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Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 2 October 2014

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
15th 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:

Alice Ashworth (Crisis)
Rosanne Cubitt (Relationships Scotland)
Emma Dore (Shelter Scotland)
Nick Harleigh-Bell (Homeless Action Scotland)
Viki Phillipps (Edinburgh Cyrenians Trust)
Bob Stewart (Dunedin Canmore Group)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ruth McGill

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 2 October 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Having and Keeping a Home

The Convener (Margaret McCulloch): Welcome to the 15th meeting in 2014 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I ask everyone to set their electronic devices to flight mode or to turn them off.

Today's only agenda item is an evidence-taking session for our having and keeping a home inquiry. We will start the session with some introductions. At the table, we have our clerking and research team, official reporters and broadcasting services. Around the room, we are supported by security officers. I welcome everyone in the public gallery as well.

My name is Margaret McCulloch. I am the convener of the committee. I invite members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and am the deputy convener of the committee.

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

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

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

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

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

Alice Ashworth (Crisis): I am from Crisis.

Bob Stewart (Dunedin Canmore Group): I am from Dunedin Canmore Housing Association.

Viki Phillipps (Edinburgh Cyrenians Trust): I am from the Edinburgh Cyrenians.

Nick Harleigh-Bell (Homeless Action Scotland): I am from Homeless Action Scotland.

Rosanne Cubitt (Relationships Scotland): I am from Relationships Scotland.

Emma Dore (Shelter Scotland): I am from Shelter Scotland.

The Convener: Witnesses should indicate to me if they want to answer a question and I will add them to my list.

The witnesses we spoke to on 14 August spoke positively about the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 but highlighted the importance of effective implementation. What are your views on the act? What areas of concern do you have? How should those areas be approached?

Who would like to start first? Shall I pick someone? [*Laughter*.]

Bob Stewart, since you are the only male in the group, I will pick on you.

Bob Stewart: Thanks for pointing that out, convener.

My background is social work. From that point of view, I welcome the act. It gives opportunities to all organisations that are involved in working with young people, whether they come from a care background or not. One of the important things about the act is that it creates a great opportunity for multiagency working. I particularly welcome the fact that the act will ensure assistance for people up to the age of 25. Over the years, my experience has been that, often, young people struggle when they leave care and come into the community. We see that quite a lot in my particular area of homelessness.

There might be some issues there with regard to the funding of support services. The committee might want to think about that in relation to the work that it does with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the councils. Although there is a huge commitment on the part of councils to work with young people, particularly those with a care background, the experience of people on the ground is that resources are still an issue. There are issues around the facilities that can help young people who are dealing with strong personal issues, which might be to do with drugs and alcohol, among other things, and—equally importantly—the fundamental issue of setting up and keeping a home. As the morning wears on, we can discuss examples of how that issue has been addressed by organisations around the table.

The important thing for me is that it has now been recognised that young people from care backgrounds have particular issues, which extend beyond the point at which they leave the care of the local authority.

Nick Harleigh-Bell: Like Bob Stewart, we welcome the definition of corporate parenting. In a "1066 and All That" sort of way, it is a good thing. However, it needs to have a real, practical meaning and I am not sure that that has been worked on enough to ensure that it translates

across in a way that means that everyone who is a corporate parent has an equal understanding of their responsibilities in that regard.

A young person I was talking to described the continuing care aspect as being like a long conversation rather than a brief argument, which was a good way of thinking about things, I thought. The process should be more like a smooth transition than like someone slamming a door. However, having that conversation requires young people to be empowered to know that that is their right. Unless there is a statutory duty to tell young people that a public body must promote and deliver wellbeing, rights and outcomes, there will be a disconnect and an opportunity for this broadly welcomed and positive piece of legislation to not deliver as well as it could. There should be an element of beefing up the rights element and ensuring that the checks and balances are in place to ensure that all young people with an experience of care know what their rights are.

The Convener: I saw Viki Phillipps nodding when Bob Stewart was talking about resources. How will your organisation cope with the extra workload when you take on people in the 18 to 25 age group? I assume that you are quite stretched just now.

Viki Phillipps: We will have to ensure that joint working is happening across all partner organisations, including the authorities, all our partners around the table today and other services. I do not think that the Cyrenians would ever claim to have the answer to all of a young person's problems and issues. Our approach is more akin to the conversation than the short argument and involves finding out what the young person is looking for and who is best placed to provide those services.

I would be particularly keen to have very clear conversations with local authority front-line staff about their understanding of their duties, because my experience from working with young people is certainly that very different information can often come from departments or even from within one department. A person can be very clear about what needs to happen and how it should happen, but another person in the same department can have a completely different understanding of what somebody might be entitled to. It is critical that everybody has very clear information at the same time for young people, whether or not they are from a care background.

The Convener: Thanks very much.

On 14 August, we heard from young people very moving stories of their experiences of homelessness. Can you give us specific issues that care leavers have faced which you have come across? Will I have to pick somebody again at random? Would Emma Dore like to comment?

Emma Dore: Sure. Shelter works broadly with homeless people across Scotland. We help around half a million people every year, and care leavers are among them, but there are not any specific projects that focus on them. We have seen through different projects that the transition from care to independent living can be very difficult, as the committee has heard previously. The engagement with professionals that has happened throughout care leavers' lives can in some cases result in almost engagement fatigue for them by the time that they reach young adulthood, but at the same time they can be more experienced in dealing with professionals in their lives.

