The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 12 June 2012

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICPATED:

Byron Carruthers (Quarriers)
Julia Edgar (Highland Homeless Trust)
Gordon Fleming (Highland Homeless Trust)
Matthew Friess (Highland Homeless Trust)
Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)
Sharleen McLennan (Quarriers)
Rhea Nicholson (Highland Homeless Trust)
Kate Sanford (Quarriers)
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 12 June 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:05*]

Having and Keeping a Home

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 11th meeting of 2012. I ask everyone to switch off their mobile phones.

We have received apologies from Dennis Robertson and Siobhan McMahon; David Torrance and Jenny Marra are substituting for them, so I welcome them both.

This is a round-table evidence session. Members and witnesses are sitting beside each other around the table, and the clerking and research team, official reporters and broadcasting services are also at the table. Around the room, we are supported by members of the security office. I welcome the observers who are sitting in the gallery.

My name is Mary Fee, and I am the committee convener. I ask members and witnesses around the table to introduce themselves in turn.

Sharleen McLennan (Quarriers): I am from Quarriers in Saltcoats.

Byron Carruthers (Quarriers): I am from Quarriers in Saltcoats, as well.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for West Scotland.

Kate Sanford (Quarriers): I am policy manager at Quarriers.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for West Scotland and deputy committee convener.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am the MSP for Kirkcaldy.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands. I declare an interest as a director of the Highland Homeless Trust, from which there are people here today.

Rhea Nicholson (Highland Homeless Trust): I am from the Highland Homeless Trust in Inverness.

Gordon Fleming (Highland Homeless Trust): I am a unit manager from the Highland Homeless Trust in Inverness.

Julia Edgar (Highland Homeless Trust): I am from the Highland Homeless Trust in Inverness.

Matthew Friess (Highland Homeless Trust): I am from the Highland Homeless Trust in Inverness.

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

The Convener: Thank you. Agenda item 1 is evidence in our inquiry into having and keeping a home. I am delighted that we have been joined today by young people who have experienced homelessness and by representatives of two support services.

Annabel Goldie and I have already met some of the young people who are here. We were privileged to go to Saltcoats and meet them, and it is lovely to have them here in Parliament today. John Finnie and Jean Urquhart met the other young people who are here when they visited Inverness, and I am sure that they are delighted that the young people have been able to come to give evidence.

What we hear today will inform our future evidence sessions with representatives from housing options hubs and the Minister for Housing and Transport, and it will help with our inquiry report. I will chair the discussion; anyone who wishes to speak should wave or whatever to me or the clerk, Douglas Thornton.

Before I open up the discussion, I ask the young people round the table briefly to give us a flavour of why they are where they are. If you do not want to speak, that is absolutely fine—I am sure that we will pick things up during questioning. If you would like to say a few words to set the scene, I would be delighted.

Sharleen McLennan: I became homeless in 2010. However, I now have my own home, and I believe that my being able to sustain that is thanks to Quarriers. Everything is now going well. If I had not got the support that I got when I became homeless, I do not think that I would be where I am now; I would probably still be homeless and I would be going from place to place without a job. Now that I am settled, I am looking to move forward, and to get myself a career and get on with my life.

Byron Carruthers: I became homeless recently—I am still homeless—because of financial reasons. My budgeting was not great, and when the gas man came for his money, I just felt that I did not want to give it to him. That eventually caught up with me. I am learning

budgeting skills so that I can move on and, I hope, keep my own house, eventually.

Matthew Friess: I have become homeless only quite recently. I moved from residential care a couple of months ago after the local authority funding was pulled. It is a bit of a culture shock because it is very different. There was not a big transition—it was quite quick. One thing that I will say about the Highland Homeless Trust is that the number of doors and opportunities that have appeared, even in recent weeks, is much higher than I had in four years of residential care. That is good.

The Convener: Thanks for that, Matthew. Julia, do you want to say anything?

Julia Edgar: No.

The Convener: That is fine. Rhea?

Rhea Nicholson: I became homeless recently due to financial problems.

The Convener: Thank you.

A number of members want to ask questions. Although it probably feels a bit scary sitting here and although it is quite a formal setting, our discussion will be quite informal. If you want to speak, we are more than happy to listen, but if you feel that you are not able to, that is absolutely fine as well.

Annabel Goldie: I am grateful to you for giving some background information, which is helpful to the committee. We would find it useful to know whether any of the young people were in care and then became homeless. Also, where was education in all of this? Was it difficult to keep going with education when your circumstances were in turmoil? If any of our witnesses would like to volunteer an answer, that would be welcome.

Byron Carruthers: I was in care when I was younger. When I left, I went straight into my own temporary accommodation, but I felt as if the care system had not taught me enough home skills or living skills for me to feel as if I had moved in. At the age of 16 or 17, you are young and naive enough to think that you can look after yourself, but when you get dropped off at your house and the door is shut, you say to yourself, "Oh, no. It's happened." It all hits you at once, because nobody has taught you the essential skills that you need to cook, budget and so on.

14:15

Matthew Friess: I cannot offer a lot on that side of things. I had education when I was in residential care, but I had health complications during that time. The schooling definitely could have been better. Compared to what you would get in school, a private tutor coming in for two hours a week is not enough to get you to the level at which you can sit exams for qualifications. I was further down than I would have been otherwise, because of that. The local authority could have done a lot better.

Annabel Goldie: It sounds as though you had quite a challenge with continuing education provision.

When we visited Saltcoats, one of the young people said to us that they did not know what being homeless was like until it happened to them, and that they had lived quite an affluent life but had created problems for themselves at home. Did the young people who are with us today have an idea what homelessness was like?

Sharleen McLennan: Before I became homeless, I had no idea just how difficult it would be. Certainly, I had no one to tell me, "Look, this isn't the best idea for you. It's not going to work out."

I left my mum's home through choice because I thought that I would get my own place and that things would be better because I would be independent and could do what I wanted when I wanted. I got my own house but could not cope with it, because I did not have the skills.

Going back to the previous question, there is not enough teaching of life skills in the school setting to enable you to know what you have to do to keep a house running. When I got my house, I had no idea just how difficult it would be, which resulted in my becoming homeless.

Becoming homeless was a big eye-opener in terms of the stereotyping that you have to deal with—the way people look down on you and think that there must be something wrong with you, or that you must have done something wrong. A lot of the time, that is not the case; people end up in that situation because they do not know how hard it is to live on their own and cannot cope.

Annabel Goldie: Does that stigma extend to attempts to get work?

Sharleen McLennan: It definitely does. If you are looking for a job and say to the employer, "I live in the hostel," they will say, "Hang on a minute. You must have problems and issues. Maybe you're not the best person for us," and will give the job to the person with a home who can say that they live a stable life.

Byron Carruthers: It is a bit of a culture shock. I think that people leave care too young, usually when they are 16 or 17. It is impossible that people, even if they have lived with their mum and dad, would have the appropriate life skills at that age. The age limit for people going into homelessness should not be 16; it should be 18.

