The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 14 August 2014

Session 4

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.scottish.parliament.uk or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Thursday 14 August 2014

CONTENTS

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
13th Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)
*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Connor Chalmers (Who Cares? Scotland)
Matthew Friess (Highland Homeless Trust)
Ashton Hughson (Ypeople)
Claudia Macdonald (Who Cares? Scotland)
Charlene McKellar (Who Cares? Scotland)
Dr Paul Monaghan (Highland Homeless Trust)
Jill Moss (Ypeople)
Jordan Murray (Ypeople)
Ryan Oman (Highland Homeless Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ruth McGill

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 14 August 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting in private at 09:30*]

10:00

Meeting continued in public.

Having and Keeping a Home

The Convener (Margaret McCulloch): I welcome everyone to the 13th meeting in 2014 of the Equal Opportunities Committee and ask that any electronic devices be set to flight mode or switched off, please.

Agenda item 3 is on the delegation of the payment of witness expenses in the youth homelessness inquiry. Members are invited to delegate to me, as convener of the committee, responsibility for arranging for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to pay, under rule 12.4.3, any witnesses' expenses in the inquiry. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Our final agenda item is an evidence session in our youth homelessness inquiry. We will start off with introductions.

At the table, we have our clerking and research team, official reporters and broadcasting services and, around the room, we are supported by security officers. I welcome, too, the observers in the public gallery.

I am the convener of the committee. I invite members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn, starting on my right, and I ask the young people here to tell us a bit about their experiences of homelessness.

Matthew Friess has been here before. When we come to him, I ask him to talk briefly about his experience since the previous committee inquiry and what has happened to him from then until now. I also ask the representatives from the Highland Homeless Trust, Who Cares? Scotland and Ypeople to tell us briefly about their organisations.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston, which is part of the east end of Glasgow.

Ryan Oman (Highland Homeless Trust): I am from the Highland Homeless Trust.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Highland Homeless Trust): Good morning, everybody. I, too, am from the Highland Homeless Trust, which is a local charity that works in Inverness and throughout Highland. We deliver housing support services to vulnerable males and females from the age of 16 onwards. We also have specialist services for young people who have formerly been looked-after children. Ryan Oman and Matthew Friess are joining me to give evidence to the committee.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am a member for North East Scotland.

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

A lot has happened in the space of the two years since I previously attended the committee. I first went to the Highland Homeless Trust to seek homeless accommodation, and I am now in the process of looking to my first tenancy, which will happen in the next few weeks.

There have been a lot of ups and downs, as there are for many young people who are care experienced, particularly with becoming homeless, in terms of what is available, service provision and what help there is. One of the biggest difficulties that I have found is that the local authority seems to become more reluctant to provide support the older people get. I do not know whether that is because of a lack of resource. I help with sustaining college and university placements and the support that is required for that, so I can touch on that.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

Jill Moss (Ypeople): Hi. I am a level 1 support worker with Ypeople. We work with young people aged 16 to 25 in our supported accommodation residence.

Our main aim is to prepare those young people for moving on to their own tenancies. They will gain skills to help them with budgeting, education and suchlike.

Ashton Hughson (Ypeople): Hi. I am in supported accommodation with Ypeople.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

Jordan Murray (Ypeople): Hi. I was previously a tenant at Ypeople's Seaforth House and I continue to work closely with people there even though I am now doing a university course. I am the chairperson of the registered tenants organisation at Seaforth House.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP who represents Edinburgh Central.

Charlene McKellar (Who Cares? Scotland): I work for Who Cares? Scotland as a policy development assistant. When I was growing up, I did not have positive relationships in my life. I grew up in kinship care and also experienced homelessness for nine years. As part of that, I slept rough on the streets for six weeks. At this stage, I would just like to thank the committee for having us here today and being part of this.

Claudia Macdonald (Who Cares? Scotland): Hello. I am the head of communications at Who Cares? Scotland, which is the only independent advocacy organisation that has the sole mantra of speaking up and speaking out for Scotland's care-experienced individuals. We work across Scotland and support young people through our advocacy until they are 25 years of age.

Connor Chalmers (Who Cares? Scotland): I am a looked-after young person and I have been since the age of eight. I am also a policy development assistant for Who Cares? Scotland. I have always had to fight to keep the supports and placements that I have, and I am still having to do so today.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Madainn mhath—good morning. I am an MSP for Highlands and Islands.

Convener, I refer to my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I am a director of the Highland Homeless Trust. Indeed, I know Dr Paul Monaghan and Matthew Friess well, and I now know Ryan Oman. In that position, of course, I have no input into the trust's day-to-day operations or, indeed, into what the trust will say today.

The Convener: Thank you all very much for coming along to give us an update.

I will start the questions by asking the young people whether they would like to tell us about how they became homeless.

Ashton Hughson: I suppose I just had a bit of a falling out with my mum. Our house was overcrowded enough, so she asked me to leave.

The Convener: Did you get any support after you left?

Ashton Hughson: I have been in homeless accommodation for about a month now and have had fantastic help with everything that I have needed sorted. I have never been in care.

The Convener: So this is just a recent thing for you.

Ashton Hughson: Yes.

The Convener: Okay, and the support that you have got so far has been helpful.

Ashton Hughson: It has been really helpful, aye.

The Convener: That is good.

Charlene McKellar: I became homeless because I had a family breakdown, but I was actually in kinship care for five years with my siblings. When I was going through that process, I had a social worker when I moved into my kinship care for three years, and then it got changed and I had no communication with that social worker. When I became homeless, I had no one to give me advice and no one to turn to for support, and I struggled. That is how I ended up on the streets for six weeks, with no one to turn to. I did not even know where the Hamish Allan Centre was. Young people should know that stuff, but we do not. People in Scotland need to be letting young people know where they can go for that kind of support. I never got it, and I am one of Scotland's people.

The Convener: Do you think that that information should be given out in schools?

Charlene McKellar: Totally. Those are the places that it needs to hit, but we need to remember that not all kids in care or kids in general go to school. They might not go to school or they might get schooled at home. It is about finding a way that allows us to reach out and get to those kids as well rather than just the kids in the schools. Something definitely needs to be done about that.