The Convener: Would Rosanne Cubitt like to comment on her experience?

Rosanne Cubitt: Yes. We see that the skills that the young people talked about when they were here and things that we would perhaps take for granted are a real challenge for them. We can help with communication and conflict resolution. We could say, "Doesn't everybody know how to do that?" but people can learn those things, develop and take ownership and responsibility for their own decision making. These young people have been in situations in which decisions have been made for them, and it is about empowering them to make those decisions themselves. That is our experience.

Bob Stewart: As a housing association that houses people of all ages but which looks in particular at young people, one issue that we come across is the lack of preparedness of young people from a care background for independent living in the community. Let us be clear that people are working on that now, but from the point of view of our housing association and other housing associations, tenancy failure is an issue per se. Tenancy failure for young people is more prevalent, basically because of their lack of knowledge, skills and experience.

For most young people who are leaving care and coming into the community, the tenancy will be a first-time one. We have looked at that issue, and my submission on behalf of Dunedin Canmore Housing Association and Four Square, which is our partner organisation, refers to the young people's tenancy training flats scheme and its success, which is built on the fact that we have the Dunedin Canmore Housing Association housing provider and a support provider from Four Square and the associated organisation that goes with it.

Colleagues have already mentioned that the importance of joint work cannot be overstressed. We need everyone to come together and to be

prepared to come out of their silos to work with young people. We have shown that quite remarkable success can be achieved if we blend the experiences of the different organisations.

In the paper that I sent to the committee, I mentioned that nearly half of the young people who come on to the tenancy training scheme, on which we work in partnership with Four Square, have care backgrounds. We focus on the range of issues that they come with—whether those are personal issues, issues of family breakdown, health issues including drug and alcohol issues or the basic issues of having and keeping a home or going into a home and managing it—and helping them to develop the skills that they need, which includes raising the bar in helping people to go back to school, go into further education or take up employment opportunities and training. We have found that putting all that together in a package leads to great success with young people, particularly those with care backgrounds.

Care leavers also have issues that affect all young people, such as difficulty in navigating the welfare and benefits system. It is sometimes difficult for a young person to take up the opportunity of a college course because their housing benefit is affected, and we often have the sad situation of a young person saying that they cannot afford to take up a course—they cannot take up a positive pathway into education and employment. Along with colleagues around the room, we are looking with interest to see whether, following the referendum, matters such as housing benefit will come to the Scottish Parliament. If that occurs, we are very willing to participate in any discussion of how we can make life better and stop barriers being set up that prevent young people from moving into education and going back to school.

10:15

The Convener: Thank you. We have just been joined by some high school students in the public gallery. I am delighted to see you all here. I ask the witnesses to explain in detail any terminology that they use for the benefit of everybody, including us.

Alex Johnstone: I take your warning, convener, and will try to keep my terms simple.

This committee and others have been discussing issues surrounding the housing options approach to homelessness. Some witnesses have been very positive about that approach, but others have been less positive about it. What is your experience of it so far? How is it working?

Emma Dore: We welcome the housing options approach and think that any approach to homelessness that encourages prevention and early intervention is positive. The intention of the housing options approach is to give individuals more choice, which can only be a good thing. Yet, there is great variety in the implementation of the approach across Scotland.

Shelter Scotland welcomes the recent activity of the homelessness team in responding to the Scottish Housing Regulator's recommendation around the development of guidance. It has pulled together a small working group involving lead local authorities. That is great, because there needs to be some guidance about how the housing options approach should be implemented, looking at different choices for individuals when they are in housing need rather than just following the homeless route. The experience of our advisers is that there has been some confusion on the front line about the application of the guidance alongside the legislative duty to provide a housing assessment when somebody is homeless.

We want Shelter and the other organisations that are represented here, which represent the people who are affected by the housing options process, to have an opportunity to input on the guidance rather than just local authorities having an input. We would like to involve service users as well, so that the voices of those who are experiencing the housing options process are included in the guidance.

We would like the guidance to represent young people's specialist needs. The committee's inquiry is focusing on young people, and I think that colleagues round the table would agree that young people experience the journey of homelessness in a unique way.

As has been mentioned, most young people do not necessarily know or understand their rights, or they are not even aware of what housing options means. Some of the young people with whom our staff have worked are very unclear about what happened to them when they went to the council. They do not know whether they had a housing options interview or made a homelessness application.

Some people are not being given an options-based approach. One young person was recently handed a list of bed and breakfasts in the area and told to get on with it. For a young person, such an approach is overwhelming and inaccessible—it does not prevent homelessness; it merely delays the problem.

For young people throughout the country who are trying to access the housing options approach, it can be very helpful to have specialist staff members who are accessible and understand about working with young people, and who will talk to them in a way that they understand.

Even if a young person knows that the council is accessible to them, the experience of going up to a desk where there is an adult in a suit who may use words that the young person does not understand and who will give them a form that they potentially cannot read can be very threatening. We have certainly experienced such issues. When a member of our staff goes along with the young person and can advocate for them and explain what is going on in an empowering manner, while supporting the young person to present their views, the results can be very positive.

I highlight the level of mental health difficulties that young homeless people experience. Up to 80 per cent of young people who use our safe and sound service have mental health issues that make using the housing options system and trying to navigate its complexity very difficult. Conditions such as anxiety, depression and anger can really get in the way. We would be looking for any guidance that is provided on housing options to take account of the particular struggles that young homeless people face.