That would give people more of a chance to learn skills that help them to look after themselves.

The Convener: When we were in Saltcoats, we discussed the outreach support service that Quarriers operates. Could Kate Sanford and, perhaps, some of the young people, give us a bit more information on that service, what support it provides and how long the support lasts?

Kate Sanford: The length of time for which the service is available varies from person to person and from local authority to local authority. We normally see young people as they move from supported accommodation into their own tenancies. While they are in supported accommodation we start on the upskilling process—what it is like to have your own home and how to be a good neighbour, and how to do budgeting, cooking and cleaning. We do all those basic things. When a young person gets their own tenancy, that support continues with them: a key worker will continue to support them and to help them with those essential skills.

One of the major issues for young people moving into their first tenancy tends to be the door-keeping element. I am sure that Byron and Sharleen will be able to tell you more about that. There is a big temptation if you are on your own, feeling isolated and quite lonely, to have a lot of friends up. One thing leads to another and the situation can easily spiral out of control.

On Annabel Goldie's question, the majority of young people who are supported by Quarriers have had significant disruptions to their education. They tend to have no qualifications and low skills levels. However, once they get in a stable place they often feel that they are ready to catch up. They may want to get ready to have a good job and they appreciate that they cannot have that if they do not have qualifications or skills to offer employers.

The next logical step is for them to move on to a college placement, to get the literacy and the numeracy skills—the basic skills—that they need and then to move on to get qualifications. However, someone who is at college full time does not get housing benefit; they can get housing benefit to sit around a hostel all day, but cannot get it if they go to college. That is a fundamental flaw in the benefits system.

The Convener: If there was not that flaw—if there was housing benefit or some other sort of financial support—would you expect more people who come through Quarriers to go on to college?

Kate Sanford: Yes, I would very much expect that. I know a young man who had a fairly difficult time, but he got supported accommodation. He was in a good place: he was in a stable situation, and he had a support worker who got him up in the morning and showed him how to get to the college. He found a college placement that would give him a skill so that he could find work, for which he got a bursary that covered travel and books, but he could not get housing benefit. Because he could not get housing benefit, he could not take up the college place.

Byron Carruthers: Jobseekers allowance is, I think, £107 a fortnight. I am a student; I think folk do not get housing benefit if they get a bursary. The bursary is a bit more than jobseekers allowance, but not much more. I do not think that the job centre or anybody else realises that it is not much more. The bursary is £70-something a week—about £140 to £150 a fortnight, which is only £20 or £30 more than jobseekers allowance—and is meant to cover rent and food. However, it covers only the rent—rent, per week, is about £70—so you would need to leave college. Although the bursary is only £20 or £30 more than jobseekers allowance, you cannot get housing benefit, which seems ridiculous.

The Convener: You can be stuck in a situation that you cannot get out of.

Byron Carruthers: Yes.

The Convener: Gordon, what support services are available in your area?

Gordon Fleming: The support services are similar to those that have been outlined by Kate Sanford. We follow through with key support for young people once they leave Planefield house in Inverness. The three young people here—Rhea, Julia and Matthew—are from Planefield house. Once young people leave care—either care homes or foster care—they may get a place in Planefield house. It is a transition step before they move into their own accommodation.

The approach has been fairly successful because the young people are not going straight from care in to their own accommodation. To send them straight in to accommodation is actually to set them up to fail. As a result, we have gone into partnership with Barnardo's springboard project. Coming back to financial issues, I point out that under our criteria young people can pursue training or education without it affecting their basic living allowance from Barnardo's. I know that Matthew will say more about that later on, but the point is that the young people can go to college, for example, without their being penalised financially for it. That system is up and running pretty well.

David Torrance: Good afternoon. I know from my 16 years as a councillor that young people who get houses can be evicted very quickly because they simply do not have the life skills. For some people there is a revolving door; they go back on the waiting list, get another house and are soon

evicted again. How important are accommodation support staff to those young people? I heard the examples that were highlighted to Annabel Goldie, but surely such staff must play a vital role in ensuring that—instead of their being like the many examples I have seen in Kirkcaldy of young people getting houses and being evicted six months later—young people can get and stay permanently in accommodation.

Gordon Fleming: I hear what you say. We had a case in which we, in conjunction with the housing department at Highland Council, moved a young lady who became pregnant out of Planefield house into temporary emergency accommodation—what they call a scatter flat. We put in place quite a large support network for her and she has since moved into her own accommodation and is doing really well. We offer her 10 hours of key working a week and she still receives support from social work services and Barnardo's.

We need to look at each case and put together—and stick to—an action plan to ensure that the young person in question does not suffer. That approach works. It is important to ensure that support continues when they leave Planefield house and that we do not simply put them on to the street and say, "Goodbye". We want to support them until they are ready for us to let go of the reins.

Kate Sanford: I agree with Gordon that continuity of support is really important. Another crucial point is that when a young person gets a tenancy they very often have nothing to put in the property and end up either having to sleep on the floorboards in a completely empty house or getting into rent arrears because they are paying for supported accommodation as well as their tenancy. Now that responsibility for community care grants has been devolved to the Scottish Government, we have an opportunity to look carefully at and do something about a situation that is genuinely setting up young people to fail. Community care grants are taking anywhere up to eight, 10 and 12 weeks to come through, which means that young people either have to spend three months with nothing in their flat or get into three months' rent arrears. That is not a great start for anyone.

The Convener: Of course, Quarriers has the fab pad.

Kate Sanford: Indeed. We work with Impact Arts on the fab pad project to help young people to learn how to decorate and do the things that they want to do in a property. However, what is needed is the basic funding and we have tried to fill the gap between a young person who has nothing getting their keys, and the allocation of community care grants, by providing loans on the understanding that they will be repaid once the community care money comes through. It is a major issue. We do not believe that just anyone should be asked to move into a tenancy, because it is simply setting them up to fail.

The Convener: You would not say to someone, "Here's your keys—off you go" and put them into a completely empty property. No one can live in such a property.

Kate Sanford: Exactly. I certainly would not do it to my children.

The Convener: None of us would.

Byron Carruthers: But that is what is happening. Folk are doing that—they are moving in with nothing. As we speak, plenty of people are sitting in a house that has nothing in it. No wonder they go out and drink. It is a vicious circle that means they will be back in a hostel, because they have nothing to look forward to when they are in their flat.

14:30

Sharleen McLennan: I have been in my tenancy for over a year now, but I still do not have everything I need. I applied for the community care grant, but it took about six or eight weeks to come through. Luckily, I knew that I was getting the tenancy, so I was able to apply for the grant before moving in and did not have to wait that long when I was in the flat. However, as I said, I am over a year down the line, but with the grant that I got I could not afford everything I needed for my home. For example, I do not have a washing machine. I have to ask to use a friend's washing machine or go to the local launderette.