The Convener: As a young person, do you have any ideas about how we could do that?

Charlene McKellar: I am sorry. What did you say?

The Convener: Have you got any ideas about how we could reach out to those other young people who do not go to school?

Charlene McKellar: One idea is that they should have an independent worker, no matter what, because they are obviously struggling. They should at least have an advocacy worker, but they do not get that. I do not understand why they do not get that. I was in kinship care and I did not know that there were advocacy places out there for me. I know for a fact that if I had had that from day 1, I would not have experienced being homeless for nine years and sleeping on the streets for six weeks. I just think that is atrocious. We are trying to change Scotland for the better. We need to work together to try to make things better for kids who need advice. There are plenty of kids out there who need support and advice and who are just not getting it.

The Convener: How old were you when you were sleeping on the streets?

Charlene McKellar: I was 16 years of age. I was trying to study at the same time, because I was still going to school. I found ways to wash myself and I took clothing to certain day centres that I knew about, but I did not find out that information until my sister told me. I should not have had to go to my sister for that information. I should have been able to go to somebody in my local authority and say, "I'm homeless—what do I do about it?" There is no advice out there about how young people can reach out to people for help and support.

The Convener: Do you have a job now?

Charlene McKellar: I now have two jobs. I work for Who Cares? and for Quarriers doing housing peer support.

The Convener: That is fantastic, particularly because your background means that you can really empathise with young people and give them the help and advice that they need.

Charlene McKellar: Totally. I know the struggles that they go through. If someone feels that they want to give up their tenancy, the only way is to support them and walk with them on that path, because that is what they need. They do not need somebody telling them what to do—they just need somebody to guide them.

The Convener: Can you remind me how old you are?

Charlene McKellar: I am 25 years of age.

The Convener: You have lived a lot in those 25 years, haven't you?

Charlene McKellar: Yes.

The Convener: Well done for what you have achieved so far.

Connor, do you want to say anything about how you became homeless?

Connor Chalmers: I have never actually experienced homelessness but, as I said in my introduction, I have always had to fight to make sure that that did not happen and that I kept the support that I had. I have had to fight to remain in placements. As Charlene McKellar said, that is all about the power of having an independent advocate. The reason why I have been able to remain in looked-after placements is that I have had an advocate guiding me every step of the way. At every speed bump, the advocate has always been there to get me over it, and any time that I have needed advice on what to do or who to turn to, that advocate has always been there and has been a key factor.

At this point, I am in a similar situation—I am having to fight to try to keep my current placement. A plan has been put in place for me to move into my own accommodation, but I do not feel ready for that so, along with my advocate, we have been fighting my case so that I can remain in my placement.

As Charlene said, if someone has an advocate and a person to tell them what they should expect or that they do not have to move on unless they are ready, that makes life a hell of a lot easier and, I imagine, decreases the chances of them ending up homeless.

The Convener: How old are you, Connor?

Connor Chalmers: I am 19 years old.

The Convener: I will now open up the questions to other committee members. As we have been talking about housing, maybe we could move on to housing issues.

Marco Biagi: We hear a lot about the great new housing options approach. Councils are supposed to be running housing options teams that provide people with advice if they get into housing difficulties. I would be interested to know if anyone has had direct experience of that approach. If so, has it been a good one?

The Convener: I just point out that if anybody wants to answer, they should just indicate to me and I will go through the names in order. Does anybody want to answer Marco Biagi's question?

Marco Biagi: Has anybody dealt with a housing options team in a local authority?

Dr Monaghan: As Marco Biagi says, the housing options approach is being rolled out across Scotland. It is being delivered by local authorities as a method to identify the housing solution that is most appropriate for the individual who is at a point of crisis. My personal experience in Highland is that the approach is clearly dependent on the resources that are available to deliver the various options that might be identified.

In practice, the range of housing options that is presented to young people and others who are experiencing a housing crisis is very limited indeed. It certainly does not lead to any immediate resolution to the housing problem other than what would have happened in the past anyway, which in Highland tended to be some form of temporary emergency accommodation.

The housing options framework is there, but it has not led to any great or significant material difference in service delivery or availability of housing solutions.

10:15

Claudia Macdonald: From our experience as an independent advocacy organisation, we welcome the housing options approach, but we

are very frustrated by what is essentially a lack of options for care leavers.

We must remember that care leavers come from a background in which, on any given day of the week, they are usually engaging with about five different professional adults in a way that their non-looked-after peers are not. When they reach the point at which they disengage with those care providers, they have to present to a whole new range of adult services—which, in effect, is what the housing options approach involves—and their reluctance to do so is understandable. The situation is quite scary and overwhelming, and it involves negotiating a whole new set of different criteria. They have to delve into their past and try to articulate, usually on their own, what they want from their housing situation.

An additional frustration with the housing experiences of care leavers on leaving care is that sometimes things do not work out. That reflects the transition from being a teenager to becoming a young adult and making your own way in life, but when things do not work out for care leavers the fallbacks are not there. They cannot go back to mum or dad, and they do not have the wider support networks that we would want for our own children.

Unfortunately, there is an inflexibility in dealing with the situation, which relates to what Paul Monaghan said about the resources that are available. We can imagine the impact on a young person if they have to renegotiate a new service or have a new discussion all over again. That can be quite overwhelming and, in many cases, off-putting, which is why young people may find themselves homeless, sofa surfing or on the street. We obviously do not want that for young people who have been looked after by our state.

Marco Biagi: I have a little follow-up question. There will always be an element of people having to present to local authorities, but, whether we call it a housing options approach or something else, how can we best make that service as friendly as possible for young people and care leavers in particular? Do we need specialist staff in authorities who can deal with people from those particular backgrounds, or do we need something else?

Claudia Macdonald: What you say is correct. We also have a unique legislative opportunity via the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which, if it is followed through in practice, should effectively mean that no young care leaver should have to rely on our homelessness legislation to find accommodation.

