

Scottish Care Leavers Covenant response to Department for Communities and Local Government and Department for Work and Pensions 'Funding Supported Housing: Policy Statement and Consultation - Section 3: Consultation on housing costs for short-term supported accommodation'

January 2018

The [Scottish Care Leavers Covenant](#) supports Scotland's corporate parents, carers, practitioners, managers and decision makers in fulfilling their duties to improve the life chances of all of Scotland's care leavers. Created by an alliance of stakeholders (comprising Barnardo's Scotland, the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS), the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (CYCJ), IRISS, the Life Changes Trust, Quarriers, Staf (Scottish Throughcare & Aftercare Forum), and Who Cares? Scotland) with a wide range of expertise and practice experience, the Covenant supports corporate parents to deliver changes in action and practice to bring improvement and consistency to the care of these young people. It offers clear guidance on how to meet the needs of young people who are often disadvantaged as a result of their care experiences.

Key messages

- Care leavers are an exceptionally vulnerable group. As their corporate parents, agencies of government have responsibilities to ensure their particular needs are appropriately met, at all times asking the question "Would this be good enough for my own child?"
- Definitions of supported accommodation for care leavers should avoid rigid, arbitrary timescales, and the use of disempowering or stigmatising language.
- Supported accommodation for care leavers should not be solely focused on a narrow 'transition to stable longer term accommodation' but should instead focus on a much broader positive and extended transition out of care.
- Within the current system, care leavers feel they have very few options available to them when deciding where to live after leaving care. Changes to funding arrangements must not limit their options still further, or impact on the quality of available options.

Care leavers and supported accommodation

As of July 2016, there were 4,602 care leavers (young people eligible for aftercare services) in Scotland.¹ While the circumstances, needs and views of these young people are rich and varied, all have experienced major difficulties in their lives.² Their outcomes are poor across a range of indicators, and these young people are in need of society's conscientious support and understanding. Due to the level of need and vulnerability of this group of young people, and the state's responsibilities to safeguard their rights and promote their wellbeing, [Part 9: Corporate Parenting of the Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#), (and associated [statutory guidance](#)), requires Scottish Ministers, local

authorities and a range of other public sector bodies to uphold particular responsibilities in all areas of their work. Corporate parents must be alert to matters which adversely impact on care leavers, promote their interests, and enable them to make use of supports and services they provide. As such, particular attention must be paid to these individual's needs when considering the funding and operation of short term supported accommodation in Scotland.

These issues, and the concept and collective responsibilities of corporate parenting, are not unique to Scotland. The legal and policy context in which the Scottish Care Leavers' Covenant Alliance Group (the Alliance) operates is built upon progressive work undertaken in England, particularly the Access All Areas report of 2012.³ Rather than seeing 'corporate parenting' as the responsibility of certain departments alone (such as social work services), Access All Areas called for each central government department to scrutinise their individual policies and ensure that looked after children, young people and care leavers are not disadvantaged. This is referred to as 'care-proofing'.

Young people leaving care come from a range of backgrounds and circumstances, and are individuals with their own unique strengths, needs and vulnerabilities. Housing is a key contributor to their wellbeing, with those living in suitable accommodation feeling more able to cope and having a positive sense of mental wellbeing.⁴ Access to a diverse range of supported housing options is critical to meeting the needs of many young people leaving care across the UK. Safe, secure and appropriate housing is critical to meeting basic human needs. As articulated by Maslow (1943), individuals have needs in a variety of areas which must be met in order for one to develop to one's full potential.⁵ Importantly, individuals require their physiological needs and needs for safety to be met before their needs in other areas can be attended to. As such, suitable housing is fundamental to good outcomes in other areas of life. A lack of suitable housing can create barriers to participation in education, employment and training, and to accessing other services, such as registering with a GP. One of the policy areas (pillars) of the Covenant is 'housing and accommodation', reflecting the importance of this to care leavers and corporate parents. While this is a vital area, it cannot be considered separately from the other pillars of the Covenant, namely 'health and wellbeing', 'education and training', 'employment', 'youth and criminal justice' and 'rights and participation'.