Sometimes people look at your situation and think, "We don't think you need this amount for a sofa. We think it could be less." In fact, if I remember right, when my community care grant came through I was told that a washing machine was not a necessity and that they would not pay me a grant for a washing machine. I do not understand how that is possible, because a washing machine is essential for daily living. Surely it is a basic right to be able to wash your clothes properly. I started off doing a hand-wash because that was all I could do, but I could not keep doing it, because the clothes were not being washed properly.

They look at a number of things and think, "No, that's not feasible. We don't think you should need money for that, because it's not a necessary item." That is very unfair because, as has been said, people are being put into a tenancy in a completely empty property and they get help from nowhere. Where does it come from?

The Convener: Certainly, if you asked me to do without my washing machine, you would probably hear me all over Scotland. Everybody should have a washing machine.

Sharleen McLennan: That is my opinion.

David Torrance: My second question is about accommodation for homeless people. We have heard that when they go into education, they do not get housing benefit. In several cases that I have dealt with, when a young person was offered a job, what they were being charged for rent did not make it worth while for them to take up the job offer—they would have been left out of pocket if they did.

The Convener: We heard about that from the young people we met on our visit to Saltcoats. Does anybody want to comment on that point?

Rhea Nicholson: A lot of young people who would have to start paying full rent if they had a full-time job choose not to go for those jobs. They just go on jobseekers allowance, because it probably works out just the same.

The Convener: Yes. That point was reflected in our visit to Saltcoats.

Byron Carruthers: A lot of the time there are no full-time jobs anyway and people do not earn enough. I would not class working for only 17 or 18 hours as a full-time job; it is just over part time. I have never been through this personally, but I know that some people who have worked for that number of hours have had to pay about 60 per cent of their wage towards their rent. That is ridiculous when they are working for only 18 hours a week and not earning that much.

Kate Sanford: To return to my earlier point, young people tend to be on lower wages because of their age and low level of skills. We cannot do anything about their age, but obviously if young people are enabled and empowered to get greater skills they will get better jobs and it will be worth while going to work.

The Convener: Do you have anything else on that, David?

David Torrance: No. Thank you, everybody.

Jean Urquhart: My question, which has been partly answered, is about follow-through care. If someone is looked after—or even if they are not—I imagine that the first person whom they come into contact with might be from social work, but what happens then? Does that person stay with them? How does the interest continue, regardless of whether someone is still in care, or still at school or not at school?

Gordon Fleming: Do you mean what happens to a person once they have left Planefield house and they have moved into their own tenancy?

Jean Urquhart: Let us say that somebody comes to Planefield house. Do they still take an interest or are you in charge and the young person does not see that person again? What continuity of care is there?

Gordon Fleming: I am not sure what you mean.

Jean Urquhart: If someone is in care or is looked after, they usually have a social worker who is looking out for them. Will that person carry on?

Gordon Fleming: Yes. That person will carry on. Under the getting it right for every child policy umbrella, a person usually has either a social worker or a lead professional. Sometimes that lead professional is the social worker, but not necessarily.

Once a young person turns 16, they move into Planefield house and the chances are that the lead professional will be a Barnardo's project worker, who will work, in liaison with us, to steer the young person towards either training or education in accordance with our criteria. We will work together with them and, if everything goes smoothly, and they are ready to move from Planefield house into their own accommodation, again, nine times out of 10, both the agencies will follow through that support based on an action plan of the young person's needs. Does that answer your question?

Jean Urquhart: Yes, it does. I wanted to know what continuity exists in their lives. I imagine—you can tell me if this is not the case—that if a change is happening in someone's life, what is important is whether that person has any stability or feeling of security and that someone is looking out for them if direct family is not nearby, or there are no siblings or other people that they might be talking to.

Gordon Fleming: I do not think that there would be a situation in which we would cut off that person completely. We follow through with support; that is worth while and it shows results, too.

Byron Carruthers: I do not know what the situation is anywhere else in Scotland regarding services that are available after someone leaves care, but I can use a service called throughcare. The service is really good for me and I would not have survived for long without it.

Throughcare is available to people up to the age of 21. Obviously, people go into care because of personal circumstances, but as a result they are able to get throughcare. There are a lot of people in the same situation as me—they are the same age, they live in the same place, and they could have been through roughly the same

experiences—but who were not lucky enough to be in care, so they do not get the benefits of throughcare or anything like that, so they really are alone. I know that it is not nice to say that they are lucky—obviously, care is not the best thing—but people would have got all that support if they had been in care, but they did not get it because they were not in care. That is not fair for people who have not been through care. Throughcare really is an excellent service, so I wonder why people who are the same age and in the same circumstances as me do not get it.

The Convener: Before I bring Jean Urquhart back in, will you explain to us exactly what throughcare provides that someone who is in your circumstances but who has not been through the care system does not get?

Byron Carruthers: It provides wee silly things. For example, I have got a bill to pay. I am on a payment plan, so if I pay an amount, throughcare matches whatever I have paid. Also, it might help me out with, for example, furniture. When I move into my own accommodation, I will get a grant—straightaway—from throughcare, with no need to wait as you do when you apply for a loan. Obviously, somebody else would not get that.

Throughcare provides wee things such as food packets. It might be a couple of days before pay day, and you have no food, but throughcare comes through. Someone who does not get throughcare does not get that support. That is not fair, because people are going through the same circumstances but some of them have not been through care.

Jean Urquhart: I had intended to ask what that throughcare looked like, but the convener asked that, so perhaps I can ask a supplementary. Byron, you are waiting for somewhere to live on your own. Is that right?

Byron Carruthers: Yes.

Jean Urquhart: What about advice to help you with work, college courses or other options? Is that likely to come from the same person who gives you the food parcels?

Byron Carruthers: Yes. You are given your own support worker, who is with you from the minute you leave care until you are 21. I was already in education, but my support worker would support me with that. If I were to ask them for help with something, they would help me, which is good. Even if they are not trained to give particular support, they will come up with ways of helping.

Jean Urquhart: They find out what you need.

Byron Carruthers: Yes.

John Finnie: I want to ask the young people here who they feel is in charge of their situation. Who is involved and who is in charge?

Sharleen McLennan: For a while, I felt that no one was in charge. I know that I was certainly not in charge. I started out in a short-stay hostel that had nothing to do with Quarriers. I was in there for a week after I became homeless. When I walked back in one day, I was told that I had no option other than to go to Quarriers. The hostel said that if I did not go to Quarriers that day, it would no longer be able to house me.

At that point, I started to think, “Hang on a minute. All these people are taking over. I have no control over this.” When I went to Quarriers, Quarriers took charge. I was told the number of times that I had been through the system—the homeless system, that is, not the Quarriers system. At that point, Quarriers took charge and said what needed to be done and how things needed to work. I am where I am now because Quarriers took charge. If Quarriers had not taken charge when it did, I would probably have made all the wrong decisions. I believe that Quarriers takes charge when you go in—it shows you what you need to do to progress.