The Convener: Viki Phillipps would like to come in. Can you also explain the housing options approach?

Viki Phillipps: That is no problem at all, convener. Thank you for the opportunity to do so.

In my understanding, the housing options approach in local authorities and in the national guidance arose from the commitment to prevent homelessness from happening in the first place. It involves asking, if not requiring, local authorities to take a certain approach when a person, whoever that is, comes to the local authority seeking housing because their current housing situation is, for whatever reason, problematic. The local authority will engage in a conversation, rather than just put the person on a waiting list and tell them that they just need to wait, and that they will be given a house when one comes along. That approach was clearly no longer realistic; it had not been for a long time, in many local authorities. The conversation will cover a variety of options with regard to the person's current housing situation and what it could look like. It would, in some areas, include giving the person a lot of information on the private rented sector.

I am perhaps going off on a tangent here, because explaining the housing options approach in one short sentence is not straightforward, and approaches are very specific to each local authority. That is one of the real challenges.

I was nodding while Emma Dore was talking. We all welcome the idea of people having choice when it comes to where they live, but we face a real dilemma in balancing what choice is available in the local area with having a nationally consistent policy that is delivered in pretty much the same way in every part of the country. I do not have the answer to that dilemma, but I think that it is important that we recognise that it exists across the board, in relation to the housing options approach.

The Convener: Alice Ashworth would like to come in, but perhaps Alex Johnstone would like to finish his questions first, and Alice can come in on the back of that.

Alex Johnstone: We have covered many of the questions that I was going to ask, but the one issue that I would be interested in hearing slightly more about is how the housing options approach applies to care leavers. Are there issues with that?

Alice Ashworth: I wanted to make a point about the potential for the housing options approach to identify opportunities for housing in the private rented sector. Earlier this summer, we conducted research that involved interviewing local authority staff in seven case-study areas. The project was about helping young people into shared accommodation in the private rented sector because of the extension of the shared accommodation rate—which, I am sure, we will come on to later. In that research, we found that, across the local authorities concerned, there was a real lack of understanding among housing advisers of what is available locally in the private rented sector, including shared accommodation options. Although there are examples of good practice and schemes to support young people into such housing, we identified a real need to empower local authority staff and to provide them with the necessary support so that they can increase their knowledge of the sector and be sufficiently able to support young people into it in cases in which that is an option—especially for young people who are limited to the shared accommodation rate.

I cannot really answer the question about care leavers, primarily because when it comes to the shared accommodation rate—which is our particular interest—care leavers up to the age of 22 are, fortunately, exempted. That said, there is obviously an issue with young people being able to take advantage of exemptions. On the exemption for young people who have lived in a homeless hostel, for example, we conducted research in which one in five housing advisers said that none of their clients had been able to take advantage of that exemption when they were entitled to do so. That is an on-going issue.

As far as the housing options approach is concerned, our main concern is that options in the private rented sector are not being identified to a great enough extent. For some young people, an

option in that sector could be a viable way for them to sustain a tenancy.

Alex Johnstone: Does anyone else have anything to say about care leavers?

Nick Harleigh-Bell: I will say a little bit.

Through our work alongside the Scottish throughcare and aftercare forum, we have had some joint practice meetings to share housing practice with throughcare practice. Of course, that is all to become continuing care practice, which is another issue that we might get on to. We have found that there is, on the housing side of things, an understanding of what the housing options approach means. It is the process that Viki Phillipps managed to define—she is laughing, but she did brilliantly compared with what I would have come up with—which involves looking at a range of options that suit the local area, that are available and that might prevent someone from needing to make a homelessness application.

10:30

The care leavers guidance says that young people with a care experience background should not be put through the homelessness route. The housing options approach for young care leavers runs almost parallel to the homelessness route. We have discovered, from talking to throughcare workers, that care leavers go through the same process, but without the same rights. The throughcare workers found that the friends of the care leavers with whom they were working, who were the same age and had similar issues, were, through making a homelessness application, being housed more quickly than the young people who went through the care-leaving process. The question of whether those friends were being housed more appropriately is different, of course.

There is some great practice throughout Scotland: one example is the work of Edinburgh's care leavers housing and support panel. Good practice involves conversation and the art of gentle persuasion. Just because someone has a right to a flat does not mean that they should take up that right, or perhaps not right away. It is important to find and put in place the appropriate support solutions at the right time. The process will never be smooth or without problems, but good practice means that there is always someone, somewhere who can support the care leaver.

We found that the housing people understood housing, and the throughcare people understood throughcare, but the two areas did not speak the same language. We have spoken about section 5 referrals—which Bob Stewart will know more about than I do—under which a housing association or a social landlord has an obligation to take on as a tenant a homeless person. The housing people were saying, "Why aren't you using section 5 referrals?" and the throughcare people were saying, "We don't know what they are."

As agencies, we are trying to break down that barrier through the Scottish throughcare and aftercare forum. There is a training element: people need to learn to speak the language of throughcare or housing. The problem is simple, but one can see how it would affect young people who know even less than the professionals because they have not encountered the language before, given that they have not been doing the job daily for years. That is not to place blame on anyone. The issue is simply that two separate cultures are now having to work more closely together, and the resource has not necessarily been put in to support that process.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We are running short of time and we would like to ask quite a lot of questions. I ask members and witnesses to keep questions and answers quite short, so that we can cover everything, because it is important that we do.