It is with this experience and within this context that we welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on Funding Supported Housing. We acknowledge the need for proposals to reform the funding of supported housing, but are concerned that care leavers will be disproportionately affected by changes to funding arrangements for short-term supported housing, and this is the focus of our response.

Supported accommodation is defined in the consultation as "Accommodation with support, accessed following a point of crisis or as part of a transition to living independently, and provided for a period of up to two years or until transition to suitable long-term stable accommodation is found, whichever occurs first"

Q1 - Do you agree with this definition?

No. Whilst the consultation document explicitly states this definition would apply to care leavers living in supported housing settings, we are concerned about the language used, and the lack of flexibility inferred by the two-year time limits.

The goal of “living independently” is not necessarily appropriate when considering the needs and circumstances of young people leaving care. Care leavers can be extremely vulnerable and have all experienced trauma in their lives. They are often expected to move on from care placements at a much younger age than young people in the general population, when they are poorly equipped to do so successfully. In Scotland, the average age for leaving care is 17 years, while the average age for leaving home is 26.⁶ As a corporate parent, there is a responsibility on the state to ensure these young people are supported to the same standards expected for their own children. For these vulnerable individuals this should not include an expectation of becoming independent, but rather *interdependent* and part of a network of positive relationships and lifelong support.⁷ With this in mind, supported accommodation for care leavers should not be solely focused on a narrow ‘transition to stable longer term accommodation’ but should instead focus on a much broader positive and extended transition out of care.

Furthermore, due to their level of need and vulnerability, and the state’s responsibilities as a corporate parent, it is not appropriate to limit care leavers’ access or entitlement to supported accommodation to an arbitrary two year period, particularly given their young age. To adequately meet needs and improve life outcomes for this group of young people, there is a need for far greater flexibility than the suggested definition implies. Young people leaving care do not all have the same needs, nor do they experience the same stable and supported transitions.⁸ Whilst some individuals leaving care may not require supported accommodation for longer periods (or in some cases, at all), others may require repeat access to supported housing on a number of occasions, and for periods either individually or collectively exceeding two years. Thought must be given to how the needs of young people who do not take linear journeys from care settings, to supported accommodation, to long-term housing will be met.

Periods of transition to supported or independent living are incredibly challenging times for care leavers.⁹ Rather than a formulaic approach, planning must be based on individual needs, and should be holistic and person-centred, involving staged transitions to new living arrangements.¹⁰ In many cases, care leavers have experienced instability, transience and uncertainty in their lives.¹¹ Research informs that the continuation of a pattern of transience and movement is not uncommon for care leavers, often mirroring the level of instability experienced through multiple care placements.¹² To effectively meet their needs and allow individuals to prepare for interdependence, supported accommodation must afford care leavers the experience of genuine stability, as opposed to being inflexible, and a source of instability and stress.

Finally, whilst it is recognised that reference to “a point of crisis” may not intentionally refer to a young person leaving care, its inclusion in the definition is disempowering, and does little to dispel the stigma felt by young people with care experience. This language reinforces perceptions of leaving care as an inevitably abrupt and catastrophic event, and while this unfortunately can still be the lived experience of many young people, it should certainly not be the expectation. Young people leaving care should be enabled and empowered to do so in a gradual, extended way, with the continued and responsive support of the people with whom they have strong and trusting relationships.¹³

Any definition of ‘supported accommodation’ which is to apply to care leavers must take these issues into account. At the very least, definitions should avoid rigid timescales, and the use of disempowering or stigmatising language.

Q11 – General comments

The proposal to end the funding of short-term supported housing through the welfare system via Housing Benefit, and instead fund these resources through the provision of a block grant has the potential to impact on care leavers in a range of ways.

The overall policy intentions to provide more strategic and joined up commissioning for housing and support services; and a more tailored approach to short term supported accommodation that recognises the tensions between the Universal Credit system, the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) cap, and the funding of short term supported accommodation, are welcomed. We recognise much of the detail of the consultation focuses on the operation of supported housing funding in England, and understand that equivalent funding will be provided to Welsh and Scottish administrations. We are pleased to respond to the broader elements of this consultation related to short-term supported housing, to ensure the needs of care leavers are fully considered at every stage of these changes.