Byron Carruthers: Sharleen McLennan has been lucky enough to have had a good experience. I do not mean to be disrespectful, but it is obvious that not enough is being done, because a lot of folk are still coming back. If organisations such as Quarriers were doing brilliant work, folk would not come back. There is something that is not going right that needs to be addressed. It is good that people like Sharleen have been helped, but there are other people who come back. If the system worked all the time, that would not happen.

The Convener: Matthew Friess or Rhea Nicholson might like to comment.

Matthew Friess: Byron talked about people going back into residential care after leaving it. I was in that situation last year. I had a college placement set up and I moved home to live with my mum. In the past, young people have often found that when they leave residential care, the doors are shut. The point about outreach—which is very good at Planefield—is that when you leave and move on to your own tenancy, the people you know will still come out and see you until you are comfortable. That did not happen with residential care. When I left, the idea was that one of the staff would act as my support worker and would come and see me once a week just to catch up, but that fell through. It is a vicious circle. You end up back in the same cycle, which makes it inevitable that you will end up back in residential care or wherever.

14:45

Sharleen McLennan: I probably did not clarify what happened properly. I was not lucky enough only to go through it once. I had to go through it with Quarriers only once, but I have been through various homelessness organisations before getting to the point that I got to with Quarriers. It was probably the fact that I have been through the process so many times that, when I got to Quarriers, I saw that I needed to step up and get it done this time. I put more effort into working alongside Quarriers than I have ever put into anything, which helped me to succeed in what I was trying to do.

I completely understand the point that Byron made, because that happens a lot. If you do not get the skills that you need that time, you do not have any chance.

Annabel Goldie: You are being candid with us, which is extremely helpful. What do you think was the cause of you going through various arrangements and structures?

Sharleen McLennan: When I first became homeless, I was in one of North Ayrshire Council's local short-stay hostels. It did not have anything like the one-to-one workshops that Quarriers does; it did not let you sit down with someone and work out where you were going wrong. It was a case of, "Okay, you're homeless, so here's somewhere to stay until you have another house." That was it. Once you were in, you did your own thing until you left again.

I do not feel that I got any support until I went to Quarriers, which runs a lot of workshops, as I said. I have heard that North Ayrshire Council is bringing in such workshops, but I have not experienced that system since I left it.

Kate Sanford: Matthew spoke about the door being shut once young people leave care. That quite often happens, I believe. Byron and I were discussing what would make that situation better. One suggestion was that people should leave care at an older age, and Byron made a suggestion about a pilot scheme approach that he might want to tell you about. He spoke about a situation in which, instead of people going from residential care into their own tenancy, they were given a month's trial period.

Byron Carruthers: I had been told that I was getting my own flat. At that young age, I was like, "Yes, brilliant—this will be amazing." However, when I was dropped off, the door was shut and that was it: "Oh no, wait a minute."

I found it all right to begin with but, after three weeks, I was choking to get back into the care system. You realise by then that this has been a bad mistake, but you cannot go back, obviously. If people had a trial period, those who realised that they needed a bit more time could go back into the care system. That would be a good idea for children. Obviously, the Government's finances are not brilliant, so that would be hard to address. There is a lot of money involved.

The Convener: You could try to live on your own but you could go back if you wanted.

Kate Sanford: That would probably not be any more expensive than dealing with the repeat cycle of someone going into homelessness and back into hostel accommodation and so on.

The Convener: It would be cheaper.

Kate Sanford: It probably would be. If young people are desperate to leave care, maybe they should be given a taster of what the reality is like, with the option of going back into the children's home, if that is what the young person thinks would be appropriate.

The Convener: Do you want to come in on anything that has been said, Gordon?

Gordon Fleming: I am a wee bit wary of the try-before-you-buy approach. If that young person fails, how will they feel when they take that backward step into the care system? It is more important that they have a transition period in which they go into, say, temporary emergency accommodation, where furniture is provided for them, and see how they do for a few months before they get their own tenancy and start having to budget for their furniture and stuff like that.

Kate Sanford talked about going into flats with bare floorboards and nothing else. Through a New Start Highland scheme, we give basic furnishings for people who are moving into accommodation for the first time, particularly young folk. It is not the most salubrious of equipment, but it gives them a starting block so that they have semi-furnished accommodation. They can then start to budget for new stuff or even apply for community care grants to buy new stuff to replace the stuff that they have been given, which is basically second hand.

Annabel Goldie: Would that transitional period involve an extended facility in the home to prepare young people for being independent, or would the transitional period take place outside the home, but with support in place?

Gordon Fleming: I think of Planefield house as a transition. We have six units there. Basically, they are the young person's tenancy, although there is a communal kitchen and sitting room, and we do activity work together. Each person in Planefield house has one key worker, but a support team comes in and out. They are residential units, but they are the young people's tenancies. I see that as the way forward. We could do with more Planefield houses throughout

Scotland. It gives young people a chance to see what living independently is like, although they are still supported.

The Convener: They are on their own, but they have a safety net.

Gordon Fleming: Yes. They have that until we feel that they are ready to move on.

Annabel Goldie: Does Quarriers have such a facility?

Kate Sanford: Yes. We provide varying degrees of support depending on the young people's needs. For example, in Glasgow there is emergency accommodation in which 24-hour support is provided for young people. That is 14 units in a purpose-built facility. When the young people are ready to move on, they have slightly less support but in a similar situation. Byron and Sharleen have been living in something similar to that. The young people have intensive support to start and then they move to flats where there is less support. Byron is in such a flat now, getting ready to move to independence.

The Convener: Has it been beneficial to you to have that support? Has your confidence increased as support has lessened?

Byron Carruthers: Aye. I think that Quarriers has 17 bedrooms in the main building and then there are four flats next door. People look at the flats as a goal, because in the bedroom there is only a bed and a bathroom, but the flats have four rooms. That is a goal and something to work towards. Once you are in there, it feels as if you have your own flat. It might be horrible inside, but it is your flat.

Jenny Marra: I will follow up on one question and then ask one of my own. I was interested in Byron's point that, when he got his flat and had been there for three weeks, he discovered that there were things that he missed about being in care. What was it that you missed?

Byron Carruthers: It was people. I was isolated from everybody. When I was in a unit, there were six children and staff members all the time. It is the shock of the quietness when you shut the door. You think, "Oh my God." That is what I missed the most.

Jenny Marra: You just had your own thoughts for company.

Byron Carruthers: Exactly—that was it.

Jenny Marra: That leads me to think that the focus on people getting their own tenancies and not living with other people or with friends or a network of people can be isolating. Do other witnesses share that experience?