Marco Biagi has a supplementary.

Marco Biagi: Yes, I have a question for Alice Ashworth based on her response a moment ago.

We do not generally engage in naming and shaming in committee, but I believe in naming and praising. You said that there are examples of good practice in terms of knowledge of the private rented sector. Can you point us in the direction of those examples?

Alice Ashworth: Certainly. We found an example of good practice in Fife called Fife keyfund, which has a 10-bed unit where young people can stay for up to 12 weeks. During that period, they are encouraged to buddy up with somebody else who is living in the unit, and at the end they are supported by the local authority to secure a two-bed tenancy together in the private rented sector.

John Mason: I want to ask about mediation, in which I believe Relationships Scotland and Edinburgh Cyrenian Trust are involved. Perhaps you can give us a definition of mediation as you understand it and tell us about some of the benefits.

Rosanne Cubitt: Yes—I am happy to speak about that. We have a network of mediation services throughout Scotland, with 90 mediators.

Mediation, for those of you who do not know, is an opportunity for people to get together with an independent and impartial third person to help communication to go smoothly. One important element involves helping the people in the room to listen and hear what the other person is saying.

All the research shows that relationship breakdown is a key factor in raising the risk of homelessness. We can give young people an opportunity to meet family members, or whoever they are in dispute with, to have a conversation, one party to the other, and talk about the issues, reach an understanding and find out the root cause of the issue. In many cases, that allows the young person to stay at home in a more positive environment or to move out and have their own tenancy, but with family support that enables them to go forward positively in the tenancy.

One of our recent projects has been the safe and sound project with Shelter in Dundee. We recognise that our specialist knowledge is on conflict resolution, communication and family development and family issues. When we work in partnership with Shelter, we can bring in its specialist housing knowledge, which means that young people have the opportunity to access that knowledge with the support of the two services working together. Somebody talked earlier about partnership working; the safe and sound project is a good example of two organisations bringing together their skill sets to provide more holistic support.

John Mason: In your written submission, you give an example from Argyll and Bute. You say that 75 people were referred, of whom 58 per cent engaged, which sounds reasonable because it is more than half, and 37 per cent resolved their immediate housing problem. I suppose that that begs the question why all of them did not want to get involved in mediation.

Rosanne Cubitt: That is partly about engaging with the process. We are learning as we go along about how to engage with young people, who are maybe different from our traditional client group. We are looking at engaging through text messages and Facebook private messaging. Part of the answer is about developing engagement and building up trust, but the issues are not easy to resolve. Mediation is not a panacea or a magic wand, but it can really help, even just by allowing people to develop an understanding of communication in problem solving, as well as communication skills.

John Mason: Do you have cases in which one party is willing to engage, but others are not? Perhaps the young person is willing, but the rest of the family are not.

Rosanne Cubitt: Yes, and it also happens the other way round. We would not count that as mediation, because we do not have everyone together, although we can still do useful work with one party.

With young people and families mediation, we might do a lot more one-to-one work with the young person before they ever get to mediation. We are flexible about our model and are very able to respond to those needs. The statistics do not always give a clear picture of what is going on.

John Mason: Ms Phillipps is involved in mediation, too. Your written submission mentions that one local authority—it is not named—seemed to be up for it, so you expected 20 cases in the first couple of months, but ended up with only three. What were the problems?

Viki Phillipps: At the risk of showing disrespect, which is not what I mean, I point out that we were not given the opportunity that we hoped for to provide training for the homelessness prevention staff who were responsible for making the referrals and explaining mediation to the young people who presented to the local authority as homeless. The staff had to do the housing options assessment interview, ask all the questions and do all the information gathering that the process requires and then remember to ask—at the end of the conversation, it would appear—"Would you like some mediation?"

Our sense from a conversation with the manager of the service was that, in fact, people were just not interested. If someone asks the closed question, "Would you like mediation?", 99 per cent of people will say no. However, if someone asks, "Would you like to have a chat with somebody about how things are at home at the moment?", the chances are that the response will be much more positive, because that does not put people in the position of having to say yes or no to something when they might not even know what they are being offered in the first place.

Does that answer your question?

John Mason: That is helpful. In that case, although the money and the personnel were available, the service was not taken up.

I get the impression from submissions that the situation across the country is patchy and that, in some cases, finances are not available. I do not know who can answer this question, but is mediation expensive?

Viki Phillipps: Mediation is absolutely not expensive. Given what it can achieve through preventative spend, it is an extremely cheap—indeed, almost ludicrously cheap—option, if you stack the cost up against the potential savings.

Continuing with Marco Biagi's name-and-praise approach, I should mention our asked-to-leave service in East Lothian, which has been incredibly successful in returning people home, largely from bed and breakfasts, where such a course of action has been felt to be appropriate and safe.

Echoing what Rosanne Cubitt has said, we need to be flexible about what we mean by

mediation. Instead of having to get all formal, get people round the table, get them to sign up to agreements and so on, all that might be needed would be a conversation or a bit of a chat with the parties about what is going on, and some support and signposting where required.

John Mason: Mr Stewart, is mediation something that you already do but which you do not necessarily call mediation?