We have to get better at working with young people. We have an opportunity via part 4 of the 2014 act to plan beyond a young person's immediate day-to-day living or placement experience and to encourage them to think about what they want beyond 15, 16 and 17 years of age. We must also encourage young people to take advantage of the new legislative provisions on continuing care in, I think, part 11 of the act, and we must give them every opportunity to determine their own path in life and feel that they have control of that process.

We are encouraged by the fact that the 2014 act expands corporate parenting in Scotland from April 2015, because it means that, in effect, more or less every public body will be charged with taking into account the lives, experiences and wellbeing of looked-after children and young care leavers. However, we have to ensure that the strategic direction element of corporate parenting, including the plans, the single outcome agreements and the indicators that determine how corporate parents are delivering services and how well they are doing that for Scotland's looked-after population, is transferred to the front-line staff. Front-line staff must know what it means to be a looked-after child; it means not having a typical home environment, having to deal with a lot of adults from a very young age and always having to justify why you need something.

As I have said, we have an opportunity to make that happen and we are encouraged by the legislation. All we hope is that it sees its way through into practice.

Dr Monaghan: Claudia Macdonald has stated clearly the opportunities and potential improvements that are available, but the difficulties and challenges that young people face are not exclusive to looked-after or formerly looked-after children. We are increasingly coming across young people of 16-plus years old who have no history of being in the care system but who are finding themselves homeless at a very young age. The situation for care leavers is far from perfect, but it is significantly worse for those young people who do not have a history in care. As they do not receive the priority and privileged access to services that formerly looked-after children do, they are at a real disadvantage.

Jill Moss: An issue is the lack of accommodation for homeless young people who have mental health issues or a learning disability. I work in a 14-bed residence, and I feel strongly that there should be smaller units to provide one-to-one support for those young people. We do not have that. Instead, the young people are all in the one building, and they face a lot of peer pressure and so on. Resources are lacking for them.

Marco Biagi: When people move beyond the emergency accommodation stage to securing long-term or permanent tenancies—they are usually tenancies—are there issues with landlords

making property available? Is such a step realistic?

Jill Moss: There tends to be a lack of one-bedroom properties. We encourage our young people to apply for one-bedroom properties, but we do not have a lot of them in our area. If because of things like the new bedroom tax they have to pay for a second bedroom, it just adds to the pressure, particularly if they are on a low income to start with. Bringing in that tax was not a good idea.

Dr Monaghan: It was never a particularly realistic step but it has become less so as a result of changes to the welfare state that have been implemented by the UK Government. The redefinition of a young person as being up to 35 years old instead of 25 is putting pressure on existing housing stock, particularly in the private sector. As Jill Moss has said, there is also the bedroom tax, and there are other changes such as direct payments.

The changes to the welfare state have made it much harder for people who are challenged and vulnerable to access the full range of available housing stock and, much more important, to sustain the accommodation once they are in it. There is no doubt that people are experiencing hardship.

Marco Biagi: Are enough landlords willing to make properties available to young people?

Dr Monaghan: That, too, is a challenge. The number of landlords is limited—it always has been. With certain changes such as the direct payment of what used to be housing benefit to people who are in the private sector, landlords are becoming extremely sceptical about taking on people who are reliant on benefits to pay their rent. A number of people have inevitably fallen into rent arrears; landlords have had to bear the brunt; and we are increasingly seeing in advertisements for rented accommodation the disclaimer, "People on benefits—don't apply", or words to that effect.

John Mason: With regard to one-bedroom flats, should we assume that it is best for everybody to have their own flat, or should we assume, as the UK Government does, that it is best for everybody to share? Should that be decided on a case-by-case basis? Is it best for some people to stay on their own and best for some people to share?

Claudia Macdonald: We are talking about a system in which a lack of resources is dictating needs instead of needs dictating what resources should be available. We need a personalised approach to accommodating our young people, particularly those who are already at the margins of society and who typically are care leavers, are excluded from the labour market, are not well-represented in higher and further education and are disproportionately represented in homelessness and in our youth and adult justice systems.

We must endeavour to allocate housing to allow young people to put down roots in a home based around what they need. Some of our young people want to share. It can be terrifying for care leavers to face the stark reality of going from a residential unit, where a person can be around between five and 15 young people at any time, to living in isolation, usually after not having had much say in where the house is and being quite detached from the connections that they have had in care. It can have a serious mental impact, cause emotional instability and, ultimately, does not allow care leavers to take the path in life that we would want them to take.

We would always recommend a personal approach that mimics what we would expect for people who have choices and opportunities that give them control over where they live, how they live et cetera. We need a personalised framework for that.

The Convener: I wonder whether Matthew Friess can give us an overview of what moving from care to supporting himself was like.

Matthew Friess: I first went into the care system when I was 11. When I turned 16, I briefly left the system to move back home with my mum because I had a college placement.

The first thing that I noticed when I left was that the doors were slammed shut behind me. I went from an environment that I had been used to for a number of years, where there were familiar faces—it was a large unit—to something that was quite alien to me: living at home with mum. On top of that, my mum is quite severely disabled from a brain injury that she suffered.

I went back home in August 2011 but within a matter of months there was a breakdown in my relationship with my mum because there was no support in place. The college placement fell through, and I found myself voluntarily back in care in the same unit that I had previously been in.

When I was 16 and a half, the local authority sought to remove my section 70 supervision order, which resulted in its being allowed to pull the funding for my residential placement. I was back in a place that although not perfect was familiar to me and was a place of safety, but because of my age the local authority decided to pull the funding. It had deemed my placement too expensive, and it did not have the financial resources to sustain it. Because I could not return home and I could not stay in a place where I felt safe, I had no option but to seek homeless accommodation, which was when I approached the Highland Homeless Trust.

The Convener: How did it help you?

Matthew Friess: It has a unit called Planefield house, which provides shared supported accommodation for six formerly looked-after young people. I was fortunate that there was a room available, because when I first heard about Planefield the waiting list was huge. I was lucky to get in there. The unit provides 24-hour support; people are allocated a key worker, as in a residential setting, and they are allocated six hours of support a week, which is enough to tackle things such as the jobcentre and to get help with benefits, form filling and doctor's appointments.