Sharleen McLennan: It is certainly strange. When I moved into my own tenancy, I thought, "This is great—I have peace and quiet and I don't have the staff buzzing down all the time." I think I lasted about half a day and then I sat thinking, "Oh no, I am on my own—what am I going to do?" Even now, the majority of my time is spent with friends or my partner. I do not like spending a lot of time on my own because that gives me a lot more time to think and I get bored or frustrated. It can get quite lonely at times. If I did not have a network of friends and my partner round about me, I would probably be in a different place. It is hard to realise and understand that you are alone.

Byron Carruthers: Your friend group has a big influence. A lot of people who move into the flats feel lonely, but their friends might not be the best people for them to hang about with, especially if they stay with their parents. They do not realise the importance of not having people round and having parties and stuff like that. It depends on who your friends are. They have a big influence; nobody can stop that.

Jenny Marra: What are your plans, hopes and dreams for the future? What do you have planned for the next few years, or where do you hope to be?

Matthew Friess: As I mentioned, for various health reasons I missed out on a large chunk of my education. Also, it was quite scattered because I was in residential care. My ambition from a young age has been to study medicine. That will be a lot harder now because I missed out on that crucial education, but that is the idea. I hope to acquire a college place and study at intermediate level and then take highers. With the support that I have from Planefield, that will be a lot more achievable.

I got a college place last year, but I went home and it all crumbled around me because the door had shut. I could not phone up the care home or go through and have my dinner there—there was not that familiarity. As you pointed out, if you have been living in a setting like that for quite a few years with familiar people, kids and staff, you get institutionalised a bit. I faced the prospect of homelessness and the option was Planefield. I had been at the residential home for nearly two years in total and I had been there previously. The prospect of homelessness was worse than anything because I was leaving what, to me, was my home. That can really mess with your head—it did for me. For a while before I came to Planefield I was in quite a bad place, but once I got there it was okay because, in a way, the support was carrying on. It is when the support goes that you struggle.

Julia Edgar: I wanted to become a chef. There is a college in Dornoch where they do all the chef

training, and I applied to get into there. I am still going through that and, hopefully, I will get on a college course there. In the next couple of years, I want to be in my own place, surround myself with different people and move on with my life.

Jenny Marra: Do you like cooking?

Julia Edgar: Yes. I have always wanted to be a chef. Hopefully, it will work out.

Rhea Nicholson: I recently started a course called life skills, which helps you to work on your CV, and you are put into a placement in a job that you would really like to do. I want to work with young children, so that is my plan. It is really good that you can get that support through Barnardo's. You do your placement for six weeks and if they feel that you are ready, they might consider keeping you on in the job.

15:00

Jenny Marra: So you are interested in working in a nursery.

Rhea Nicholson: Yes.

Byron Carruthers: I have been studying social care at college for two years because I want to become a care worker in a children's home. I finished my second year last week and I start my next year in August. Through throughcare, they have been able to push education maintenance allowance, and you can get housing benefit with that, but next year I definitely need to go on bursary. I am worried about whether I will be able to continue my education because I cannot afford to go on bursary and not claim housing benefit—that would just make up so much in rent arrears. I am worried about having to leave after putting in two years of work at college.

I did not come out of school with a great education, so I had to start at the very beginning. I will do my NC higher next year. I never thought that I would do a higher. I am worried about having to stop that just because of housing benefit. I think that that should be addressed. Obviously, it is not going to be addressed in time for me, but I am thinking about people in the future as well. Housing benefit is a big issue for education.

Sharleen McLennan: I was lucky enough to leave school with a standard grade education, but by no means has it helped me in finding a career. However, I have just come back from a voluntary nine-week overseas programme. Quarriers works with a company called Werkcenter, which takes a group of people from Quarriers as part of an exchange programme and enables them to go over and do some work experience in Holland. That drove me to want to do things, and since completing the course, I have decided that I want to run my own business doing interior soft furnishings.

Throughout various tenancies, I was very much involved in the fab pad programme, which I think was mentioned earlier. That is where I found my skills and my desire to run my own business. That is definitely the path that I want to go down. I want to find out about the ins and outs first, and then do a business plan and look to get some help on setting up a business and getting the funds that I will need to get materials and everything else that I need. Once that is up and running, I hope it will be successful.

Jenny Marra: We should keep a watch on all these plans, convener.

The Convener: Indeed. Perhaps you could come and decorate for us in a few years' time. That would be lovely.

Gordon, does your organisation have similar links, for example with the organisation that Sharleen talked about?

Gordon Fleming: If you mean the fab pad one, not as such, but we have close links with Barnardo's works, which we work closely with to try to get placements for young people. We also have close links with the college. We went out to Dornoch to have a look at the course that Julia Edgar talked about, and we are hoping to take her up for a day's induction to see whether what it offers in its prospectus would suit her.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Stuart McMillan: Matthew answered the question that I was going to ask when he said that he felt institutionalised before he was able to move on. Did anyone else round the table have a similar thought process? Is that how you felt before you took a different step?

Sharleen McLennan: Towards the end, I was desperate to get out of Quarriers.

I was in North Ayrshire supported accommodation for a year and a half and, as you said, I felt institutionalised. There were people all around me, I did not have my own space and I felt like I could not deal with it. You had to be in by a certain time, you had to abide by all these rules, you could have visitors only until a certain time—everything was rules, rules, rules. It definitely felt like I was institutionalised.

Byron Carruthers: I do not know whether Matthew feels the same, but I do not think that people knew that they were institutionalised until they left and did not have the other children and staff members around, because the situation was something that they had been used to for a long time.

Annabel Goldie: Sharleen mentioned a programme that Quarriers is engaged in with a Dutch organisation called Werkcentre. Could Kate explain how Quarriers got to know about that?

Kate Sanford: It is a partnership that was set up between Quarriers and Werkcentre, which is a work programme that is based in Holland.

The partnership was facilitated by the Scottish Government's unit for young people's employment. Young people from Quarriers who were selected through a recruitment process went to Holland for nine weeks, where they lived in group accommodation and were given a variety of different work placements. Shortly after that, people from Holland came over to Scotland, and Quarriers has facilitated work placements for them in a variety of areas—they are doing bits of social care, some administration and so on, and live in group accommodation. At the moment, they are living in Quarrier's Village.

The programme seems to work well. Sharleen can tell you about how it felt for her. Young people have told me that it is one of the few opportunities that they have had to go abroad and experience a different culture, language and lifestyle—things that are completely different from the things that they have experienced. I have seen them come back motivated, inspired, desperate to get on with their lives, keen, enthusiastic and committed to finding work. The difficulty is that we have not been able to find the opportunities for real work back in the United Kingdom and Scotland, which is what they all want. One young man was offered a job in Holland, but he does not want to live in Holland; he wants to live in Scotland.

Sharleen, do you want to talk about what it was like as a participant?

Sharleen McLennan: Before I went into the exchange programme, I had no interest in finding or keeping a job. It was like I got paid to do nothing, so why not do nothing? Once I went to Holland and spent my weeks working, I thought, "What have I been doing? I've been sitting doing absolutely nothing. I need to get my finger out." I came back and was surprised by how motivated I was to work.

