to welfare reform, the housing system and so on, but it can recognise that problems are arising and do what it can to support those families that are coping with teenagers who are unemployed and have very little access to income from welfare benefits. There is a lot that we can do on that in Scotland.

Stuart McMillan: Which countries did your research cover?

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: It covered Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Portugal, Hungary and the UK.

Stuart McMillan: Can you provide the committee with some further information on that?

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: Certainly—that is no problem.

Stuart McMillan: Thank you.

The Convener: Does Rosemary Brotchie want to come in on that point?

Rosemary Brotchie: My point slightly relates to that subject, but I will broaden it out.

The Convener: You may make your point, and then we will go to John Finnie before we come back to you.

Rosemary Brotchie: We have had a useful discussion this morning about responses to homelessness and how young people cope with it, but we have not considered in as much detail the prevention of homelessness. Following on from Suzanne Fitzpatrick's comments, we are aware that it will become a problem and we must start thinking about a range of prevention activity now.

Recent research by Shelter shows that whether or not a young person runs away from home is an excellent indicator of the likelihood that they will become homeless. Our research has shown that the rate of running away among young homeless people is 84 per cent, in comparison with 11 per cent for the general population. We know that young people do not just become homeless; they often have episodes of running away beforehand. If we can identify the young people who are in a family or a care situation and are likely, when they are 16 or older, to become homeless, we can intervene early on.

We might be able to prevent running away and homelessness by offering support to sort out problems at home early on. That could include forms of family mediation, sorting out problems with family and friends, providing support—as we have discussed—for parents and carers around how to parent young people in their family circumstances, and intervening if we can. We can also—as we have mentioned—offer young people somewhere safe to stay as a respite. There can often be problems at school too, which we must take into account.

Shelter is currently developing a project across Dundee, Fife, Angus, Perth and Kinross to work with young people who have been identified as running away and offer some of those skills. We hope that the project will start in April next year, so that we can identify young people and see how some of those things can really work.

The Convener: Thank you. Again, it would be helpful if you could give us more information about that project.

15:15

John Finnie: I should like to touch on some of the points that Rosemary Brotchie has raised but, initially, I want to talk about the bricks and mortar of this matter. Homelessness is not exclusively a problem for young people; it is a significant problem generally. I am still a local authority councillor, and I know that there are 11,000 people on the waiting list in Highland. There is evidently insufficient housing stock, and the reasons for that are for the committee to consider, but they are significant. This is not just about the dearth of housing stock; a lot of the problems relate to the type of housing stock that we have. For example, we have a lot of two-bedroomed houses, and an insufficient number of one-bedroomed and four-bedroomed houses. The latter would cater for larger families and prevent a lot of the tensions that arise. On occasion, I deal with families with three generations living in one house, perhaps including a shift worker. We have also been hearing about the difficulties caused by sofa surfing. Those circumstances inevitably lead to breakdown and fragmentation, resulting in not just one but a number of demands being placed on the homelessness service. To me, it is self-evident that insufficient housing is the root cause of all those problems, and the more housing we can build, the better.

I want to pick up on a point made by Dr Monaghan about customer care. That might seem a bizarre term to use in relation to looked-after children, but I am a corporate parent, and I take those responsibilities very seriously. Perhaps we should have corporate parenting lessons as well as parenting lessons. For example, there might be

tensions between the social work and housing departments when one of those departments is leading a looked-after child to the other department to register them as homeless. That is not how I would treat my kids and they are in their 30s. There needs to be a coming-together on this. It is all very well to talk about multi-agency work, but the work within local authorities, where the primary responsibility lies, is important.

Housing associations also have a role to play. I have dealt with situations that were the complete opposite of what Yvette Hutcheson described—I thank her very much for her contributions, by the way; I found them extremely interesting. For example, a very vulnerable young woman was given occupancy of a three-bedroomed house. The gatekeeping skills required for that, in the area in which she lived, would have been very demanding in any case, and the tenancy broke down. In the interim, the situation caused endless friction with neighbours. We just need a bit of foresight and planning, and an understanding of young people and of the demands that are placed on them. As Paul Monaghan said, many young people in care have very demanding needs, but that does not mean that we should not respond to them; it is all the more reason to put every effort into responding.