10:30

One of the biggest difficulties comes from going to such a place after being in a residential setting that restricts what people can do and where they are detached from mainstream society; units are often in the middle of nowhere, simply because some of them are massive. To put a young person somewhere with 12 other young people and five or six members of staff and call that a house is unrealistic and gives a completely false picture of real life.

In such homes, there is not enough emphasis on preparing young people for independent living. When I was 14, I could have used some help to prepare for the transition to independent living. The vast majority of young people leave care early, and they do not have the same safety net of family to return to that their mainstream counterparts have.

When I went to Planefield house, things improved, albeit slowly. I will give the committee one of my views about throughcare and aftercare accommodation. Planefield house is meant to enable a transition from residential accommodation to independent living but, since I have been there, I have found that a lot of the young people who come through the door feel that they need a transition for the transition. Something is wrong with that.

One problem is the age at which people go into a place such as Planefield house. They are often 16. If you can imagine having been in what feels like a prison for a large period of your life and then all of a sudden being handed the freedom to go out until whatever time you want, with no restrictions on what you can do, you will see that people could spend their two or three years at Planefield burning up their new-found freedom. If people want to get themselves sorted and move forward at the end of that time, the difficulty is that their time is up.

Alex Johnstone: Matthew Friess has just highlighted an issue that I wanted to ask about in greater detail, so his comments provide an appropriate opportunity to extend the discussion. I wonder whether the people who use support mechanisms and those who run them can talk about their relationship with local authorities. Do local authorities provide what you expect them to provide? To what extent do voluntary organisations have to step in and fill the gaps in what local authorities should provide?

The Convener: Does anybody want to answer, or will I pick a victim? Does Alex Johnstone want to explain his questions further?

Alex Johnstone: This is a system in which local authorities are supposed to provide the required support, but we have heard that some people have found it difficult to establish a relationship with a local authority. To what extent are local authorities fulfilling the duties that we presume have been placed on them? To what extent do you have to bypass them and go to the kind of voluntary organisations that are represented around the table to get that job done?

Claudia Macdonald: I do not want to speak on behalf of Charlene McKellar and Connor Chalmers, but I will pick up on the valid point that you have raised. Sometimes, the negotiation between a young person and a local authority can—unfortunately—be complex, for a variety of reasons. We know and appreciate that local authorities have resource issues. However, as an advocacy organisation, we are finding that different local authority departments are telling young people different things. Connor Chalmers is—unfortunately—one of those young people who have been told by one facet of a local authority that it cannot do anything for him, because his case is now closed.

Effectively, Connor—and we should bear in mind that he is a looked-after child and that the state has intervened and removed him from his family life—is being told, "You are not important enough and your case is closed." That is not okay, and unfortunately for Connor—as for any other young person—it can have a lasting impact on his ability and desire to go and talk to other facets of the local authority.

I acknowledge that housing and homelessness legislative rights in Scotland are very advanced and comprehensive but, despite that, local authorities are not always informing young people of what their rights are. At that point, we find that we are asked to help out quite a lot, which usually involves us having a conversation with a housing officer or a front-line officer from another part of the local authority about which rights are being infringed.

That is not okay—rights need to be realised. At the start of the meeting, Charlene McKellar said that she did not know that there were

organisations or people out there who could help her realise what she was entitled to. Where rights are being infringed or not realised, we must provide safeguards, or else young people will constantly be disenfranchised with regard to the statutory provisions and legal rights to which they are entitled.

Connor Chalmers might want to add something about what it felt like to be told that his case was closed.

Connor Chalmers: When a local authority tells you, "Your case is closed", or says, "This is the plan we've put in place for you, so this is what is going to happen and you do not have a choice in the matter", it is not a nice feeling. One of the things that local authorities are supposed to encourage and advocate for young people is independence; they are teaching them how to be independent. To take all the power out of a young person's hands and say to them, "Well, your case is closed, and this is what is going to happen—deal with it" contradicts everything that authorities have been trying to do, in my case for the past 11 years in which I have been looked after by my local authority.

Social workers in local authorities do not always know a lot about the rights of the young person whom they are supposed to advocate for. Sometimes they do, but if they do not, they will not tell the young person about their rights and the young person then has to go looking for the services. I was fortunate enough to know about the other services purely from family members, and I was able to use them. At present, however, there is an on-going issue between me and my local authority, because my standpoint is, "Don't teach me to be an independent person and then take all of that away from me by removing me from your system altogether. There is no point in teaching me any of the stuff that you've taught me if you're just going to throw me out at the end of the day."

The Convener: Thank you very much. Before I bring in Paul Monaghan, I have a brief question that you can answer quickly. Would social media help in raising awareness of the help and support that is out there? I am thinking about simple things from some of the organisations that are sitting around the table today, such as tweeting information, or putting it on the telly or billboards, or on Facebook or whatever. Do you think that young people would access that information?

Charlene McKellar: Definitely, without a doubt, young people would read it, but it would need to be young people friendly, because if it is not, they will not pay attention to it or take it on board.

I go on about this issue all the time, but there needs to be a lot of information out there for young people. When I became homeless, I was walking about the city centre. There are other homeless people sitting there, begging on the street, but there is no help and support for them and they probably do not know where to go for that. If they walk past a bus stop and there is something in there that shows them where they can go for help and support, that is going to attract them, even if it is just a phone number or a map so that they can find a place where they can go to receive help and support. It is wrong that young people do not know where to go for help.

The Convener: I have another question. I am sorry; I feel as if I am hogging the meeting, but this is a good lead-in. How do the organisations around the table let young people who are not within your system know that you are there to help them? How do Ypeople and the Highland Homeless Trust get that message out?

Jill Moss: As far as I am led to believe, it would be through our website, but that is probably as far as it goes. I agree with what the young lady said; there is definitely a lack of information out there.