Being in a new country and learning about a new culture and a new language was daunting. However, although I had been abroad twice in my life, I had absolutely no hope of ever going anywhere else, as I could never afford to sort out passports, accommodation and so on. Quarriers and Werkcentre sorted out all of that and gave me the fire to move on, get some sort of career behind me and earn money to enable me to live comfortably and do the things that I had wanted to do in my life. Thanks to the programme, I am at that stage in my life, and am ready to move on. Unfortunately, there is nothing here. I said to one of the Quarriers staff members today that I wish that I was back working in Holland. I would do it again in a minute.

Byron Carruthers: Employment might be a big issue. After all, if people are sitting in the house bored, with no employment and nothing else to do, they might not keep their house. Even a training opportunity will get them out of the house, give them a sense of accomplishment and make them want to find a good job. Sharleen went to Holland and came back enthusiastic about finding a job. Some folk have been out of work for so long that they just get used to it. I think that if there were more training opportunities people might keep their house a bit longer.

Stuart McMillan: I am delighted to hear Sharleen's comment about going abroad. Having studied abroad myself, I know exactly what she means about it broadening horizons and giving people extra confidence in themselves. When you come back, you feel as though you want to take on the world.

When I came back home in 1997, there were few jobs around; in fact, I was unemployed for six months and found the whole thing extremely frustrating. My advice to everyone around the table is that you should never give up, because some avenue will open up. The experience that Sharleen has had in her nine-week placement will certainly stand her in good stead. She might not realise it now but she will get full benefit from that experience; in the future, something will happen and she will look back and think, "Well, that experience in Holland helped me because of X, Y or Z".

I am keen to get more information from Quarriers about what sounds like an exciting programme. I certainly think that more people should have the benefit of such an opportunity, if that is feasible.

The Convener: The young people whom Annabel Goldie and I met in Saltcoats and who had been abroad sang the programme's praises. It was certainly very beneficial and they all came back with a huge amount of knowledge, experience and confidence.

Do you have another question?

Stuart McMillan: When I asked earlier about institutionalisation, Byron wondered whether a one-month trial period might work. However, Gordon suggested that that might not be a positive move. Could we not have a halfway house? Instead of having people simply move into a house, feel frustrated and alone and go back to their previous accommodation when things do not work out, is there any mechanism—from the whole

range of services—that you would want to put in place?

Gordon Fleming: I am concerned that those who leave Planefield house for a one-month trial and fail at it cannot get back to the point where they feel that they can try it again. There is no easy answer to the question.

At our six-monthly review and referral meetings with all our partners, including the national health service, Highland Council housing, Barnardo's springboard project, social work services and resource, we discuss the young folk to find out where they are with regard to moving into their own accommodation.

We all know the young people fairly well, and I would never say to the panel, "We want this young person to move out now because we think that they are ready," unless I actually believed that. There would be no point in doing that because we know that the spiral will mean that they will come back again. That would be my concern about saying to somebody, "Go out and try, and if you don't succeed, you can always come back." I do not think that that would be a positive move.

15:15

Stuart McMillan: Is there an open-door policy? If someone goes into their own tenancy, do you say to them, "Remember, if there are any issues that you want to talk to anyone about, don't hesitate to pick up the phone or pop in"?

Gordon Fleming: As I said, we follow through with support, as do our partners. On two or three occasions, we have taken back people to try again when they have left by their own choice or for other reasons. We have not told them to come back if things do not work out; we review the whole situation and say, "This is not working. Let's invite them back to try again." I do not think that it is a good policy to tell people to try things out and if they fail they can come back and try again. It is a tricky one.

Kate Sanford: Byron spoke about children who have left care going back into the children's home if they found that they were not quite ready for independence. There is a big temptation for children to leave a care situation because they think that they are ready to be independent—they think, "We can do this." However, by the time that they get out there and find that they do not like it and that it is not working, they are sucked into that vicious cycle of homelessness. That is what we want to try to prevent.

It is true that the support mechanisms will vary from young person to young person. The key is to have a range of models or mechanisms for support that young people can tap into to suit their own circumstances at the time. That would provide the progression that I was talking about, whereby people might leave care, go to one of our intensive support units, move on to something a little less intensive and then be supported in their own tenancy via outreach.

I do not think that there is one answer. A young person's age when they leave care has a lot to do with it. On the whole, 16-year-olds are not ready for independent living. Young people often ask me why the option for young people leaving care is to present as homeless and then get supported accommodation. Could we look at having a bridge between those two?

Byron Carruthers: On what I said earlier about the month's trial, Gordon put across a good point. Children of 16 put up a front. They have a lot of pride and think, "I can't wait to get this house. I don't need you. I don't need this or that." They have gone on for the past two years about how they do not need support, so saying after a month that they want to go back into the care system would be a bit of a backward step.

I think that people leave when they are 16 because the care system is full—they are trying to put kids in everywhere. It would be impossible for people to try to go back after being out for a month. After they have been out of their room for a day, somebody else is in it because the care system is jam-packed. I think that it would be impossible to go back.

Stuart McMillan: Byron mentioned housing benefit a short time ago, and my final question is about benefits and the changes that are coming down the line. What are the panel's views on how the welfare reform agenda will affect younger people coming out of care and going into independent living?

Gordon Fleming: I will make a couple of points about benefits—I ask Matthew to speak about the issue, too.

It is difficult for 16 to 18-year-olds to manage, because jobseekers allowance does not cut in until they are 18. The system that we adopt now is that there is a basic living allowance, which is effectively the same as the lower end of jobseekers allowance.

Matthew gets disability living allowance. He wants to talk a little bit about that.

Matthew Friess: The system that Highland Homeless Trust uses is throughcare and aftercare. As Byron said, it is a really good service, but the criteria are very narrow, so one thing might mean that you do not meet the criteria. As he said, a lot of people outwith the care system could do with that support.

As has been said, among the biggest problems are money, benefits and funding for a lot of things. I met the throughcare and aftercare criteria, but the one thing that has recently stopped me meeting it is the fact that I have a disability and claim disability living allowance. That excludes me from a big part of the funding—one element is local authority funding. The big problem with that is that DLA should not be counted, because it is not counted against anything else. It is hard enough for anyone going through the care system, homelessness or whatever; it is inevitable that it will be a little bit harder for someone who goes through that with a disability.

It is completely wrong that that group is being excluded from local authority funding. They should not be penalised for having a disability. One of the biggest problems is that a young person with a disability who is told that that is the position might not necessarily be able to speak up for themselves and challenge it. That is not right and should be changed.

Kate Sanford: There are major issues with welfare reform across the board, but particular issues for young people arise from changes to housing benefit, unemployment benefit and DLA. When DLA becomes the personal independence payment, it will become a lot harder for people to get it, as the criteria will be much stricter. I have concerns for some of the young people we support, particularly those who are currently on DLA because of mental health issues or mental health issues comorbid with addiction issues. It will be extremely difficult for them just to survive.