Debt and welfare

We are aware, through our Alliance group member services working directly with care leavers, of the impact of Universal Credit on catastrophic levels of debt being accrued by young people in relation to housing costs. This is often due to numerous moves through expensive emergency, temporary, and supported accommodation placements, alongside the impact of the LHA cap, direct payments to claimants, and the Universal Credit assessment period. It is positive that under the proposed grant funded arrangements, there would be no 'rent' cost for young people using supported accommodation, so they would not accrue such rent arrears. However, we are concerned that the definition does not apply to temporary accommodation, which can be framed as the only option for care leavers, and would welcome further clarification about how temporary accommodation will be adequately funded within the welfare system.

Although we welcome moves that reduce debt and rent arrears within the current system, it is important for care leavers to have opportunities to develop the skills needed for adult life in a supported environment. This includes the experience of budgeting and paying rent. Without the expectation and experience of regularly and proportionately contributing towards housing costs, many care leavers could leave supported accommodation without all of the life skills they need, which could have a long term impact throughout their lives. In the proposed new system, where housing costs are met by a grant, the needs, views and circumstances of each individual should be carefully considered, in order that they are afforded the right support, opportunities and expectations to develop budgeting and other life skills in a manageable and meaningful way.

While we acknowledge the importance of any model working effectively alongside the current reserved welfare system, it is also vital that it is able to work with devolved social security systems. This includes the new Scottish Social Security Agency, and, in the context of care leavers, with pre-existing structures of support and statutory obligations through, for example, local authority social work and housing departments.

Achieving quality and stability

While ring fenced block grants have worked successfully in the past, particularly in the early years of Supporting People, we are concerned about the long term security of short term supported accommodation under the proposed scheme. The move from an individual,

statutory entitlement to housing benefit to a discretionary grant has the potential to significantly decrease stability for Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and third sector providers of short term supported accommodation. Long term financial planning, as well as new and innovative investment in supported accommodation, will become difficult for providers working to short term funding cycles. We are concerned that this type of funding arrangement has the potential to be less flexible and responsive to needs than the current arrangements, and could lead to a decline in the range of specialist services available for care leavers. Research indicates that even within the current system, care leavers feel they have very few options available to them when deciding where to live after leaving care.¹⁴ Where competitive commissioning processes focus on cost savings, there is a risk that the quality of the service may be poorer.

Relationships with supportive people (such as practitioners working in or connected to supported accommodation), and emotional support are critical for care leavers. Young people identify the 'small things' that can matter most, like having someone who will listen and access to support 'out of hours' when they are most likely to need it.¹⁵ These types of supports, and the retention of high quality, skilled staff, are vital, but not possible without sufficient funding. There are risks that organisations could present more competitive bids for services designed to meet the needs of a range of service users, limiting the number of bespoke services to support the particular needs of care leavers and potentially putting vulnerable young people at risk where they are housed with other groups of people with very different needs and vulnerabilities. Similarly, existing high quality services whose primary focus is aftercare, rather than housing provision, may find grant funding makes their services financially unviable, resulting in a loss of expertise.

Capturing current and future need

The importance of ensuring adequate funding amounts, both UK wide, and to each devolved administration, cannot be understated. The proposal to base these calculations on current spend and, importantly, projections of future need is sensible, but will be complex. The process must be transparent, and informed by rigorous analysis of robust data. Funding resources to establish, implement and embed the new system must additionally be considered, as these will not be reflected in the current spend. Failure to adequately resource the implementation of a new system, including the infrastructure, transitional arrangements, and training and coaching of staff, will result in an ineffective system which does not meet the needs of vulnerable people. Additionally, we know that young people, including care leavers, often end up in informal and unstable housing arrangements (often referred to as hidden homelessness). We would welcome consideration about how to ensure that the attempts to capture current and future need takes into account those who do not immediately approach their local authority for support.

Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to respond. We hope the feedback is helpful; we would be happy to discuss any aspect in further detail.

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