Dr Monaghan: The convener's question comes back to Alex Johnstone's earlier one about relationships. The range of relationships that young people are required and expected to negotiate when working their way through the care system and moving into the wider community as an independent adult is complicated and not all those relationships are successful. Charlene McKellar has highlighted that as evidence of cracks in the system that young people can and do fall through.

That also highlights the importance of transitions. My opinion is that the transitions that young people and others have to experience as they move through their lives are extremely difficult. That is compounded by the range of relationships that they are required to address and develop with professionals, and by their own personal relationships and social networks. The situation is difficult.

Within that range of relationships, some are poor and not successful, and that extends into working relationships between partner agencies. Sometimes they work very well but sometimes there are tensions. There are often tensions within various local authority departments. Lack of knowledge, misinformation and mis-advice—all of the things that we have heard about—contribute to the situation and they compound the difficulties and hardship faced by young people. We could say that we do not make it easy for young people to work their way through the transitions into a life of successful and independent living.

The Convener: Does the Highland Homeless Trust deal only with referrals? Ashton, you were

not in the system when you became homeless after you left home.

Ashton Hughson: I have not been in the system.

The Convener: So how would someone who lived in the Highlands but never came through the system know that the organisation was there? How do you reach out to those people? That is the question. I am not asking about people who are already in the system but asking about those who become homeless through no fault of their own and need help. How do they know that you are there to help them?

Dr Monaghan: Again I go back to the point that I made earlier about the notion that looked-after children and former looked-after children are in the system. They are identified and known about and they have privileged access to support and guidance from a range of agencies.

We have another group of young people who have never been in the system and who find themselves homeless or at some other crisis point in their life at the young age of 16. Typically they come to my organisation because they have been required to present as homeless to the local authority. At that stage, there might have been some social work involvement. The service is reactive not proactive, and that is a significant issue. It prevents agencies such as my own from working reflexively with young people. We come into contact with them only after a significant amount of damage has been done to their lives.

10:45

Jordan Murray: When I became homeless at the age of 16, I was, luckily, still at school, so support was available there. That is how I got in touch with Ypeople. I got in touch with the school, which put me on to the headteacher. That was still during the Christmas holidays; I became homeless on boxing day. I then got in touch with the headmaster of the school, who referred me to social work. As I never had any previous social work involvement and was already 16, my case was immediately put to the side and I was not talked to. The school had to organise things with Ypeople so that I was supported. Because I had had no previous social work involvement and was already 16, no support was available for me. That needs to be addressed immediately.

Alex Johnstone: Do you think that you were lucky that you happened to have the right people in the school who could do that?

Jordan Murray: Definitely. Luckily for me, I was a very good friend of the headmaster's daughter. That is how I was able to get in touch with him directly. There are young people out there who are not in school, who do not have such relationships, or who perhaps do not go to a school that is as supportive as mine was, and who are not able to get such support. I was extremely fortunate that I had to sleep in a neighbour's house for only a few days before I managed to get into Ypeople. Luckily, I have never had to sleep on the streets. There is no way people who do that can get that support. The support was presented to me by my school, which did the work for that of its own accord, because social work just put the matter to the side.

The Convener: Thank you.

We will move on, as I know that people want to make statements about education. I know that Christian Allard wants to ask questions about education, employment and housing.

Christian Allard: I want to start with welfare reform, which Paul Monaghan talked about, and the bedroom tax, which Jill Moss talked about. How do the young people feel when they secure accommodation? I know that Connor Chalmers talked about that. Are the bedroom tax and welfare reforms on your radar? What is the impact on young people who have secured accommodation? Do you somehow feel insecure because of those things? Do you have any experience of that from the letters that you have received, for example?

Connor Chalmers: I have never been in my own accommodation, although that is not for the want of trying. From what I have heard from people who are here today and siblings who are in their own accommodation, it is not easy and it is not an easy feeling. A lot of the time when people talk about homelessness, we think about those who are on the streets, but when a person moves into a house, it is not a home; it is a house, and they are expected to pay for things such as the bedroom tax.

It is quite a difficult question for me, as I have not been in my own accommodation, as I said. However, to make young people feel that their home is properly their home, there must be appropriate support. There must also be something that helps with things such as the bedroom tax, because not all young people who move into their own accommodation have employment. That means that they will perhaps have to sign on. I have had to do that in the past, and that is not an easy thing to do. The things that must be paid, such as taxes, which Christian Allard talked about, make it difficult to settle in a particular home.

From my experience, young people who have a care background and some young people who do not but who have had a rough childhood are already in a vulnerable position. Putting them in a house and expecting them to know how to cope

with all those different things makes them far more vulnerable. Their self-esteem levels, which are already low, go below rock bottom. They simply ask, "How am I supposed to support myself? Who is out there to help me? Why am I being left by myself? Is it because of something I've done?" All those questions constantly run through their mind.

There has to be something more concrete for those young people so that they are not just thrown into the wilderness and expected to know what to do straight away.

Christian Allard: Talking to other young people might give someone the impression that having secure accommodation and being on their own is too daunting, because of what they hear from their siblings or friends who are in that situation. It is a difficult transition to make.

Connor Chalmers: I would agree that it is a difficult transition. It is a scary transition. I do not think that looked-after young people get enough preparation for it, which makes it even more difficult. No one teaches you the basic things that you need to know when you move into a place that is supposed to be yours. When I left the children's unit that I stayed in, I did not know how to do much. I did not know how to do a wash in the washing machine. I kind of knew about cooking, but that was more from school than from the unit. I lacked other basic household skills, too. For example, if you buy a cupboard or something, you need to know how to build it so that you can use it, but no one teaches you how to do that. No one teaches you the necessary budgeting skills to enable you to look at your monthly pay and say, "That's my money for electricity and that's my money for gas, so this is my money for food." No one shows you those things.

There has to be more preparation. People have to know how to do those things if they are to feel secure in their accommodation.