Byron Carruthers: That sounds a bit like discrimination against Matthew, and it is probably against the law. That is not fair and the issue should be addressed straightaway, rather than later. That is a ridiculous situation.

The Convener: When Annabel Goldie and I visited Saltcoats, we were told by one young person, who openly and honestly spoke about her circumstances and how she came to be homeless, that she would be keen for there to be some form of peer education. She said that if someone like her had come into her school at the point at which her personal circumstances were breaking down, she would have been more likely to listen to them.

I am interested to get the views of all the young people round the table—and those of Gordon Fleming and Kate Sanford. Might such peer education have helped you? Would you have been interested in such a scheme? Would some form of peer education for young people in secondary schools be beneficial?

Kate Sanford: I think that young people sometimes tend to glamorise the homelessness system. They think that there will always be freedom—that they can do what they like—and that they will have a great flat, but things are not like that at all. I know that young people sometimes have that illusion, which they are quickly disabused of. Young people have come to Quarriers and said, “Is this really what it’s like?”

Young people have said that bridging the gap between them and their family when there were difficulties might have helped them at the time. I know that programmes have tried to do that. People have tried to mediate before the family situation breaks down; obviously, that does not work in all cases. It is inappropriate for a young person to stay in a family home in which it is not safe, but young people have talked about situations in which family members simply got on top of one another and it was difficult to take a reasoned and rational view of what was going on. Some mediation might have helped. Young people have also said that a break away from the situation for both their parents and them might have stopped the escalation of emotions getting completely out of hand. A break or respite accompanied by a mediation programme might prevent some young people from becoming homeless and getting into the vicious cycle of homelessness.

The Convener: So breathing space needs to be available.

Kate Sanford: Yes—something like that. Somebody needs to take a different perspective and put things into proportion.

Gordon Fleming: What Kate has said is very interesting. Around a year ago, Highland Council launched its homeless prevention team, a key aspect of whose work is family mediation in such circumstances. I think that it has a mediator in the Highland Council buildings every Wednesday afternoon to try to set in motion mediation for families that are perhaps going through mini crises with young people, especially 16 and 17-year-olds.

Respite is sometimes very important. I have seen it working on a couple of occasions, with the young person going back into the family home. Respite has worked in conjunction with mediation, and it has prevented young people from becoming homeless. It prevents their going down to the service point in Inverness and saying, “I want to make a homeless claim”, which is too easy.

Jean Urquhart: I have a wee supplementary question for Gordon Fleming, but first I will make an observation. An article in *Holyrood* magazine said that 1,300 households approached Highland Council as homeless last year, which was a drop of 1,000 on the previous year. The drop sounds quite dramatic.

Gordon Fleming: It is very dramatic.

Jean Urquhart: Is that a result—

Gordon Fleming: It is the result of the work of the homeless prevention team. That team is run by Lewis Hannah, who spoke at a meeting that I was at a couple of weeks ago. He had all the figures in front of him. I think that the number of claims dropped from 2,400 to around 1,200 in a year, so the drop was quite dramatic. The team is trying to put forward mediation, respite and anything else to try to alleviate the homeless problem in the Highlands, as it is vast.

15:30

Jean Urquhart: The council advertises for people to make properties and flats available. Are other local authorities doing that, too? Is that something that you know about, Kate?

Kate Sanford: No.

Gordon Fleming: The council is advertising for properties in the private rented sector not just for young folk but for anybody in order to cut down the number of homeless claims by offering a deposit guarantee scheme. There is a lot of suspicion among landlords about deposit guarantee schemes, but it seems to be working to a degree. We will see the bigger picture in about a year's time. Six months down the road from when a homeless person goes into the private rented sector, it might break down, so the jury is still out. The results are very encouraging, but I would wait another year to see whether the figures go up or down again.

Annabel Goldie: What Gordon Fleming is describing is immensely encouraging. I would like to hear from our witnesses. If you are in a situation at home that is frightening, bewildering or worrying—if it is torrid and a cauldron of emotions—do you, as a young person in that situation, feel that you have no one to speak to? Would it help to have some structure whereby you could reach out of the family and say to someone, "This is awful. I need to do something about it"?

Byron Carruthers: Respite is a great idea for people who come from a family background—I have not. We were talking about it in Saltcoats. A parent can get comfortable with their child not being there. So, when somebody moves into a hostel, not only can the person in the hostel get used to not being at home, their mum and dad can get used to the child not being there and, if there is any opportunity for the child to go back, it will not happen because the mum and dad are comfortable with the situation. Respite—some time apart—would be brilliant.

Rhea Nicholson: My mum is a single parent who only works part time. The reason why I became homeless was that my mum could not afford to keep me as well. Her benefits for me stopped after I turned 16 and she could not afford to keep me. A lot of single parents cannot afford to keep their children, so a lot of single parents' kids become homeless. The jobs that are out there that you apply for are still there a couple of months later. I do not think that they are giving young people a chance, whether or not they have qualifications. I think that they should be given more of a chance.

The Convener: As none of our witnesses wants to come in on that point, do members have any further questions to ask the witnesses?

John Finnie: I want to pick up a point that Gordon Fleming made about the deposit guarantee scheme. The reality is that the public sector will not be able to solve the problem, much as the statutory obligation might lie there. The delay in the processing of housing benefit claims is a significant factor in deterring private landlords from making accommodation available. Someone can wait several weeks to get payment and then disappear for a few days, and the landlords feel abandoned in the process—both by the local authority and by the entire benefits system. We have heard examples of co-ordination with the third sector across local authorities. We need to involve the benefits system in that as well.

The Convener: That is a good point. Before I bring this evidence session to a close, I ask Kate Sanford, Gordon Fleming and our young witnesses around the table whether there is anything that has not been covered that you think is important for us to take forward as part of our inquiry? Is there anything that anyone would like to add?

Kate Sanford: One thing that I have not mentioned is the importance for young people to have some kind of buddy or mentor to guide them. I do not mean a paid worker; I mean someone at the end of the phone, so that you can just lift the phone and say that you are having a bad day or that you do not understand what to do about something. We are trying to get a mentor or a buddy for every young person we support who is moving on, to try and continue that support. Gordon Fleming also spoke about continuity of support, and it is crucial. It is not always possible to have a paid worker continue to support young people indefinitely. We think that it will bear fruit to help young people establish relationships with someone who can guide, mentor and advise them as they move into adulthood.

The Convener: Thank you.

Gordon Fleming: Planefield house is now working very well. We had our teething problems in the beginning, but the situation now is that there should be more Planefield houses throughout

Scotland, or services in that format. Sharleen or Byron mentioned loneliness. Planefield house gives a young person the chance to have their own mini-tenancy. There are shared kitchens and living rooms, but the young person has their own little tenancy and they still have a circle of friends around them, and most of the time they get on. It is a very good pilot in the Highlands region and I would like to see more of them throughout the country, particularly for throughcare and aftercare.