Bob Stewart: We have already talked about use of language. Mediation, as such, will take place, but as Viki Phillipps has made clear, it is important for young people that we take care not to use the language of professional adults and that, instead, we use language that they understand and are comfortable with and which allows them to open up and have the sometimes difficult discussions that families need to have. It is a skill that staff need, but the area has perhaps been underinvested in, and it is certainly something that we should be looking at.

John Mason: I see that Ms Dore wants to come in, so my next question should perhaps be for her. Who should be taking a lead in encouraging mediation? Should it be councils, Parliament, housing associations or someone else?

Emma Dore: All the above should take the lead. As Viki Phillipps's example makes clear, if front-line staff do not have a shared understanding of or buy in to the effectiveness of mediation, it will be less effective. If you do not really understand what mediation is or what it can achieve, you will not be able to sell it the right way.

As Dunedin Canmore's experience shows, sometimes it is all about having the right person in the right place. If the young person in question has a good relationship with the housing officer or the person who has popped round, that is great, but as has already been pointed out, it has a lot to do with the mediator being a trusted person—someone with whom the young person in the family will engage and will bring out in the open some very difficult, personal and gritty issues. That can make people feel very vulnerable, but as research and, certainly, the experience of Relationships Scotland and the Cyrenians has shown, if such a service is delivered by someone independent who is not from, say, the council's housing team, it can be very effective. Indeed, someone in our survey said that they wanted to talk to the person who came to see them because they were not wearing a council badge.

As the safe and sound project and the Cyrenians have found, it is important to support not only the young person but the family. Mediation can bring up a number of very difficult issues; the issue might be not just conflict in itself, but conflict because of mental health, criminal justice and other such issues. Having a conversation can go some way towards addressing such issues, but both parties can need a bit of help to make progress with them.

Rosanne Cubitt: We would like—

The Convener: I am sorry, but we are really short of time and need to move on. Again, I ask the witnesses to keep their answers as short as possible.

10:45

Christian Allard: First, I have a question about education. Some of you have talked about an early stage school programme that you were involved in to try to increase homelessness prevention, to make sure that young people know what its roots are and, at the same time, to address stereotypes. I want to know more about that programme. What influence can you have on education departments? Some of you have talked about a lack of interest, so how can we inspire education departments to put the subject on to their curriculum?

Nick Harleigh-Bell: That is my baby. [*Laughter*.] When it comes to education, I am not sure that we need to be talking about encouraging and nurturing engagement; rather, what we need is a big stick. That is an unusual approach for me because I am usually about encouraging and nurturing people.

Before our organisation became Homeless Action Scotland, we were the Scottish Council for Single Homeless. We pioneered leaving home and housing education in schools through the development of the I'm offski! pack. Earlier this week, a teacher in a local authority area that I shall not name called to ask me whether I had the I'm offski! video on DVD. Schools are still using materials from 15 years ago even though the situation has changed so much. That teacher wanted to make sure that her students had the information and she did not have anywhere else to go. She probably found us more by chance than anything else—we might have a phone number redirect, which would have helped.

The big stick is needed to make sure that the one enthusiastic teacher in every three schools is the competently trained and aware teacher in every school. There is no reason for teachers, who are brilliant at teaching, to be housing experts, yet housing is one of the fundamentals that affect young people's attainment. We chose this career—we may have often fallen into it rather than choosing it—and we are engaged in it.

Shelter has produced brilliant reports about the effects of homelessness on children. If you look at the educational attainment of young homeless

people they are, as Bob Stewart said, stifled and hampered. I want to see—this is a big stick—an element of initial teacher education to be about factors that affect young people's learning and to look at housing situations. As I say, housing is a fundamental issue. Everyone must live somewhere and everyone must go to school, but not everyone who goes to school will have somewhere permanent to live.

I also want to see an accredited continuing professional development course for teachers on leaving home, housing and homelessness issues. That is not there. There is nothing to say that the teachers or the schools are not enthusiastic. We provide materials that teachers can use and we will go wherever we are needed to ensure that there is support but, because it is just me doing that, I cannot be everywhere. That is an issue. A CPD course is needed that works for everyone, that works in the same way and that is reflective of real need, with teachers empowered to do the right signposting. It is not enough to rely on a local service to come in, because not everywhere has such services. Even if there are such services—I will finish off my point quickly—not every third sector organisation has the capacity to go out to schools and deliver that support. That is where I am coming from.

Christian Allard: Thank you. Your response leads me on to another question. You say that you are astonished to hear people asking whether old videos are available as DVDs. In our inquiry, Charlene McKellar from Who Cares? Scotland told us why nothing was done on social media. She said:

"Totally. Those are the places that it needs to hit".—[*Official Report*, *Equal Opportunities Committee*, 14 August 2014; c 2048.]

You mentioned a pack. How can that be made more available not only to the teachers but to the children? Perhaps social media is another route.

Nick Harleigh-Bell: You cannot force a social media thing to happen. If you try to do that, you tend to get it horribly wrong and it falls on its face. Again, it is about ensuring that people have the right information at the right time so that it does not become specialist information but is just something that people can share.

In terms of getting the right communication channels, if you try to keep up with young people, as soon as you have Twitter down pat they have discovered something else and are saying, for example, "I'm sorry, but we're Snapchatting today," or that they are all moving from Facebook to Ello. We do not know what the next pattern is going to be, so we have to make sure that the most common communication channels are the ones that are open—I believe that things like Facebook and Twitter are here for a wee while yet; I will put my hands up to that. However, rather than following what could be a passing trend, we must focus on the most common channels of information. Where we get our information from requires a little bit of information gathering but not heavy research. I know that teachers use the website that we provide. We let them know about it through old-fashioned mail and email.