Picking up on what the previous speaker said about preventative work, a big frustration of mine is that one of the easy hits, in budget terms, was to take away the budgets for family mediation, Relate, and counselling. In my local authority, that involved sums of £67,000 and £86,000. That had implications for the preventative aspects of the service, although I am delighted to say that those budgets have partly been reinstated. They were seen as easy budget hits, however, with no regard being given to the implications further down the line.

I have a query about preventative spend, which is the direction that the budget is taking. There is a lovely phrase in one of the submissions about the balance between crisis and early intervention. Of course, we all seek early intervention, but could our witnesses comment on what kinds of preventative work can be done? I know that many things have been said about respite, which is an excellent idea. Do any of the witnesses have any other ideas?

The Convener: I want to bring in Yvette Hutcheson, as she has been waiting for a while. I know that others have as well. I also take John Finnie's point that it is important to look at good practice in preventative spend, so we have a list of topics here. We are hoping to end within a wee while, so if we all try to be brief, everyone will get an opportunity to speak.

Yvette Hutcheson: I want to pull this back to the question of employability. When someone is homeless, it is hard enough to get registered with a doctor, never mind find employment. A whole host of things come into consideration.

When someone is in that position, they have no confidence in themselves and they do not have a set address. There is also a stigma attached to being homeless with employers, doctors and housing officers—everyone has a take on young homeless people, and the view is generally that they are homeless because they deserve it. It is not easy to find a job, even a cash-in-hand job sweeping up hair in a hairdresser's. As soon as an employer sees the homeless person's address and it is the name of a hostel or supported accommodation, a barrier goes up.

As has been touched on, people coming through care do not have the greatest exam results, qualifications or life skills behind them, but when someone is in that position, although they want a job, a house and a better life for themselves, they cannot go to college because they will not get housing benefit. The council or whoever will happily pay housing benefit for someone to sit in a hostel all day, but if they want to go out and make something of themselves by doing a part-time or full-time college course, the council will not pay it. It is hard for that person to get the benefits or the money to attend college in order to gain the qualifications to further themselves and get a job, which in itself is really difficult as soon as employers see their address—that is when their background comes into it. The Princes Trust, Venture Scotland and Fairbridge play an important role in getting young people's confidence up and teaching them life skills, but there is still a major barrier in the fact that they cannot get to college.

When I was in the homeless unit, I considered going to college for something to do and in order to get an extra qualification at the end of the year, but that option was totally shut off because I could not get the funding for it and it would have been too hard to keep my place in the homeless unit. That is something else that needs to be looked at. There are so many barriers preventing young people from getting a better life for themselves.

The Convener: Thank you, Yvette. Those points are all very helpful.

Nick Bell: I return to a point that Rosemary Brotchie made. I highly recommend the Shelter report on young runaways. It is a reminder of the fact that the Scottish Government has a five-point action plan on young runaways, which is not hugely well known about because it sits under child protection. I am also a member of the Scottish coalition for young runaways, which has overseen and pressed for some of this work. The

policy needs to be revisited with a view to the prevention of homelessness. At the moment, it is seen in its own right as the prevention of exploitation of children. That is very important, but it could be explored a little further to see what some of the options are. I also point out that Scotland has only one refuge for young runaways—it is one of only two in the UK. Although it has produced some fantastic outcomes, it has precarious funding. The provision seems a little meagre, to say the least.

The Convener: Where is that refuge?

Nick Bell: It is outside Glasgow and is run by the Aberlour Childcare Trust.

Rosemary Brotchie: I will add briefly to what I have already said. One of the big difficulties is in working out how we should address these problems. As has been mentioned, it is important that we improve the links and communication within local authorities between homelessness services, services for young runaways and services for people in care. If we create those links and join those services up, then, if somebody has a history of running away, that information will be passed on to homelessness services. When somebody applies as homeless, those services will understand that person's background and history, and we can understand and make those connections. In social care we hear time and again about the importance of having joined-up services, and that is extremely important in this context, too.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: I want to raise again the issue of prevention, and the prospect of learning from England. England is much further down the road than Scotland on assertive homelessness prevention measures across the board, not just for youth homelessness. However, youth homelessness and young people was a key focus of homelessness prevention efforts in England and I recommend that the committee looks at a couple of cities' youth homelessness services.