Jordan Murray: Throughout my school life, I was dead set on going to university. My homelessness affected that to some extent. Suddenly, I was not doing as well in school and I was really struggling. Luckily, I managed to get into university and I rebuilt bridges with my mum. However, in order to claim a student loan, you need to declare your parents' income, even if you have been homeless. You need to have been out of the system for three years—out of education, and working with a certain income—to claim as an independent student. That meant that, when I went to university, I had to declare my mother's income. Luckily, I was able to get a good enough rate to keep going to uni. I got into some debt, but I have managed to get out of it because I have had a full-time job over the summer.

However, many students who have been homeless and now live in their own accommodation have to give up their dreams of getting a degree, simply because they cannot afford to come off their benefits. There is no benefit system available to students who are in higher education under which they can claim housing costs. That means that they have to go to the discretionary fund at the university. The problem with that is that children who have come from a high-income family and still do not get any support from their family, or people who cannot get hold of the relevant P60s and other documents, have to claim a non-income-assessed loan. That means that they cannot claim the discretionary fund that universities provide.

I want something to be implemented that enables people who have been homeless in the past for more than three months, for example, to claim some level of benefit towards their housing. The non-income-assessed loan currently stands at £475 a month. That is not enough to pay travel costs, rent and university costs, such as books and so on. This committee is concerned with equal opportunities, and we need to ensure that everyone has the chance to take part in higher education.

Dr Monaghan: Christian Allard asked about the experience of benefits and so on. Connor Chalmers has highlighted the fact that experience of the benefits system does not typically start until an individual has moved on and is living independently. We are seeing now that, because of that, there are significant delays in claims being settled, which leads to a significant amount of uncertainty for the individual, which creates a lot of worry and hardship. That uncertainty is not alleviated until the claim is settled, which can take a number of months.

With regard to the benefits system generally, in the Highlands, and Inverness in particular, universal credit is now being piloted. The administration of that system seems to be unnecessarily complicated and poor, leading to a great deal of confusion and contributing to the uncertainty. When vulnerable people try to engage with that system, which must be done electronically, that leads to sanctions being imposed on them, along with a loss of benefit, which contributes to their problems.

The impact is one of significant levels of uncertainty, which impact significantly on the individual's ability to move forward with their life.

Christian Allard: I want to go back to the issue of education. Jordan Murray had a very good experience, and the way you came through is fantastic. As you said, it was through your personal connections. We also heard about Charlene McKellar's experience. Can the other

young people tell us whether they felt that they were sanctioned when they were at school or college because they were homeless? I know that if you miss a certain number of days at college, you can end up off the course. Can the young people give us an idea of their experience at secondary school or college, or tell us if they wanted to go to university but thought that it was not possible? What are your experiences?

The Convener: Charlene, do you want to respond?

Charlene McKellar: Sorry, but could you repeat that?

Christian Allard: Sorry. It is just about your experience when you were at secondary school. You said that it was quite difficult but you managed. Your secondary school was very good to you, but do you think that maybe you did not receive a positive response at times from the secondary school? Do you think that maybe other young people did not get a positive response but, to the contrary, were maybe told that they could not stay at college, for example, or that they would be penalised if they missed more school, for example?

Charlene McKellar: Obviously, for someone in my situation, attending school is quite difficult. To be honest with you, I did not want anybody to know that I was sleeping on the streets, because it was no one else's business but mine and it was for me to deal with. However, the two main things that stopped me doing that were trust and relationships. I had no trust in anybody and no relationships with any teachers because they were so mean to me because I had behavioural problems. I was at school for a reason; I was there to get educated and not to be spoken to as if I was one of their friends.

I think that it is really difficult for young people who are living in supported accommodation and hostels to get into any sort of training or education, unless they do it themselves. I tried for several years to get into college to do a higher national certificate in social care, because that is what I wanted to do. However, because I had been living in supported accommodation, it came down to money. Everything on this planet is about money, but it should not be about money. It should be about giving every kid, whether they are from a care background or living with their parents, the opportunity of some sort of education and training, but that does not happen.

I do not understand why Scotland would stop young people from getting an education, because that is what is going to make people—getting training and getting into employment. I struggled—don't get me wrong.

Just on the back of this, I will raise what I was trying earlier to get in to ask a question on. I have had to give up my tenancy, which I fought for for years and years. I have had to give that up because of the debt that I got into. I did not know how to pay rent or pay for gas and electricity, because I had never done it in supported accommodation. Nobody showed me how to do that. I was forced into the flat and I did not know that there were two or three options that I could have had under section 5.

When I moved into my tenancy I had support workers for six weeks, but I asked for extra time with them so that I could learn how to do things. I knew how to budget, but I did not know how to pay my rent or do shopping—all the basic stuff. I did not have that. They stuck with me for only six weeks. I asked for the reason behind that, because there is always a reason for something in life. The reason was that the funding that they had to support me was stopped because I had been with them for three and a half years.

They told me that my tenancy was the only option that I had, but it turned out that it was not the only option. I could have waited until I got a house that I could call home. I do not see where I live right now as my home, because it is not mine and I am not in control of it.

I cannot stress more how strongly I feel about children and young people getting into education and training. Nothing should stop them from doing that. We really need to think about that, because we are going to have kids who will just go down the wrong path in life because no one wants to help them into training and education.

11:00

The Convener: I have been listening to what you have all said. Would it help if there was something like an adult foster carer who could take you into their home until you are ready to leave or who could be appointed to you as a fosterer while you go through the transition from having home support to living in your own house and could stay with you until you feel that you do not need them?

Charlene McKellar: That is not where the problem is. The problem is young people being forced out of their accommodation, whether homelessness hostels or accommodation with foster carers or supported carers. I was forced out of my last accommodation because of money.

The Convener: However, if you had something like a fosterer or supporter who was there—

Charlene McKellar: I think that it would work, but other support networks are needed alongside that.

Connor Chalmers: Supported carers are already in place—I currently live with one. They come in from the leaving age for a children's unit, which is an average of about 16 or 17. Unfortunately, not all young people get the opportunity to access that support but, if they do, they move through a house. I have been with my current supported carer for three years.