Christian Allard: I have a question about funding. We have talked a lot about funding for the Dunedin Canmore Group, and perhaps Bob Stewart will want to talk about it. Funding for youth organisations has been described as a "moveable feast". I do not know how funding cuts will affect Dunedin Canmore. You have talked about more imaginative ways of obtaining funding. Can you share your views on that with the committee?

Bob Stewart: Yes. Being creative about getting funds is probably more to do with desperation about the fact that we are unable to get funds from other sources. We are therefore forced to be creative in that area. This afternoon, I am going to a briefing session in the city chambers at which the homelessness services and other services will be told that there is going to be a further 10 per cent cut to the funding of services, three months after we were told that there was going to be a 15 per cent cut. We are now looking at a cut of nearly 25 per cent in funding by the local authority for homelessness services in Edinburgh. That is the funding backcloth that we are operating to.

It means that many organisations are going to have to take some hard decisions regarding some services, and it will be very sad if that is the case. However, councils have their own funding issues to deal with, and we respect that. I would stress, though, the importance of investment in funding for services to help young people at a stage at which we can stop the cycle of homelessness and deprivation—we are very familiar with all that. It is really important that we do not go down the track of ceasing funding for services that at the moment help to stop the cycle continuing.

All of us in the third sector are constantly involved in finding money to continue the services that we provide just now and, which is important, to develop other services. For me, it is important that we do that jointly. Dunedin Canmore has experience of a number of very positive partnerships with agencies that enable us to combine resources to deliver services.

At times, it is a bit of a struggle with councils whose departments—God bless them—work in silos. It is important that we can encourage colleagues in the councils to look at multidepartmental funding, as well as at multi-agency funding for health, for instance. I would be interested to see what effect the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014 has on the

integration of health and social care. I would like that to take place and act as a model for a range of services that we all deliver.

Marco Biagi: To complement the housing options approach there is the housing support duty, which came into effect legally last year. What effect has that had?

Nick Harleigh-Bell: I will make my answer as quick as possible, although I have about four points.

We recently completed a quick and dirty survey of all 32 local authorities, from which we had 19 or 20 responses, so it gave us a fairly good picture. The responses came from homelessness prevention and housing options teams. I believe that there is a report on our website; if there is not, there will be by the end of today. In summary, less than a quarter of homelessness services said that they required any additional demand on resources to fulfil the duty. A similar number were putting in additional resources, but they might have done that anyway.

The housing options approach has been credited with refocusing work and the housing support duty complements it very well. The biggest issue that was picked up was non-engagement by people who have had an assessment and been found to require support but who have not engaged with the support services provided. We have not said a great deal about that, other than that people genuinely believe that the housing support duty is a good thing.

The guidance came after the duty was in place, so a lot of processes already existed—it was a bit cart before the horse. You cannot turn around a big ship very quickly, so people are having to wait for a convenient review point to tally up their practice with the guidance.

Generally the duty has been welcomed. It has not had the big scary impact that perhaps people were afraid of, but it has flagged up issues to do with non-engagement and communicating the importance of support to people who are liable to need it.

Emma Dore: I would like to pick up on Nick Harleigh-Bell's last point. Our services—particularly our safe and sound service—believed that some of the non-engagement arises because of how the support would be offered, particularly to young people. In some circumstances a young person might just be shown a tick list of different support needs and asked, "Are any of these you?", and given 10 seconds to answer. If they said, "Yes, I have a problem with so-and-so," they might be given a leaflet or a phone number. These are difficult and long-term issues, which is why the housing support duty has been put in place. These issues could prevent someone from maintaining a home. The information about what we can do to surround people with the help to maintain a home needs to be communicated in an informed and appropriate way, particularly if it is for young people.

Marco Biagi: We have heard evidence on the intentionality criterion. Are some young people being defined as intentionally homeless who should not be? If so, what should be done?

The Convener: Do I have a volunteer? Alice Ashworth, would you like to answer?

Alice Ashworth: You said that just as Emma Dore was volunteering to speak.

The Convener: We will go to Emma, then.

Emma Dore: A percentage increase in intentionality is being seen across the board of the homelessness population. The number of youth homelessness intentionality decisions has risen from 3 per cent a couple of years ago to 5 per cent last year. Five per cent is still a small percentage, but a change from 3 to 5 per cent is a significant percentage change. That reflects a general change across the whole homelessness population.

We need to recognise that young people's journeys into homelessness are often complex and messy. Their homelessness is not necessarily the result of one instance—it is not necessarily the case that the young person says, "We had a terrible argument and my parents kicked me out. I cannot go back and I can get them to write a letter to state that." The journey is often very difficult and can involve the young person moving in and out, sometimes staying with one person and sometimes staying in a car. Such a situation is difficult to demonstrate, particularly where a relationship has broken down entirely and the parents do not necessarily want to engage with the local authority for historical reasons, whatever those are.

11:00

It is very difficult for some local authorities to get the evidence that they require to support a young person's story. However, there is some good practice among local authorities, and there are professionals in the field who understand the issues and are willing to take somebody's word or trust the evidence for a situation.