Newcastle has just done an evaluation of its prevention service and it is doing some very interesting work on the prevention of youth homelessness. Birmingham, particularly St Basil's, has done some innovative work that Newcastle and other cities in England are picking up on. That work is partly about the respite, mediation and support for families with teenage children that we have already mentioned.

It is also worth looking at a bespoke route through the statutory homelessness system for young people. In Newcastle and Birmingham, young people do not go through the same statutory homelessness route that everyone else goes through. They go through a bespoke route with youth homelessness officers who assess their statutory application and look in a proactive and assertive way at mediation and other prevention methods. The young people have the same rights as everyone else, but they are dealt with differently and that seems to have been effective, certainly in Newcastle, which I have looked at in detail recently.

Clare Adamson: It might be quite early to ask this question. We were talking about statutory duties and things that fall to one side, but the Scottish Government is going to implement the United Nations charter on the rights of the child. That obviously has an age limit of 18. There is quite a lot in that and obviously the Scottish Government will be working on it initially. Have any of the organisations looked at how it might be used to help services and change the way in which we are dealing with young people?

One of the frustrations for the Education and Culture Committee is that attainment levels have been known about for a long time, and we know that things can be worse for looked-after children at home. A huge amount of effort seems to have been put into tackling those issues but the outcomes are not changing and we are starting to ask why that is. If anyone has any insights into how we can get the organisations to work together, that would be welcome.

The Convener: Thank you. We will take Annabel Goldie next and then Paul Monaghan. One or two more people want to come in, and Clare Adamson's question will need to be answered, but we will keep going with those people I have on the list.

Annabel Goldie: I have forgotten the question that I had in mind originally, but I have come up with a better one.

I want to go back to Yvette, because I like listening to her. It is great to have her here. I have been struck by how much of the discussion has focused on preventative measures and how some really interesting points have emerged, not the least of which has been what Suzanne Fitzpatrick talked about. I am not clear about what is the trigger to a young person's becoming homeless, or what intervention might prevent reaching that trigger. That is where Yvette Hutcheson might be able to help the committee.

Rosemary Brotchie mentioned the connection between runaways and the likelihood of becoming homeless. Is that related to truancy from school? Could it be picked up on and intervened on at that point? When we know that something like 45 per cent of young homeless people become homeless because of relationship breakdowns, and we also know that mediation has a role to play, how does the young person get from a desperate home situation to a mediation intervention? Does Yvette

have any views on that? Some councils offer mediation.

There is also the question of parenting skills. I suffer from that happy syndrome of feeling that I would make a much better mother to other people's children than their own mothers do, which I know is a completely blind delusion. What should we do when we see that parenting skills are fractured or non-existent and that the young person is the painful victim of that situation? Perhaps Yvette holds the key to that question. When someone is in a difficult situation that they know is not working, they know that something must be done about it. What help can young people access?

Yvette Hutcheson: There is nothing beyond school or social workers, who are already involved.

15:30

Annabel Goldie: They are the main channels.

Yvette Hutcheson: Yes. I did not have the experience myself, but in my unit I heard from people who, when there was a family breakdown, had talked to either their teacher or social worker. There may have been some mediation, but obviously if they were in the homelessness unit it had not gone quite according to plan.

Any preventative action would be great. It is better to bring a family together than to have a child breaking free. As soon as a child runs away, they lose the support network and their family, who are the people they are supposed to be closest to—although in some cases, that is not the story. If there is someone whom they can approach knowing that there is a good possibility of getting their issues resolved, it can only be a good thing.

Rosemary Brotchie: I will add briefly to what we have said about social workers and schools. In the survey that we conducted, more than half the people said that, to their knowledge, they had been reported to the police as being missing on the occasions when they ran away. I think that the police often do not take the case any further if the young person just turns up again. There are things that we can look to join up in building an understanding of when people are running away and of what is happening to them.

The Convener: Paul Monaghan has been waiting patiently to speak, along with Heather Gray, Sharon Munro, Stuart McMillan and Suzanne Fitzpatrick. After that, we will close this valuable meeting, but if anyone wishes to submit more information, either on the particular projects that we have been told about or on other points, Douglas Thornton is the man to whom to submit it. We would like those points by the end of the week, because we will thereafter be considering our deliberations.