Although there are supported carers, the system is not working in the way that it is supposed to. A lot of the time, when somebody leaves a children's unit, they still do not have the skills needed, so they move into the house of someone who is supposed to teach them the skills. However, that carer is not being given the opportunity to do that because, when a young person moves into such supported accommodation, local authorities seem to be in too much of a hurry to get them out of it and into their own accommodation again before they have properly been given the opportunity to have someone there.

Aspects of the system are good, such as the fact that a supported carer can act as a go-between so that the transition is not as rough as it would be if you just went straight in. However, not a lot of people are made aware of the fact that that support exists and not a lot of people get the opportunity to use it. It is rare. There are not many supported carers and, because of that, only select people get the opportunity. All young people should be given that opportunity and none should be rushed out of it because each and every young person who is rushed out of it is being set up to fail in life. That is not what we should be encouraging young people to do.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that, Connor.

John Finnie: Many positive terms are used in such conversations. One of them is "housing support duty". Will some of the young people comment on that and tell us whether they have ever had a housing support assessment? They have all had personal experience, but are they aware of the term? Does it mean anything to the agencies? Support should play a pivotal role in all of this.

Dr Monaghan: Support is the pivotal feature. What Charlene McKellar and Connor Chalmers said reflects my experience, which is that we need to develop relationships. It is not really about buildings; it is about developing relationships and ensuring that young people have others in their lives whom they can look up to, benefit from and take guidance and advice from.

The idea of having a mentor, rather than supported carers or foster homes for adults, might be useful. Individuals could go to their mentor—a person with whom they had a personal relationship—to get advice when they had a difficulty or an issue that they found troublesome to deal with. Having that on a largely informal basis might be helpful.

Claudia Macdonald: When young people leave care, they tend to engage with us on housing-related issues, when decisions are being made for them on housing support and so on.

Mentoring is a great idea. We actively pursue that through our young people's networks. However, if we were facing a legal situation in which someone was being threatened with eviction, bankruptcy or something along those lines, we would expect to engage a lawyer or a professional representative to help us to negotiate and realise that person's rights. Unfortunately, young care leavers are not able to engage those dedicated, professional services. Therefore, the system must have safeguards. There must also be a continuum of support, from friendships and peer, care and formal relationships to professional-based relationships, because that is the ultimate safeguard. Young people absolutely deserve that. We use our professional, independent advocates to realise rights for those young people.

Siobhan McMahon: I have a question that follows on from the issue that Christian Allard raised. We asked people back to the committee to share their experiences as a follow-up to our report. The report referred to the community care grant. The grant has changed and the DWP's social fund has become the Scottish welfare fund. I do not know whether the individuals on the panel have experience of trying to get a grant for their tenancies, so my questions are probably for the witnesses who represent organisations. We are told that the lead-in time for awards has increased to eight weeks. Has that made a difference? Is it too early to say? What more could we do?

Jordan Murray: I applied for a community care grant when I first moved out of supported accommodation at Seaforth house. I went into a house with literally nothing. The walls were a state and a lot of other work was needed. I applied for the community care grant, but was knocked back twice. I was given an award after I got an intervention through another organisation that Ypeople works closely with. Even then, the amount was very low considering how much work was needed and how much money was requested. I then sought support from my school, and the local rotary club put carpets on my floors. Something must be done about the fact that people are knocked back.

Matthew Friess: I only recently found out that we have access to section 29 money, which is a discretionary fund that social workers can access. Grants of up to £1,500 can be provided for young people who are moving on into their own tenancy.

The problem is that that does not even come close to covering the costs. Jordan mentioned carpets. The cost of carpets alone can run into £600 to £800, depending on how big the property is. You also need to factor in all the white goods that you need and so on. The situation must change.

Siobhan McMahon: Claudia Macdonald has spoken about the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, and the issue is covered in her paper. Others have commented on the legislation, too. From next April, changes will come into effect relating to what happens with young people in residential, foster or kinship care, with the entitlement to be looked after increasing to the age of 21. What difference will that make? Are there other changes to look out for, given that the legislation is new and needs time to bed down?

Claudia Macdonald: There is much encouragement for the committee to take from the legislative provisions that will be enacted from April next year.

On looked-after children and what are referred to as the continuing care provisions, a young person should be able to stay in a residential, foster or kinship care placement until the age of 21 if they want to. As soon as they exercise that right it should be taken into account and a placement should be available.

As with any piece of legislation, there is a requirement to ensure that the intentions are completely followed through in practice. One of our worries is about realising the best possible practice, and we are working alongside Scottish Government colleagues to ensure that that happens. Young people must be informed by social workers and the other corporate parents in their lives that they have that entitlement.

When a young person in care is about 15, life beyond the formal supervision order starts to be thought about. At that point, and before it, we must talk to young people about what being in a care placement for an extra two, three, four or sometimes five years would mean to them. We need to talk about the decisions that they could take and the mistakes that they could make and learn from. We pretty much need to allow them to grow up with a bit more support around them. We hope that the continuing care law will be actively encouraged and that young people will understand their right and entitlement to request to stay put in a placement.

We believe that the committee should welcome the expansion of corporate parenting and the fact that we now have 24 types of corporate parent in Scotland that have a formal duty to have regard to the wellbeing of looked-after children and young care leavers. The committee will probably also be encouraged by the fact that wellbeing has been put into legislation for the first time ever, which puts the intention of the getting it right for every child approach into legislation and which we actively welcome.

The age limit for aftercare has been increased to 26, which again we are encouraged by. We believe that the extra five years of entitlement when people leave care and go into independent living should be welcomed and that all corporate parents should encourage young people to take advantage of that.

Obviously, with any legislation, there are pitfalls in realising the legislative intentions. We must ensure that practitioners at all levels in all corporate parents understand the duties, the implications of those duties and how to apply them. Unfortunately, we sometimes find that young care leavers and people who are looked after stumble at the first block with an organisation. That can sometimes be a receptionist or someone on the phone. People might feel that they are being judged because of their status. We have to ensure that people at all levels in all CPs have a general working understanding of what a looked-after child's life is like and the implications of the new act.

We are encouraged by the intentions that could be realised for Scotland's looked-after children and care leavers.