Marco Biagi: I will come at the issue from a slightly different angle. Is there any evidence that young people are maintaining tenancies or housing arrangements that are unsafe or sub-optimal because they are worried about being considered to have made themselves intentionally homeless if they left? Does anyone have any experience of that?

Viki Phillipps: I do not have any experience of it, but that does not mean that it may not be the case.

Nick Harleigh-Bell: Yes, there are such examples. We recently undertook our "Youth Homelessness Survey 2014" in Scotland, which included information on that. Again, there is an awareness issue. Young people who are currently sofa surfing or staying with family and friends, and who do not present as homeless because they do not know that they are homeless, will eventually present to a service. Often, the situations that have led them to that decision have been things such as sanctions, whether those are applied inappropriately or not.

We have evidence that there has been a huge increase in sanctions. Some decisions have come from certain jobcentres in certain local authorities—I could name them, but I will not, because we do not shame anyone, although it is tempting—which have inappropriately applied sanctions that have had knock-on effects. For example, a jobcentre has taken away housing benefit or delayed payments while a decision has been going through when it should not have done so. That has put young people at risk. As they have been seen not to engage with Jobcentre Plus, they have been deemed to be eligible for sanctions.

John Finnie: The submission from Crisis states:

"Crisis believes that the extension of the Shared Accommodation Rate ... alongside longstanding problems with benefits for younger adults, will put young people in Scotland at particular risk of homelessness."

What impact has the shared accommodation rate and the introduction of direct payments had on young people's ability to find and maintain a tenancy? Given the time constraints, it would be welcome if you could also throw in some comments about the bedroom tax.

Alice Ashworth: We have grave concerns about the impact of the shared accommodation rate, not only on under-25s but on under-35s, since the rate was extended in 2012 to 25 to 34-year-olds for the first time.

We mention the research that we have conducted in our written submission, so I will not go into too much detail, but we have found that there are real problems with the affordability and availability of shared accommodation. That echoes our conversations with housing advisers around the country. One local authority—I will not name it—said that it did not see a single room advertised within the local shared accommodation rate in 18 months. I can—

John Finnie: May I interrupt you there? That is not a criticism of the local authority, so are you able to say where it is?

Alice Ashworth: The remark is anecdotal, so I would rather not, if that is okay. As I said, there are grave issues with affordability and availability for those who are limited to the shared accommodation rate. At the same time, we know that the social housing sector is declining in Scotland, which will put far more pressure on young people to find realistic accommodation.

We know from research that the Department for Work and Pensions commissioned that overall, throughout Great Britain, the case load of under-35s on local housing allowance—on housing benefit in the private sector—has fallen dramatically since the changes were made. From the period just prior to the introduction of the reforms to August 2013, there was a 13 per cent drop in 25 to 34-year-olds and a 9 per cent drop in under 25-year-olds in receipt of local housing allowance.

However, the data does not tell us what happened to those individuals. Some of them might have moved back in with their parents, if that was an option, or some of them might have moved into work and might be earning an income that makes them ineligible for housing benefit. We are concerned that many of them might actually be homeless or hidden homeless, and a number of landlords, including a number of large landlords in certain areas of Scotland, who were interviewed in the research expressed the worry that those individuals were sleeping on friends' sofas. We do not know where they have gone, but it is certainly a real concern when the amount of available housing benefit is simply not enough to meet the cost of even a room in a cheap shared house. Indeed, that is coupled with the problems that have already been highlighted of local authority staff simply not being aware of the accommodation that is available in the private rented sector.

You asked me to mention the bedroom tax. As I said, local authority staff are for the most part unaware, or have a lack of understanding, of what might be available in the private rented sector. At the same time, they are unable to provide one-bed properties in the social rented sector because the young people would be subject to the bedroom tax and, understandably, they are not going to let rooms that those young people find unaffordable. Young people are therefore left with very limited, if any, options, and we are also finding that the 25 to 34-year-old age group are now too old to be eligible for any youth homelessness services. There is a real gap in that respect, and with, I am glad to say, Scottish Government funding we are working with all 32 local authorities to identify

ways of supporting young people into shared accommodation in the private rented sector. A lot of those housing providers recognise that with the impact of welfare reform and the declining social sector the private rented sector will have to play a bigger role.

For quite a long time now, we have been pressing the United Kingdom Government to at the very least review the shared accommodation rate. If the Scottish Parliament gets greater powers in this area, we will have a meaningful and valuable opportunity to really think about how best to support young people who need support with their housing costs.

John Finnie: Thank you very much for that comprehensive reply. Of course, one challenge that we face is identifying the housing component of universal credit, which is being trialled in Inverness in my area.

Alice Ashworth: Yes. We do not have any real concerns about the principle of universal credit—if the benefits system can be simplified, that is fantastic—but we are concerned about the question of direct payments. For a start, rent arrears have been increasing, but they are certainly increasing in areas where housing associations have trialled such payments. Moreover, DWP-commissioned research into changes to local housing allowance revealed that where landlords have been willing to negotiate rent slightly because of people's lesser entitlement to housing benefit, it has happened in exchange for their receiving the housing benefit directly instead of its being paid to the tenant.

Marco Biagi: Does Dunedin Canmore, which was one of the pilot groups with regard to direct payments, have anything to add in that respect?