Dr Monaghan: I will quickly pick up on prevention. It is perhaps worth highlighting that a number of legislative tools—for want of a better expression—exist but are rarely used by local authorities. For example, there are interim accommodation orders and section 32A of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, which allows homelessness duties to be discharged through the private sector where housing support services are also provided. Those are good opportunities to develop integrated services that can deliver positive outcomes through holistic partnership working, but they are rarely implemented.

Heather Gray: I want to highlight access to advocacy for young people. The fact that the UNCRC will be enshrined in statute is fantastic for services and young people, but we need to ensure that young people are aware of those rights and of how to have them realised, so there is a bigger debate to be had about advocacy.

Some positive work is happening in the looked-after children strategic implementation group for which the new centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland is the secretariat. Cultural change, particularly about the stigma and discrimination that children and young people experience, and changing people's hearts and minds through our work on corporate parents and public awareness are really important in making progress.

To take up your offer, convener, I will be able to submit some examples of positive projects, where we have partnerships between the third and private sectors to help to provide finance and to solve problems. I will ensure that the committee has access to information on those projects, so that members can see the innovations and, I hope, learn from the information in improving outcomes for young people.

Sharon Munro: I was delighted to hear someone mention the children's rights agenda. Young people are essential to everything that we do—we are here to work for them. Consulting them and finding out about their solutions are key to that, so it has been great to hear about the agenda today.

Members asked about other solutions. Out of the corporate parenting agenda has come the concept of the family firm, whereby the council, in acting as a corporate parent, provides opportunities for young people to be employed. There are some good developments around, although they are not offered universally and we would certainly like to see more of them.

We talk about early intervention. There is something in having good assessment and in involving, talking to and understanding the young person. There are already mechanisms in the looked-after children system. I am talking about pathways planning from the point of view of care leavers. A key aspect is having a good assessment that considers what stage the young person is at and whether we should focus energy on maintaining and promoting good family relationships through intervention or mediation, or whether we should look to get that young person a different type of accommodation, depending on the age and stage that they are at, their experience and whether they are looked after at home or away from home. It is about making sure that we get it right, because we do not want to set people up to fail.

Barnardo's has some good examples of work, such as the supported lodgings scheme. Local authorities are doing similar work; I know that Glasgow City Council has a very well-established scheme. The results from our care-leavers flats scheme are very good in respect of young people maintaining their tenancies and going on to be successfully nominated to housing associations for tenancies because they have had a lot of support to do the first bit, which has allowed them to move on.

I want to make a final point about how prepared we are for the impact of the Welfare Reform Bill. We need to look ahead and think about its impact on young people. There are serious implications that we need to begin to get our heads around. We do not want to be looking back, as we are today. We should look forward, anticipate the changes and do some preparation for them.

Stuart McMillan: I have a question for Rosemary Brotchie, who talked about the need to improve information exchange among agencies. Does information not get passed on because the information technology systems do not talk to each other, because of data protection issues or because of staffing issues? Is it all of the above?

You said that once an individual is found, the police might not undertake follow-up investigation. John Finnie is probably the best person to answer this, given that he is an ex-police officer. If an individual is found and the police do not think that there is any requirement to do any follow-up work, why should they do it?

Rosemary Brotchie: The evidence suggests that young people who have had an episode of running away are likely to repeat it and could become homeless in the long term. One instance might not appear to be significant, but the cumulative effect could be. Obviously, we need to act proportionately and the police have a lot of other things to deal with, but we need to find a system that will flag up such things. Perhaps that already happens in some police forces—I am not absolutely clear on that—but we need to understand the connections and links in order to know how best to identify young people before homelessness becomes a crisis for them.

John Finnie: I have reducing currency in respect of my knowledge of the police service.

For me, running away would be seen as a child protection issue, and there is nothing more important than child protection. As part of the getting it right for every child initiative, I would have thought that it would be most appropriate to share such information between the agencies, as does happen. There was always frustration within the constabularies at the continual running away of looked-after children from some establishments, but there was perhaps a major misunderstanding there, which I hope has been overcome. I would be surprised if there was not at least some basic recording of and inquiry into the rationale for running away.

Rosemary Brotchie: Child protection is obviously crucial. The connections that I am looking for are specifically with homelessness services and teams, which have access to homelessness prevention strategies. That is what we are trying to deal with here. If those teams become aware, particularly of children aged 14 and 15, who are on the cusp of being eligible for those services, those who are at risk of homelessness can be identified much earlier.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: I support what Rosemary Brotchie says about runaways. There is a clear evidential link between someone's displaying a pattern of running away and their becoming homeless as an adult. I also pick up Annabel Goldie's point about the triggers. We have good evidence on the triggers; from a range of research, we know what they are and what the signals are. I have just completed a piece of work on multiple-exclusion homelessness in adulthood across the UK, which showed some very clear triggers, most of which emerge between the ages of 14 and 17. Those include all the school-related issues such as truancy, exclusion and so on, but having parents with an alcohol or drug problem is also a powerful predictor, as is running away. Homelessness as a child was the most powerful predictor in the statistical work that we did. So, we know what the signals are, we know the triggers and we have the evidence.

There has been a lot of talk about whether young people know whom to go to and with whom to raise issues. That is important, but we should not wait for a young person to do that. We know who the troubled young people are—it is obvious to their schools and, a lot of the time, to the criminal justice system.

Annabel Goldie: That was my question. What triggers the intervention? We know what to look out for. As Yvette Hutcheson said, it is difficult for someone who is in that situation to do much about it unless they speak to a social worker or a teacher.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick: I think that it is for the teachers. We recently gave evidence to the ministerial working group on homelessness in England, which was looking to feed into prevention efforts there. We said that focusing homelessness prevention on housing and homelessness agencies was responding too late because those agencies come across the young people and adults very far down the line. The key agencies are the criminal justice system—including dealing with young runaways and shoplifters, which happens early, too—and schools. Slightly further down the line, but earlier than housing and homelessness agencies, are substance misuse agencies, particularly for those who have the most extreme problems. Schools and criminal justice are the key priorities, with housing and homelessness agencies a bit further down the line.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

Clare Adamson: Last week, we visited a secondary school and spoke to a guidance team there. They told us that they could recognise children who were on the cusp of being looked after and that their attendance level was the biggest issue. The problem was that, when they approached other agencies, unless the children had presented as a police problem or were known to social work services because of such issues, the school could not progress the matter. All the services must work together to ensure that the triggers are identified and acted on earlier.

The Convener: Yvette, would you like to say a few words to end with, in view of the comments that you have heard? Your contribution has been very valuable and has—I am sure that members will agree—brought things alive for us today. I thank you on behalf of the committee.

Yvette Hutcheson: Thank you very much. From what I have heard, I think that prevention is an absolute gem. If you can prevent a young person from being homeless and get them either back with their family or with a foster family, that is good news because it prevents them from falling further into the system and having even less hope of getting out of it in the future. If you can prevent that from happening, that will be ideal.

Further on from that, there is a need to prevent repeat homelessness. Plenty of people come into homelessness units and then get their own tenancies but do not have the support, the skills or anybody around them to help them out, and they end up back in the unit time and again. Sometimes, they just need somebody at the end of a phone line. Quarriers has an outreach service whereby, when someone gets their own tenancy, their key worker checks up on them—they give them a call and pop by to make sure that everything is going okay, that they are eating well and that they are managing their money. Quite a lot of people who get tenancies are just dropped and left to fend for themselves, so a factor in prevention of repeat homelessness by those who get tenancies is that they should have all the support and energy that they need in order to help them to keep their tenancies.

The Convener: I thank all our witnesses today. With all the challenges that young people face, the situation can be quite daunting. I am sure that members will agree that it has been invaluable for the committee to hear about preventative work—which we are particularly interested in—about how young people can be supported through the appropriate tenancy and about how agencies need to work closely together. We have also heard about the triggers and the predictors that we should be observing carefully. You have given us a lot to think about. I hope that, when we come to choose how to proceed with our inquiry, we will do justice to the young people who need our help.

Meeting closed at 15:45.

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