The Convener: Thank you. Would Matthew, Julia or Rhea like to make any final points?

Rhea Nicholson: Services are really good, but I think that if they engaged a lot more than they do, things might move a lot faster.

The Convener: What do you mean when you say "engaged"?

Rhea Nicholson: Barnardo's helps you and tries to get you on to a course, for example. If it met up with you regularly and more often, it might help move things on a wee bit faster.

Sharleen McLennan: I think that the prevention scheme will be a major thing. When we had our fact-finding visit to Saltcoats, Janeine Barrett, who is principal officer for homelessness at North Ayrshire Council, said that the council has a rehabilitation programme or something like that, to help get people back into the family home. That will need to be brought in everywhere, as much as possible, because Gordon Fleming's figures show—I cannot remember Janeine Barrett's specific figures—that the number of people who become homeless and stay homeless reduces significantly after they are involved in such schemes.

The Convener: Janeine Barrett spoke about intervention and mediation, where a third party steps in.

Sharleen McLennan: That is right. I think that she said that there has been a reduction in homelessness of between 40 to 60 per cent so far. The figures show that that certainly works, so it should be progressed to minimise homelessness in the future.

Byron Carruthers: I feel the same. Prevention is obviously the most important thing, but I do not want people to forget the people who are still homeless. Everybody around this table thinks that prevention is the most important thing, and I agree, but I do not want everyone to focus on prevention and forget the people who are actually homeless.

The Convener: I thank you all for coming. We appreciate you taking the time to come here. The evidence and information that you have given has been very useful to us and I hope that you have enjoyed your visit to the Scottish Parliament.

I suspend the meeting for five minutes, as a photographer is coming to take our photograph.

15:39

Meeting suspended.

15:57

On resuming—

Petition

School Uniforms Policy (PE1411)

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of a petition. Petition PE1411, by Luca Scarabello, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to reform school uniform policies by stopping gender-specific uniforms and changing the clothes that are worn for uniforms to garments that are more comfortable, less physically restrictive, and more affordable and practical.

Schools have a responsibility to comply with equalities legislation and to allow adjustments to school uniform to be made as needed. Local authorities are responsible for schools' compliance with legislation.

We have two choices: we can close the petition or we can take another course of action of our choosing. I invite comments from members.

Jean Urquhart: Is there any history of the Parliament discussing school uniforms? It is an issue that seems to have been on the agenda for a while—it has been discussed by schools and parents around the country for some time. It seems that the use of uniforms is increasing. Is there any history of the Parliament discussing the subject?

The Convener: No. The only work that has been done is detailed in the papers. Awareness of the issue has gone up and down; it is an issue that has bubbled away. I am not sure that the guidance on uniforms has changed. If the Parliament has not looked at it, it will not have changed. It is down to local authorities to ensure compliance. Schools have a bit of flexibility.

David Torrance: I purposely went to Asda before I came here just to check the price of school uniforms. They are so cheap now compared with how much they used to cost. Headteachers say that school uniform makes it easy to distinguish between pupils who belong to their school and those who do not. I know that there are schools that have really pushed it in Kirkcaldy, especially in deprived areas. I am thinking of Kirkcaldy high school, in particular, where it has made a huge difference. It helps with accountability.

I will be open and honest: I am all in favour of school uniforms. They are probably the cheapest that they have ever been. Kids do not need to buy designer gear, so there is no pressure on parents.

The Convener: Is it your view that we should close the petition?

16:00

David Torrance: Yes, please.

Stuart McMillan: I do not have kids in school yet—the first one starts in August. I have been thinking about the issue as a parent but without the relevant experience so far. During my time in school, we had a school uniform. There was a degree of flexibility as to what we could and could not wear, but there was a core element of clothing that we had to wear. I did not mind that—it was fine.

I do not fully understand some comments in the petition. There are comments that uniforms can "cause great discomfort" and are "uncomfortable". I do not understand that.

The Convener: Is that for children who are on the autistic spectrum?

Stuart McMillan: No. I know people who have children who are autistic, and I have every sympathy with them, as it is an extremely difficult condition to deal with.

I have tremendous sympathy with much of what the petitioner proposes, but the current flexibility that schools have has worked for a long period. I am not against changing things, but there is already a degree of flexibility across local authorities.

The Convener: When I read the submissions, I was struck by the thread running through them all. Varying points are made in each of them, but the common thread running through them all is that they are broadly supportive of having a uniform. They accept that there is flexibility and a certain leeway and that there might be some cases in which a uniform is not the best option. Local authorities have flexibility to make adjustments. The Scottish Youth Parliament is broadly in favour of school uniforms. Although I am broadly sympathetic with the petitioner, the submissions kind of refute what the petition calls for.

Annabel Goldie: I take the same view as David Torrance, Stuart McMillan and you, convener. The people who really benefit from school uniforms are the parents. David Torrance is right that the cost of a school uniform nowadays is significantly less, relatively speaking, than the cost of a traditional uniform used to be. I, too, was interested in the Scottish Youth Parliament survey, in which the majority of respondents favoured the option of having a school uniform. Uniforms are a help to parents, because they do not have to worry about their children being singled out for wearing different clothes, or about one child who wears designer labels or more expensive clothes. It is

important to ensure that parents feel that their child can cope with the school environment and that it is positive for their child.

As David Torrance and Stuart McMillan suggested, the petitioner is to be commended for raising an interesting point and for using the procedures of the Parliament to allow that point to be aired and discussed, but I am of the view that the principle of school uniforms is sound. I am satisfied that there is enough flexibility in the system to allow particular situations and circumstances of an individual school pupil to be taken into account. There are adequate arrangements in place, so I support closing the petition.

John Finnie: On a personal level, I am not a supporter of uniforms. I do not recall that my children necessarily wore them, although I am sure that they did in primary. There is an element of choice. It is important that people are comfortable. I am swayed by the requirement to comply with the legislation on equality issues. It would be an ill-considered move if a school head made an issue of things that are not worth making an issue of. I favour closing the petition.

Jenny Marra: I, too, favour closing the petition. Unlike John Finnie, I am a big supporter of school uniforms. As we discussed with some of the young people who were at the committee earlier, a strict uniform policy is a great leveller in schools, especially when some families cannot afford the designer gear that children feel under pressure to wear. If everyone is dressed the same way, they can all get on with learning. I note the element in the petition about the gender issue with uniforms, but I feel that that is addressed by the Equality Act 2010 and the Equality and Human Rights Commission's guidance on that act. As the issue is covered by the legislation and guidance, we should close the petition.

The Convener: I agree. The committee's decision is to close the petition.

That concludes the meeting. Our next meeting will be on Tuesday 19 June.

Meeting closed at 16:07.

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