Bob Stewart: There is not only a danger of people falling into debt but an issue with housing associations losing rent revenue. Our experience in the pilot is that although some of the consequences can be mitigated, doing so requires huge resources. We had to put a huge amount of staff resources into the exercise, which was funded through the DWP, and the concern is that if those resources are not there housing organisations and councils will be left in a very resource-intensive situation that it will be difficult to maintain. The big issue is that people might end up being evicted and going back into the cycle. We must keep an eye on the danger of creating homelessness through an attempt to simplify the welfare benefits system.

Siobhan McMahon: We talked about the impact on a young person's housing benefit of having a college place, for instance. Mr Stewart said that, if more powers came to Scotland, he would like us to do something on that. Will you give more information on that? We share the sentiment, but do others? The more people speak about it, the better we can make the case. Has the number of people in such a situation increased or stayed the same? What has happened since our report was produced?

Emma Dore: A young person who recently accessed the safe and sound service said that the situation was like having to choose between going to college and having a roof over their head. That is happening in Scotland and is unfair. I highlight and support Bob Stewart's comment about taking the opportunity, if it arises, to ask questions about finding a better solution to the housing benefit question for the vulnerable young people involved that allows them to continue to engage in training or education. Lots of research has shown that to be one of the routes out of homelessness.

Nick Harleigh-Bell: A mechanism that could be used is the discretionary housing payment, but local authorities fear and even lack understanding about using those payments. In working with one local authority, I found that when a DHP application could be made, sustained and repeated was unclear.

Siobhan McMahon: Where does the problem lie? Does it involve information from the Government to local authorities?

Nick Harleigh-Bell: Yes—it involves information from the Government to local authorities. Following the DHP changes, people are scared that DHPs will be a pot of money that runs out. That has led to an underspend. People seem to think that the extension of DHPs to a maximum of 12 months is a one-off rather than something that can be repeated. There is no reason why someone who is doing a three-year college course cannot be supported for three years, but the fear exists.

I am loth to use the word "prejudice" but, at times, the suspicion is that young people might not maintain their tenancy, even though nothing indicates that. A local authority might say that the DHP cannot be given and come up with a circuitous route to fulfil its prejudices.

The Convener: In evidence to us and to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee for its follow-up work on the homelessness commitment, concerns have been expressed about the increased use of temporary accommodation. What is the standard of temporary accommodation? Has that increased or fallen?

Emma Dore: Shelter Scotland has long campaigned for the Scottish Government to produce officially endorsed guidance on a minimum standard for temporary accommodation, including specific guidance on appropriate

temporary accommodation for young people. As my colleagues have said, there is a lack of appropriate one-bedroom accommodation in social housing stock, which is reflected in the use of temporary accommodation.

The stock for temporary accommodation needs to be reconsidered, to meet the changing demographics of demand following the 2012 commitment. Local authorities should review and revise the size, shape and location of their temporary accommodation stock, as well as its condition. People are also staying in temporary accommodation for longer, which only highlights the need for a look at the conditions that they are in.

11:15

Due to the lack of appropriate temporary accommodation and supported accommodation for young people, our teams have seen young people, for example with mental health difficulties, being offered places in completely inappropriate adult hostels, which are dangerous and risky and which young people just cannot navigate. They are treated as adults on forms and so on, but they do not have the skills and resources to respond appropriately. In that situation, we find that many young people would rather sofa surf and put themselves in unstable, unsuitable and again potentially risky situations than engage with what is being offered to them, because of the lack of quality and availability.

The Convener: I ask Christian Allard to be brief, as we are running out of time.

Christian Allard: In response to a question to the Scottish Government from my colleague John Finnie, the Minister for Housing and Welfare, Margaret Burgess, came back to us with a breakdown of the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation by local authorities. I was astonished to see that, even if there is a decrease across Scotland, some areas have very high figures. One of those areas is Aberdeenshire, which I represent.

Why is the position so patchy? Why is bed-and-breakfast accommodation used a lot more in some areas than in others? Is it a sensible housing option for the future?

Emma Dore: First and foremost, I do not believe that it is a sensible housing option, particularly for young people. Some very vulnerable people are being put in bed-and-breakfast situations that are completely detrimental to their mental and physical health.

We mentioned the variation across Scotland previously, in relation to housing options. There are wide differences in housing stock, the availability of resources and how councils choose to apply their resources for temporary accommodation. Some local authorities have not prioritised the provision of the right temporary accommodation for the people who need it in their areas. In rural communities, there are issues with the proximity of temporary accommodation to people's homes or to the centre.

This is an area in which we have to consider local authorities on a case-by-case basis, but where they are showing that they are consistently overusing bed-and-breakfast accommodation, challenging questions need to be asked of them.

The Convener: John Mason has a brief question. I ask for an even briefer answer, as we are running close to time.

John Mason: My question is based on the Homeless Action Scotland paper and it concerns something that I do not think we have touched on. The paper says that those who are leaving kinship care or who have been looked after at home are a particularly vulnerable group. Is that the case?

Nick Harleigh-Bell: Yes. Continuing care should help to pick that up, in that the rights have been extended to them. Young people who are in kinship care or are looked after at home tend not to have the same access to support when they are at home or when they are looked after by family members, so they have even less support when they leave home. It is a situation in which mediation would work well, but often the opportunity is missed.

John Mason: Thank you.

The Convener: That concludes today's meeting. I thank our witnesses for coming along and giving us that information. It has been really useful.

Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 9 October.

Meeting closed at 11:18.

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