Siobhan McMahon: That was a comprehensive answer.

To go back to a point that the convener made, one issue is how we get the message to young people. Charlene McKellar explained that, if somebody does not know where to turn, they cannot get the information. What can the committee do about that? You are working with the Scottish Government, which is great, but what should we ask for? How could that message get out?

Claudia Macdonald: There are a few things. First, this is a classic case of you do not know what you do not know and you cannot know it until you know it. We see that time and again in the young people on whose behalf we advocate. Information must be available as widely and as readily and in as many formats as possible. The act creates a duty to inform, and compliance with that duty must be evidenced. Previously, legislation on looked-after children and young care leavers was perhaps not tight enough in placing the duty to inform on the statutory services. We believe that compliance with the duty to inform must be questioned and queried and that a young person must be able to challenge a service if they feel that they have not been informed.

We believe that all corporate parents, including teachers, nurses, doctors and general

practitioners—in effect, all the community anchors that we see in our streets and environments—should provide information promoting the rights of young care leavers and young people who are looked after in our communities. Information is also vital for young people who are looked after at home and young people who are in kinship care because, by virtue of their residential care status, they might not be around so many statutory services.

Sometimes, we have to take advice from young people on what works in terms of receiving information. That means young people being told things repetitively, by a variety of people and in a variety of formats. It means young people being reminded as often as possible, by people whom they trust, about what rights they have.

11:15

Again, that goes back to the point that we have all—the young people and the organisations around the table alike—echoed: relationships matter to young people; trusting relationships matter. We need to empower those relationships to be available to young people and to stay with young people as that is the predominant way in which young people know what is available to them and what rights they have.

John Finnie: One category of accommodation that has not been mentioned thus far is temporary bed and breakfast accommodation. I have posed a couple of parliamentary questions on the subject of care leavers and temporary B and B accommodation and I received very detailed responses covering every local authority. Analysis of the responses suggests that

"the number of young people who had been care leavers and who are presenting as homeless has fallen by 40 per cent in five years".

Nonetheless,

"1 in 5 young care leavers who had presented as homeless spent time in a B&B during their application period".

Do any of the young people here have experience of staying in a B and B? Do the organisations agree with me that national minimum standards of quality of temporary accommodation for care leavers must be enshrined in statute?

Jill Moss: The young people who come through our project have no support when they are in B and B accommodation; they are on their own, which is not good. Without a doubt, more places need to be made available, rather than B and B accommodation being an option.

Charlene McKellar: I do not think that a young person who has experienced being in care should be in a B and B or a hostel. As Jill Moss said, they do not get support there. A 16-year-old going into a B and B will find a lot of older men and women there and a lot of the time, there is a lot of peer pressure and pressure from people of different ages. Being surrounded by those people is not the right environment for a young care leaver to be in.

I do not think that it is right that males and females should be sharing. This might be something that is personal to me but I do not think that it is appropriate. I do not think that it is right.

Dr Monaghan: On John Finnie's point about temporary emergency accommodation, I have to say that I am a little sceptical about the figures that he quoted. My experience is that temporary emergency accommodation is used very frequently to accommodate formerly looked-after young people. Such accommodation is also allocated to other young people who do not have a history in the care system.

Charlene McKellar has accurately identified the fact that young people who go into that type of accommodation are often exploited. They often very quickly encounter and get involved in the world of drink and drugs, which leads to obvious problems.

In my view, temporary emergency accommodation for young people is always inappropriate. It should never be used for young people and I absolutely agree that guidance and standards should be imposed to stop it being used in an ad hoc way.

The Convener: John Mason is next. Then we need to start winding up.

John Mason: I have certainly had a case in my constituency in which it was suggested that it can be very difficult to persuade the council that somebody is unintentionally homeless. The council wanted to know if the person had been sofa surfing and all the details of all the places where they had stayed, which was difficult for them because some of the people they had been staying with did not want that information disclosed. Have people come across that issue? Is it an issue everywhere, or only in particular areas, such as Glasgow?

Charlene McKellar: I will give you a quick example. I got my first ever tenancy through supported accommodation and outreach. I went through various problems and issues with my neighbour up the stair lighting things and putting them through my door. I went to my housing association five times and did not get anywhere. I tried to get some support from my support aid workers who refused point blank to help me because the young person up the stair was also in supported accommodation.

I went to my housing association and told them that I was leaving because I did not feel safe—I

felt as though my life was being threatened. Who in their right mind would live in that environment with people like that? There was no support there. The first words that came out of the housing officer's mouth were, "You're making yourself intentionally homeless."

There is always a reason why young people leave their flats. Housing officers need to sit down and chat to them about it. They are not making themselves intentionally homeless. That word should just go, because it is not right to use it.

John Mason: So you are saying that we should just say "homeless" and that should be it, full stop.

Charlene McKellar: Yes. Young people end up on the streets or end up back in the circle of going round hostels and supported accommodation for particular reasons, and those need to be got at. It should not just be a case of people saying, "You're making yourself intentionally homeless. Gie's yer keys—see you later." Housing associations need to give the young people the time of day and inquire why that young person does not feel safe in their own home when they should be able to feel safe.

Dr Monaghan: Intentionality is an important issue. There is a fair bit of subjectivity around the criteria that are applied in decisions about when intentionality applies. Some local authorities now limit the offers of social housing to prospective tenants. When an individual refuses to take a tenancy in an area that they find unsuitable—perhaps because they have relationships that they wish to avoid in that area—we often hear that they have to take it or they will be found to be intentionally homeless and will not get any more offers.

Charlene McKellar again accurately emphasised the fact that when some individuals who are living in unsuitable accommodation make the decision that they have to move on for their own wellbeing, they are considered intentionally homeless, which is inappropriate.

The Convener: Thank you. Before I conclude today's meeting, I thank every young person who came here today. You have been an inspiration to us all and I have been moved by what I have heard.

That concludes today's meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 25 September.

Meeting closed at 11:23.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland.

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For details of documents available to
order in hard copy format, please contact:
APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78457-860-2

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78457-874-9

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland