



action for
children
gweithredu
dros blant

Too much, too young.

Helping the most vulnerable young
people to build stable homes
after leaving care.



Action for Children-Gweithredu dros Blant is a charity that supports and speaks out on behalf of the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the heart of communities throughout Wales. With more than 100 services in Wales we are where you live and work.

We help thousands of children and young people to transform their lives each year and we've been doing so for over 100 years. The children and young people we support face the most difficult problems in life.

By supporting Action for Children- Gweithredu dros Blant you inspire hope in the thousands of vulnerable children and young people we help.

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Summary

Childhood is short. It is the foundation of our self-esteem and sets the tone for most of our adult life. Children and young people need to feel loved, secure and safe. They should push boundaries knowing that someone will catch them when they make a mistake. They should know that there are people in their lives who will never give up on them.

When the state takes on the role of parent it should ensure that children receive the nurture and security that their families are not able to offer, no matter how complex their lives are.

Sadly, something is going very wrong for the most vulnerable young people leaving care. Too often those who have experienced the most traumatic early lives, the children who were beaten up and left for dead or dragged into criminality, are the very ones being failed by the different faces of their corporate parent.

Whether they need a safe home, decent mental health care or just a consistent person to rely on, the most vulnerable young people are falling

between the gaps in our complicated and over-stretched support systems. Often, they unjustly place the blame on their own heads.

This report asks why this is happening. How can young people who have been in care end up homeless? Why are the good intentions of the care system not bearing fruit? Why are the most vulnerable not benefiting from welcome reforms? And why are those who need most support moving into a chaotic young adulthood without it?

The situation is urgent. Costs are escalating and pressure on local services continues. Resources are not being used effectively, particularly for the most vulnerable older children in or on the edge of care. Every year that passes, some of the most vulnerable young people who leave care disappear from the radar, only reappearing when things have reached crisis point.

It is time to re-focus on our vision for children and young people in care. The state has a legal duty to meet its responsibilities to children in its care. It also has a moral imperative to behave less like a system and more like a parent who cares about what happens to their child as they take their first faltering steps towards adulthood.

We are calling on all aspects of the corporate parent – from the Welsh Government to Local Health Boards to professionals working in local agencies – to re-examine their role in good parenting. Whichever face young people are dealing with, it should offer love, security and safety.

As one young person reminded us:

“You only get one chance at childhood, and without it, you can’t reach your potential.”

Key findings

1. The most vulnerable young people experience the highest levels of instability and uncertainty.

The reasons they entered care, the care system itself and a lack of the right support after leaving care all contribute. This chaos continues into adulthood resulting in homelessness and the least stable housing. Current accommodation arrangements are not flexible enough, and do not provide sufficient support, especially for those young people not in foster care. Young people told us that the good corporate parent must not give up, especially when young people’s lives are at their most complex and challenging. They want to see a single, flexible framework that is centred around their needs rather than the needs of the system.

2. Emotional well-being should be our starting point. Without it, practical support is not enough for the most vulnerable young people.

Poor emotional health permeated young people’s stories. Essential support disappears rapidly

after those with complex needs and disabilities leave care. The emotional and mental health of children in care is not sufficiently prioritised, with the Welsh Government and Local Health Boards needing to take greater responsibility for their role in corporate parenting. The most vulnerable children and young people need therapeutic care placements that actively develop emotional well-being, address psychological trauma, and help them develop resilient and positive relationships.

3. Young people need long-lasting relationships they can trust, to help them manage living independently and bounce back when things go wrong.

Young people consistently ask for continuity and support from a trusted adult after they have left care. This helps them to build resilience, manage their tenancies and prevent housing crises. Arrangements for young people with more complex needs are insufficiently financed and supported. When I am Ready arrangements need to be accessible and work for the most vulnerable young people.

4. Returning home or maintaining links with birth family can be complicated.

Large proportions of young people who have left care return to the family home or seek contact with family members. Re-establishing contact with their birth family can be a particularly risky time – emotionally and physically. Too often, this happens without support. In particular, there is not enough help for young people or their birth families to manage negative relationships and potentially risky situations.

5. Every part of the state and its services takes some responsibility to behave as a good corporate parent but, too often, systems not designed for vulnerable young people leaving care create more instability.

For the young people we spoke to, the challenge of managing tenancies was made more difficult by unsafe locations and lack of choice about accommodation. “Endless chances” are needed for some of the most vulnerable young people to prevent spirals of evictions and debt.

Our recommendations are set out at the end of this report.

Introduction

What is the problem?

The most vulnerable young people who have been in care are forced to grow up too quickly. Too many young people who have left care live in unsafe housing, where they feel lonely and scared. They move frequently and many experience periods of homelessness.

Most young people who have been in care continue to cope with the lasting impact of a traumatic childhood. They can suffer from depression and anxiety, on top of dealing with the challenges of living on their own for the first time.

They tell us that too often they feel alone with these difficulties – even when they have been helped with the practicalities of transition and finding somewhere to live.

Leaving care is not the same as leaving home. Young people who have been in care rarely have the stability or support networks that most teenagers take for granted. Without that safety

net, every poor decision can have serious consequences and prevent the most vulnerable young people from achieving their potential.

The reasons why they entered care remain present in their lives. Difficult emotions and relationships remain and, like any of us, they need help to cope with them.

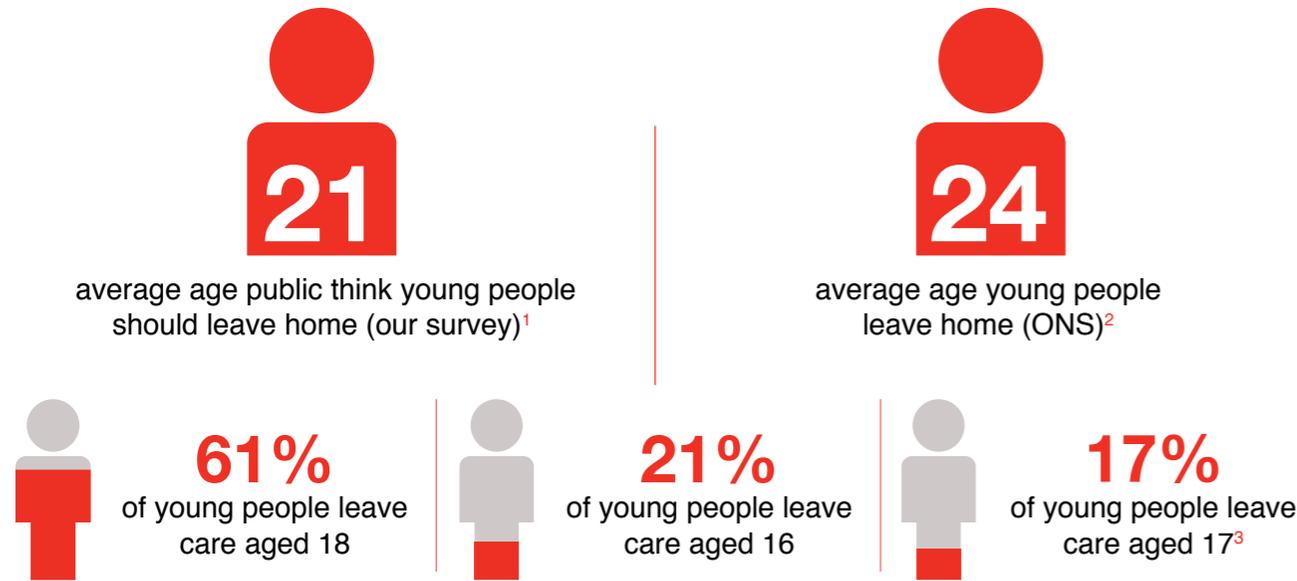
It is well established that young people leaving care tend to have poor housing experiences. Calls for changes to both policy and practice have been made repeatedly, but the outcomes of young people who have been in care remain persistently poor.

Despite the collective efforts of national and local government, good intentions have not led to good results. The sheer volume of guidance and variety of services is testament to the efforts of politicians and professionals to create a system that works.

Somewhere, the focus on the best outcomes for young people has been lost. The gaps between services and systems have become potential crisis points for vulnerable care leavers. Fundamental problems remain that leave them ill-prepared for adult life and not supported in the ways that they tell us they need.

Local areas continue to negotiate the costs of care and the even greater costs of poor care. Young people who leave care experience disproportionate levels of homelessness, unemployment, poor health and crime. The personal, social and economic impact is enormous and, while felt most acutely by the individual, ultimately this affects every one of us.

FIGURE 1: FORCED TO GROW UP TOO QUICKLY



Policy context: where are we now?

Some of the most vulnerable young people who leave care become homeless and embark on chaotic pathways into adulthood. It is clear that the system is not working and there is an urgent need to look at barriers and opportunities for change.

Supporting stable transitions

The current legal and policy framework for looked after children and care leavers in Wales is primarily drawn from the Children Act 1989 and the Children Leaving Care Act 2000. Support currently offered to care leavers in Wales includes: structured pathway planning from care to independence; the right to a personal advisor; and support to find suitable accommodation and access education and training. For care leavers who are vulnerable and require extra support a responsible local authority must assist young people until they are 21 to the extent that his or her welfare requires it. However, care leaving entitlements are based on age, education and employment status rather than need.

The Welsh Government has recognised that providing care for longer and stability can impact positively on care leavers' outcomes. The When I am Ready scheme, which allows young people to remain with foster carers until they are 21, has been pioneered during 2013-14 and will be implemented across Wales during 2015.

From 2016, young people in Wales will have a right remain in foster care up to 21⁴. Action for Children – Gweithredu dros Blant advocated for this change through our Chance to Stay – Cyfle i Aros campaign, which will make an enormous difference to young people who wish to remain in stable, familial foster homes.

Not all young people leaving care will benefit from these reforms, and there is a risk that some of the most vulnerable young people who have not had stable care journeys will be excluded. More needs to be done to identify the best ways to make it possible for all care leavers to remain in settled accommodation, including residential care, or to move on to housing in a supported and flexible way. To effectively support adolescents in and on the edge of care, resources need to be invested more effectively and early intervention approaches are needed to prevent future crises.

A shared responsibility for the most vulnerable young people

There is a multi-agency legal framework for shared responsibility amongst public bodies that recognises the continued vulnerability of many young people beyond the age of 18. Within current housing law, care leavers between the ages of 18 and up to the age of 21 are considered a priority group for housing support in Wales.^{5,6} The Mental Health (Wales) Measure Code of Practice also requires mental health services providers to co-ordinate with other services provided to looked after children.⁷ However, it is well known poor outcomes persist for care leavers.

Care leavers who require additional support

- **16/17 years olds** are currently defined in law as either 'eligible' which means that they should receive the support that comes with being looked after or 'relevant' which means they are no longer in care but the local authority must: keep in touch; provide suitable accommodation and maintenance; provide continuous needs assessment and pathway planning; and help with education and employment. A homeless 16 or 17 year old should be accommodated and become looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. These duties are replicated in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

- **Young people with a learning or physical disability** should be involved in early planning for support to meet their needs after becoming 18. New duties under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 mean that any young person who is likely to have care and support needs is entitled to an assessment. There should be no 'cliff-edge' in support when young people reach 18 as support from children's services must continue until adult services can take over.
- **Young people who have mental health needs** should continue to receive health advice and services. The Welsh Government committed to ensuring effective transition between adult and CAMHs services in the Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2012-16.⁸ The recent Inquiry into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services by the National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee heard directly from young people in care who have not been able to access the mental health support they need.⁹
- **Young asylum seekers and care leavers** in the youth justice system are eligible for pathway planning support, but the process is more complex and requires particular cooperation between agencies when immigration status changes, or when a young person is in or leaves custody.
- **Preventing homelessness.** Care leavers can apply to their local authority as homeless

and should be considered to be in 'priority need' if they are aged 21 or under, and if they are over 21 they can continue to receive support if they are vulnerable as a result of being in care. As long as the young person is not found to be 'intentionally homeless', accommodation should be provided under the homelessness duty.

Policy context: where are we going?

The legal and policy framework for looked after children and young people leaving care in Wales is in a process of renewal. Earlier this year the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 was passed and will be implemented in 2016. The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 includes a clear duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness, and to pay particular regard to the needs of young people leaving care.

These laws mark the corner stone of a renewed approach to supporting care leavers in Wales, for which the drivers are achieving positive outcomes and supporting people to achieve better well-being.⁹ This presents an important opportunity to build on the new legal provisions and develop a renewed policy and practice framework for looked after children and care leavers focused on children's and young people's outcomes.

Our focus

The most vulnerable care leavers

This report focuses on the experiences of the most vulnerable young people who leave care.

FIGURE 2: CARE LEAVERS MOST VULNERABLE TO POOR HOUSING OUTCOMES

- Young people who leave care at 16 and 17 years of age
- Those with social, emotional, mental health and behavioural problems
- Offenders, including those with a history of violence and substance misuse
- Young people who run away from care
- Young disabled people who do not meet the threshold for adult services
- Young asylum seekers
- Young people who experienced negative and multiple moves in care and after care

Research shows which young people who have been in care are more likely to experience difficulties with their accommodation when they leave care.^{11,12} But some groups are particularly at risk. Leaving care at 16 or 17 and having more complex needs like a disability, mental health or behavioural problem, can not only impact upon young people's ability to manage independent living successfully, but also affect the security of their housing over the long-term.

Despite this, there is a lack of understanding about how to improve the experiences of the most vulnerable care leavers so as to prevent entrenched poor housing outcomes.

All young people leaving care are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness. Some ways to assist them when they get into difficulties have been identified. However, it is harder to help the most vulnerable young people leaving care and less is known about what will help prevent them from experiencing insecure housing over their lifetime.¹³

The young people who are most likely to experience poor housing over the longer-term have a lot of problems because of what happened to them before entering care. This can be compounded by a poor experience in care. As a result they are more likely to go on to have the most severe and costly problems later in life, including unemployment, poor health, substance misuse and prison.

There is an urgent need to strengthen our understanding of the particular challenges for the most vulnerable care leavers and what early help will not only make a long-term difference to them, but also prevent unnecessary and escalating costs to society.

Early help - What we are looking at and why

Action for Children – Gweithredu dros Blant is committed to supporting children and young people early to prevent crisis and from problems getting worse. Focusing on the accommodation journeys of some of the most vulnerable young people who have been in care, this report examines the importance of identifying problems early and the difference preventative support could make. It explores:

- Barriers to stability, what increases the risk of homelessness and poor housing outcomes for the most vulnerable young people who have been in care
- Key factors that help to facilitate stable accommodation pathways and prevent instability for the most vulnerable young people

We believe that, if it is possible to identify which young people are more likely to need additional help or have more complex needs when they leave care, it is reasonable to expect services and support to be planned and arranged accordingly.

We examine the implications for better care for the most vulnerable older children, look at accommodation options and the options for extending support into young adulthood. We pose a number of key questions and areas for further inquiry as well as suggesting recommendations for change.

Methodology

The research involved 28 care leavers across England and Wales, living in urban and rural communities. A total of 31 young people were interviewed, as an additional three young people on the edge of care were included. The young people represented the groups at risk of poor housing outcomes, with most having an identified vulnerability in more than one area. See figure two and appendix one for detailed breakdown.

We sought to contextualise young people's experiences by speaking to support workers who were able to provide insights into the accommodation pathways of other young people in a similar position. Twelve practitioners and/or carers, who between them knew 17 of the young people, participated in the research.

Particular challenges were involved in engaging with young people who have been in care, but who are the most marginalised. Many of these young people are out of touch with authorities and only come into contact with services when they were in crisis. This was addressed by targeting a range of services and liaising with individual practitioners who were in touch with these young people. All participants were receiving support from the following types of services including: Supported Housing and Homelessness support, Targeted Youth Support, Family Intervention Projects, Independent Visiting Schemes, Care Leaving Services, and Intensive Fostering, including alternative custody provision.

A review of the literature and data on care leavers' accommodation destinations, housing outcomes and experience of homelessness was also undertaken. This study builds on focus groups with 37 care leavers, undertaken with Action for Children's services in 2013, where young care leavers identified accommodation issues as one of their top concerns.

All quotes in this report are from young people and practitioners in Wales.

The scale of the issue: What do we know about care leavers' housing outcomes?

FIGURE 3: CARE LEAVERS AND RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

	- There is no national data on the exact number experiencing homelessness at some point after care
	- But research shows approximately one third experience homelessness at some point between 6 and 24 months after leaving care ¹⁴
	- Homelessness is 'hidden' ¹⁵

FIGURE 4: HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING OUTCOMES

	Seven per cent of young people who have left care in Wales are NOT IN TOUCH with their local authorities ¹⁶ We don't know where they are living	Housing outcome ?
	There is no data on the type of accommodation destination of 16 AND 17 YEAR OLD CARE LEAVERS who are some of the most vulnerable young people	Housing outcome ?

Research findings

1. The most vulnerable young people experience the highest levels of instability and uncertainty.

Barrier to accommodation stability - Instability in care

The majority of the young people we spoke to had experienced high levels of instability when they were in care.

- Fourteen young people had three or more placements
- Seven young people had five or more placements
- Three young people had ten or more placements (12, 24 and 26 placements)

Moves in care were mostly due to placement disruption but sometimes because returns to their family home had then broken down.

These young people's lives were punctuated by moves between foster carers, residential homes, secure units, sofa surfing and being up all night walking the streets. The use of Bed and Breakfast was frequently referenced. One young person resorted to living in a tent and another sheltered in the back of a car.

In addition, young people often spoke about the lack of continuity in their care resulting from repeated changes of social worker. The benefits of continuity and stability 'to effect a more gradual and seamless approach to planning the transition to adulthood for vulnerable children' was denied to these young people.¹⁷

Unstable accommodation after leaving care and frequent moves is due to a number of reasons, including:

- Temporary placements because a tenancy has broken down or was unsuitable
- Being moved on from semi-independent accommodation, which is in short supply¹⁸

The level of instability experienced has been found to vary between local areas because of varying sufficiency of accommodation options.¹⁹ But, the extent to which care leavers experience instability across different types of accommodation, including return to family in between other accommodation and housing options, is unknown.

Barrier to stability - Coming into care as a teenager

Research tells us that instability in care is linked to the age and reasons why young people entered care. Data sets in Wales do not specify the age children and young people come into care, or the cumulative numbers of placements they have during their time in care. However, English data shows that adolescents who come into care are the most likely to have multiple placements and the least stable experiences of care, in part because of contact with family and challenging behaviour.²⁰

Improved data sets which track individual looked after children's journeys through care more effectively will be a fundamental requirement of a care system that improves outcomes for children and young people.

Our research focused on those young people most vulnerable to poor housing and homelessness. Over a third (11/28) of the young people we spoke to came into care as adolescents: four young people came into care aged 14, five at 15 and two at 16. Several young people had entered care as teenagers after being on the edge of care for several years. We found that entering care in the teenage years impacted on their ability to settle in their placements or benefit from longer-term therapeutic support.

Unaccompanied young people were also late entrants to the care system and were more likely to be expected to manage in lodgings rather than receive a placement in a care home or with a foster family.

Adam's story

I came into foster care when I was ten years old. I had five foster carers. I also went to live with my mum and sister in that time. It's not nice having to move all the time, but you get used to it.

They never arranged for me to see my old friends. Quite a few of the foster carers I was with lived in the middle of nowhere, so I didn't really bother making friends there. I used to mooch off school to go into town and that, I'd see my old friends then.

At 16 I'd had enough, I just didn't want to be in care anymore. I left to stay with my mate on his sofa. Social Services found out I'd left and put me in a hotel. I was depressed and my head was all over the place. It was a tiny room, and so unbelievably depressing. I only stayed one night. I went back to my mate's. After that I went to stay with my sister and brother-in-law, it had been hard not seeing my nephews and I wanted to be around them and my family.

Social services offered me a supported housing place with other young people but I didn't want it. It feels like they're still trying to control my life, and I didn't want to be in another place like that.

The only support I get now is from Susan, my former foster carer. I called her when my brother-in-law kicked me out and she came and got me. When I had to leave there, I wanted to go back into foster care but I was told it was too late and I couldn't go back. I was 17.

I pay to live here with Susan from my benefits. I've been sanctioned by the job centre at the moment. They've cut my housing benefit because I didn't go to a personal advisors meeting, but I didn't know about it as I didn't get the letter.

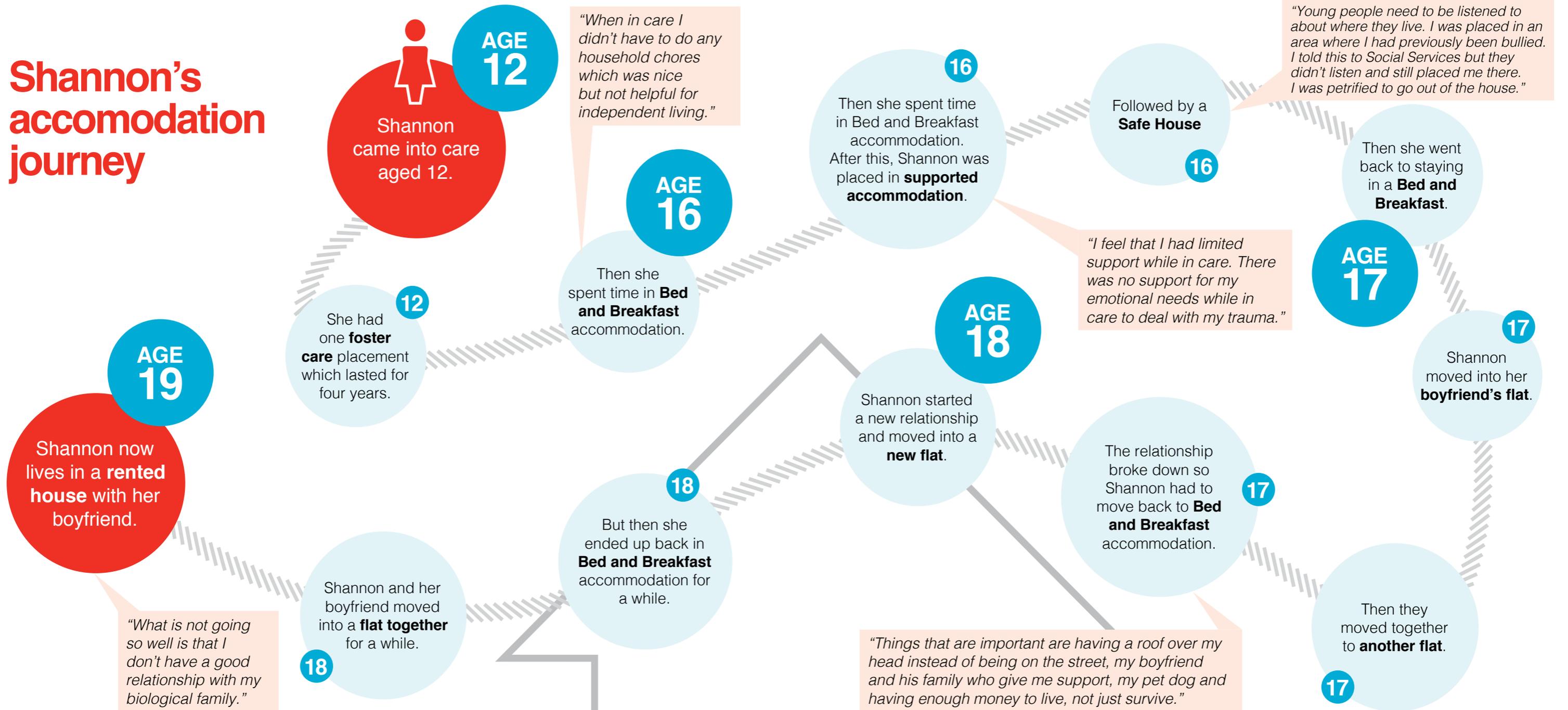
I don't feel I've had much support from social services since I left care. They say they'll do loads, but they don't. They have loads of other kids in care to look after as well.

I had anger management a few times, but it doesn't work. I'm now at the point where I've decided I do want to get help and get some things off my mind. My social worker told me to go to my GP, so I'm going to ask him if I can have therapy and have someone to talk things through with. I've never been offered it in the past.

In the future I'd probably like to live near here. I know the place and people there, including my family. Susan lives here as well, she's first on my list. I don't seem to get in as much trouble when I'm here.



Shannon's accomodation journey



Barrier to stability - Living independently at 16 and 17

Moving on from care early at 16 and 17 years old is associated with poor experiences of care, including multiple placements, which in turn impacts upon stability in accommodation after leaving care. It can also be because young people feel ready to move on. Nearly 40 per cent of the young people we spoke to (11/28) had left their care placement aged 16 or 17 years old.

Some of the most vulnerable young people cease to be looked after when they are younger, following a placement breakdown and often before they are ready.²¹ We heard from young people who described 'an urgent desire' to get away from foster placements but then having to grow up too quickly. Gaining independence was important for them, but often the reality of living independently was a shock.

At 16 I'd had enough, I just didn't want to be in care anymore. Social services offered me a supported housing place with other young people but I didn't want it. It feels like they're still trying to control my life, and I didn't want to be in another place like that.

(Young Person)

Several young people also said they felt 'pushed out' and were forced to leave placements at 16 and 17 when they felt they weren't ready.

FIGURE 6: ACCOMODATION DESTINATIONS 16+ AS FIRST PLACEMENT ²² (2013/14)

- **175** young people in Wales at 16 and over moved into supported independent accommodation
- **50** young people at 16 and over moved into unsupported accommodation
- Public data does not tell us how many young people returned home when they left care at 16/17/18

Multiple placements in care, entering care at an older age, leaving care from residential homes, and becoming independent at 16 and 17 are all factors that increase the likelihood of homelessness and poor housing outcomes.

In view of the higher risk of poor housing and homelessness for these vulnerable young people, greater attention should be given to the fact that they are least likely to be in settled foster care prior to becoming 18 and therefore unable to remain in care placements until they are 21. They are also more likely not to be in education or training and so do not benefit from support up to 25. Remaining in foster care may not be an option for them but they should be entitled to remain or return to residential care, or be supported to stay in other forms of supported accommodation arrangements, until they are 21.

2. Emotional well-being should be our starting point. Without it, practical support is not enough for the most vulnerable young people.

Barrier to stability - Reasons young people came into care

The feelings and difficulties that the young people talked about were often linked to the reasons for being in care, including the experience of chronic neglect and abuse earlier in their lives.

Poor emotional health and well-being permeated through young people's views about their current circumstances. They described feelings of worthlessness, self-blame, and hopelessness and said that depression and anxiety prevented them from being able to cope with living on their own. These feelings were linked to their views about having had little or no education and worries that they would never get a job.

Young people who had received help from psychologists and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) indicated that their challenges with their mental health stemmed from trauma they had experienced in their childhoods, including sexual abuse, domestic violence, neglect and physical harm.

Some young people talked about how they dealt with difficult feelings and issues in their lives

through self-harm and substance misuse. Others spoke about struggles with negative labels and the stigma associated with behavioural difficulties and disability. Typically, young people felt that they had brought these problems on themselves and their parents through their bad behaviour.

Entering care with poor emotional and mental health can make it difficult for children to settle in care, which in turn creates more instability.²³ Lots of moves and insecurity in care then impacts upon the level of stability after leaving care.

Barrier to stability – Lack of recognition of emotional and complex needs and on-going support

We found that difficult and conflicted feelings about family and loss continued to have a significant impact on young people after moving on from being in care.

I'm now at the point where I've decided I do want to get help and get some things off my mind. My social worker told me to go to my GP, so I'm going to ask him if I can have therapy and have someone to talk things through with. I've never been offered it in the past.

(Young Person)

A growing body of research on child development shows that exposure to stress, being abused or neglected at a young age and as a teenager can result in long term difficulties, including with:

- Managing and regulating emotions
- Abstract thinking and social interaction
- Coping with stressful situations and making decisions
- Risk-taking behaviour and understanding what is safe²⁴

Often comparisons are made between children and young people who have been in care and the outcomes for other young people. Yet the impact of adverse experiences means that children in care often do not reach the same stage of development as their peers by the same age.

Practitioners also linked some young people's learning disabilities to developmental issues resulting from maltreatment, delayed entry into care and yo-yoing in and out of care, with young people's needs continuing to go unmet. They expressed concerns about the most vulnerable young people becoming independent as young as 16 or 17 years old when their developmental age was in fact much younger.

He feels a burden of shame and guilt for what has happened to him. He sees it as his fault and says that he was wild and couldn't be controlled. However he should have been picked up a lot sooner.

(Practitioner)

Whilst increased risk taking is linked to normal teenage behaviour, the impact of adverse experiences like abuse and neglect is underestimated. Some of the most vulnerable care leavers present to the outside world as having the capability to manage, but in fact have particular needs which are often unrecognised.

Issues such as unpaid gas bills left by previous tenants posed unexpected obstacles. Young people left bills they did not understand unpaid in the hope that the 'problem would go away'. They talked about not having had the right 'head space' to prepare for leaving care and felt that they struggled when they were on their own.

There needs to be an information guide on how to seek support and services for household care. For example my washing machine leaked and I didn't know who to call or what to do. Therefore I got a bill for damp. Kids in care should have the support before independent living.

(Young Person)

What would have helped me manage housing would have been more direct financial advice. As I didn't listen, they left me alone. It would have helped if they'd tried harder to get me involved.

(Young Person)

Both young people and practitioners agreed that there was scope to be prepared for independent living before leaving care, but that the complexity of young people's needs meant that expectations for them to manage without similar or high levels of on-going care were unrealistic.

There are unrealistic expectations that young people with high level of emotional and behavioural needs can function as 'adults' when they hit their 18th birthday.

(Practitioner)

He had a statement and went to a Special School, so one minute he is seen as a child who needs additional support and then he wakes up on his 18th birthday and he is meant to perform and function as an adult.

(Foster Carer)

Particular issues arose when young people had a disability or mental health problem that fell below adult thresholds for support. Several of these young people were coping without the support they had received before the age of 18. Specialist services disappeared as a result of high adult eligibility thresholds.

The young person has been referred to the Community Mental Health Team twice, and the Local Authority's Learning Disabilities Team and the Vulnerable Adults Team but they have assessed them as not needing a service. This has been difficult for the young person to deal with.

(Practitioner)

Receiving support from adult care services was unusual for disabled care leavers. Services supporting young people with learning and physical disabilities reported a 'huge gap' in accommodation options that would enable independent living. Staying with foster carers who offered to look after the young person when they turned 18 was often the only option.

Enablers of stability – Emotional and mental health support, therapeutic care and practical preparation

Whilst approaches to help all young people reach their potential and to be self-reliant are important, we found that young people with more complex needs faced additional challenges.

Practical skills like decorating, cooking and budgeting were all identified as important areas for support by young people, as well as dealing with the complexity of the housing system. Young people who had had to find somewhere to live by themselves said this was a particular challenge.

Young people were clear that they needed support in a 'hands on' and practical way. Many spoke positively about the input they had had with day to day challenges of living. Evidence suggests that care leaving services are focused on improving help for young people in these areas.²⁵

However, a distinction was made by young people between the help they received with practical skills and moving into independent accommodation and help with their past experiences and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

They helped me with therapy skills so that I could live an easier happier everyday life. They helped sort out my emotions and relationships using mindfulness to deal with situations that may arise.

(Young Person)

Both were identified as important, but young people who had not received any therapeutic help with their experiences identified 'having someone to talk to' as something that would have helped earlier when they were in care, as well as now.

High quality care placements, focused on attachment and building resilience, are fundamental to reducing the impact of negative pre-care experiences.²⁶ Ensuring that care is focused on maximising protective factors, as well as providing a stable base, needs to be prioritised to help ensure that the most vulnerable young people have more stable experiences in care, are equipped to move on from care and experience less instability when they live independently.

Barrier to stability – Significant gaps in preventative and mental health support

Early help to deal with traumatic experiences and complex behavioral needs was seen by practitioners as fundamental to later success in living independently.

A clear and definitive barrier is that the young person has not had the opportunity to learn independent living skills. Pre-18 the young person displayed consistent challenging behaviour towards support providers regarding learning and the distribution of responsibility when becoming independent. Post-18 the young person has not engaged fully with support services so has not had the opportunity to learn the skills needed for successful independent living.

(Practitioner)

Practitioners suggested that young people who are most likely to be vulnerable should be prioritised for therapeutic support focused on emotional regulation and resilience, and that this could help to prevent young people from embarking on a chaotic pathway and experiences such as homelessness, drug abuse and involvement in crime.

They expressed concern that resources are primarily targeted towards those young people who are already costing the authority most, rather than investing in preventing the challenges from emerging in the first place.

They should have intervened for certain situations a lot earlier and listened more attentively. ... I should have had more support through transitions to different placements, schools and now.

(Young Person)

Despite the majority of children in care requiring professional support for mental health problems, over 70 per cent of children entering care in one study, there is a lack of coherent mental health support.²⁷ Provision for some of the most

vulnerable young people in residential care has been found to be particularly poor, and the type of support that looked after children require to help with attachment and developmental issues is scarce.²⁸

Action for Children's Multi-disciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen (MIST)

Therapeutic care, impact and outcomes

MIST is 'wraparound' therapeutic support for looked-after young people aged 11-21 who have complex needs. All have experienced abuse, repeated placement disruptions and often display significant risk taking behaviour. At MIST young people are understood in light of their life experiences, developmental stage and family circumstances. Alongside their families they are supported to develop pro-social behaviours, build self-esteem, long lasting

relationships and emotional intelligence. As a result of contact with MIST, young people:

- Improve their emotional and physical well-being
- Are less involved in behaviours and relationships that are harmful to themselves and others
- More engaged in education and more settled in stable foster care placements
- Have enhanced capacity to parent their own children and break intergenerational cycles of being in care

For every £1 invested in the service, the likely social value generated is £5.10, due to young people being able to remain in foster care rather than costly out-of-area residential care.²⁹

3. Young people need long-lasting relationships they can trust, to help them manage living independently and bounce back when things go wrong.

Enabler to stability – Continuity of important relationships to help build resilience

Stable accommodation has been described as the 'vehicle' to stability, but our findings highlight that good emotional health and resilience is the starting point.³⁰ Practitioners emphasised the primacy of building emotional resilience and the difference it can make, both to stability in care and for stable accommodation pathways after care.

Risk taking behaviour can be exacerbated by exposure to risks in unsuitable accommodation like hostels and in unsafe communities. Ongoing and supportive relationships with professionals and carers can act as a protective factor and help boost resilience.³¹ However, the protective influences of important relationships, including with neighbours, friends and other members of the community, are underused.³²

We found that flexible access to a trusted adult helped equip young people to manage day-to-day challenges, including keeping themselves safe and navigating risky situations and people they were likely to come into contact with.

Barrier – Lack of continuity and broken relationships

Care leavers wanted more flexible contact with a trusted adult, in particular during evenings and weekends, to help calm them down and talk through particular challenges. They described the benefits of having a mentor or Independent Visitor, as someone they could trust and who was independent of the local authority. Schemes that provide ongoing contact between Independent Visitors and care leavers were proposed by some practitioners as a good way to ensure continuity and crucial protective relationships.

What is needed is a mentor designed to support care leavers when gaining independent living; support which covers a generic range of independent every-day living skills e.g. cooking, help using appliances, budgeting, sorting benefits. We need someone to ring up and ask any questions and things we need support with – without feeling like a burden or that the questions isn't relevant.

(Young person)

He needs someone like a mentor who can spend time with him.

(Foster carer)

Care leavers spoke about an all or nothing approach – they were either in contact with their Personal Advisor or had no contact at all. For some of the most marginalised and vulnerable young people, trusted relationships with workers and carers in residential and foster care were of particular importance.

Some young people lost contact with services for significant periods of time, their circumstances changing daily or weekly, but returned to the service when they needed help or had become homeless. They did not necessarily have to have contact with an individual in these settings, but they still identified the services as a source of support. Sometimes contact was re-established because workers went to extra lengths to keep in touch, even if they didn't see the young person, such as writing to several addresses and visiting family members.

Practitioners expressed the importance of recognising the particular challenges in keeping in touch with the most vulnerable people who had left care. The unpredictability and insecurity of their lives meant that flexibility and accessibility was key. At one service, former residents are invited for Christmas lunch, providing an opportunity for young people to return and receive advice and support if needed.

Addressing mental health, substance misuse and behavioural challenges is essential to enable the most vulnerable young people to remain in care. The When I am Ready scheme, due to be rolled out across Wales in early 2016, must

consider how placements can be sustained if arrangements are paid for through a benefits system that penalises the most troubled young people.

He doesn't attend his appointments and [because of sanctions] he doesn't get the money he is meant to give us for his food and rent.

(Foster Carer)

Concerns were raised that the most vulnerable young people in care will not benefit from the When I am Ready scheme, putting the continuity of good relationships with foster carers at risk. The additional difficulties for carers in maintaining placements for the most vulnerable young people, as well as cost implications for local authorities for providing additional support, need to be taken into account in the scheme's final design.

The risk of discontinuity and broken relationships in the care system is well known.³³ Further attention must be given to whether When I am Ready arrangements will be sufficient for the most vulnerable young people. It is vital that the reforms do not further disadvantage the most vulnerable care leavers and undermine the stated objective to provide further stability until 21.

Enabler - Positive family and peer relationships

Whilst many of the young people in the research had little or no contact with their birth family, a wide range of extended family members, friends, partners and having their own children featured most highly when young people talked about what made them feel safe, secure and happy.

Some young people felt that important people in their lives had been ignored and that being moved away from friends and contacts made coping in independent accommodation more difficult.

Things that are important are having a roof over my head instead of being on the street, my boyfriend and his family who give me support, my pet dog and having enough money to live , not just survive.

(Young Person)

Staying close to where the young person had been previously placed was vital to the young person's chances of success whilst transitioning into independence.

(Practitioner)

A third of young people involved in this research were also young parents. Becoming a mum or dad appeared to provide them with a sense of purpose and security. They were more likely to see themselves as having turned their lives around for the better. There is potential for young care leavers who have families of their own to receive support from family support services.

4. Returning home or maintaining links with birth family can be complicated.

Children and young people who come into care are still part of families, even if they no longer see them or live at home. However difficult and complicated, attachment to family relationships and, for many, ongoing contacts with family members is important and inevitable.

Accommodation instability is linked to young people returning home to live with family, including after being moved from supported accommodation or when tenancies had broken down.³⁴

Welsh data doesn't give us a clear picture of how many care leavers return home at some point after leaving care. However, in England, living with parents or relatives is the second highest accommodation destination for care leavers at 19.³⁵ We found that when young people reach transition they are more likely to exert more control over their life, deciding to return home or visit family at some point after leaving care without the support of social workers or care leaving services.

Importantly, the young people we spoke to who returned home were also those young people who were most likely to have contact with family because they had entered care in their teenage years.

We heard several accounts of young people making the decision to return home without any assessment or challenge and where little was known about the birth family. Yet research has shown almost half of those who enter care because of abuse or neglect have been abused again if they return home. A third of those who remain at home continue to receive poor standards of care, including confirmed incidents of abuse and neglect.³⁶

Young people we spoke to described relationships breaking down and being 'kicked out' shortly after returning home, resulting in homelessness.

In one case, the father of a 16 year old got in touch through social media which resulted in the young person removing himself from care to live with him. He had had no contact with his father for most of his life. This decision was allowed by social services, but no assessment of the man's circumstances was made. The arrangement quickly broke down and the young man became homeless.

A practitioner from a Leaving Care Service talked about the push-pull factors of families on young people, describing a situation where:

The young person keeps in contact with their family independently; this for them is a huge source of support. I however can see negativity where the young person would willingly miss important meetings involving professionals who are dealing with crises to go and spend time with family. It can be difficult to discuss the importance of balance in the young person's life.

(Practitioner)

Whilst young people themselves may make the decision to return home, the known risks about their family circumstances support the case for careful planning and continued support. High quality assessment is vital for identifying potentially negative and disruptive birth family influences, as well as identifying positive relationships and networks. It is also key to ensuring that young people experience the right care placement. If young people feel settled and safe in care, they are less likely to "vote with their feet" and remove themselves from care.

There is a clear case for agencies to work together to integrate support and mediate between young people and their families to prevent homelessness.³⁷ Investing in early intervention approaches for the most vulnerable young people is identified as an underpinning feature of positive accommodation and support pathways to minimise risk of poor housing outcomes.³⁸

Managing relationships: What helps

Action for Children's Intensive Fostering services provide support, such as family therapy sessions to help young people make sense of the relationships they held with their family, how to regulate their feelings and keep themselves emotionally safe. Young people are helped to identify and understand unhealthy or healthy relationships with their biological family. As a result, young people were better equipped to build resilience, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Evidence based intensive support services demonstrate the benefits of working with young people alongside their families for successful reunification after care. However, we found little evidence of support being offered to care leavers or their families when they returned home, or planning to consider the risks or impact on either the young person or their family.

5. Every part of the state and its services takes some responsibility to behave as a good corporate parent. Too often, systems not specifically designed for vulnerable young people leaving care create more instability.

Difficulties arose for some young people when their tenancies were terminated because of breach of tenancy rules. For some, the most vulnerable young people, losing accommodation quickly resulted in patterns of evictions, spirals of debt and knock on effects on the likelihood of being able to live in stable accommodation.

The supported lodgings services had clear ground rules for young people but emphasised the need for ‘endless chances’ for the most vulnerable care leavers, who struggled with learning needs and cognitive impairment from long histories of neglect and abuse.

The challenge of managing tenancies, and resulting instability for some of the most vulnerable young people, was compounded by the poor location and the lack of choice about accommodation, a common finding in other studies.³⁹ Accommodation was often isolated and in run down communities. Care leavers found themselves in risky environments. Where young people refused to live in unsafe accommodation, they would lose their place on the housing list.

I have a two year old girl but was I was placed in a flat below a drug dealer. Having a say in where I could be housed is important. I was told I had to take the flat offered or moved down the property list.

(Young Person)

The importance of joint working between care leaving and housing services was highlighted, as well as the risk that housing and welfare policies can have unintended consequences for the most vulnerable care leavers. It is clear that responsibility for the safety and well-being of young people who have been in care must be shared by all agencies and government departments.

Conclusions and recommendations

The policy framework around children in care aims to protect them, but it also defines where children are in the system in ways that don't reflect the reality of children and young people's lives. Entitlements for young people who leave care are not based on their needs, but on their age, education and employment status. For the most vulnerable young people it is vital that agencies work together better to plan and provide support when it is needed.

The impact of traumatic experiences like severe neglect and family breakdown is enduring. Life for young people who have been in care is not always easy or predictable. They want to do well and many do go on to fulfil their potential. But managing independence is challenging. Relationships can be complicated and risky which is why, as for all young people, being able to learn from mistakes is vital.

The need for support does not disappear overnight, but leaving care accelerates this process and, for some, support drops away

suddenly. This is particularly difficult for the most vulnerable young people, those who have suffered the most traumatic experiences, who have been in care for a short time or who experienced lots of instability. They all need a safety net to fall back on.

The care and care leaving systems need to mirror the real experiences and needs of children and young people – those who were taken into care because they needed protection. Many care leaving services are doing a good job, but we have identified a preoccupation with processes and practical considerations, rather than a focus on addressing the reasons why young people entered care in the first place.

The system is failing to take into account or respond to poor emotional and mental health, significant relationships, links with family, and complex behavioural needs. This failure not only makes it significantly more challenging for the most vulnerable young people to move into independence, but actually sets them up to fail.

The current approach is not effective and the cost implications are not sustainable.

The recognition that young people are forced to live independently too young led to the introduction of the When I am Ready scheme, which allows young people to remain in foster care until 21. But young people with the most complex needs are least likely to benefit from this opportunity.

Good parents do not turn their backs on their children when they are at their most challenging or life becomes difficult. We must ensure that the corporate parent is also flexible enough for the most vulnerable young people or they will lose out.

Care leaving processes focused on building young people's practical independent living skills must go hand in hand with approaches that support young people to develop emotional skills and resilience, and prioritise therapeutic needs for support. Our research supports the case for re-thinking models of care and extending a more flexible model into young adulthood, particularly for the most vulnerable young people.

This report does not propose to unnecessarily add to the care leaving framework, which is already complex and challenging to implement. Instead...re-think.

Action for Children calls for action in the following areas.

1. The Welsh government should review the role of the corporate parent in children and young people's lives. This should include their journeys before, during and after care. The result should be a single framework focused on children and young people's needs.

2. The good corporate parent must prioritise the emotional and mental health of children in its care.

- The Welsh Government's Health Directorate and Local Health Boards must take greater responsibility for their role in corporate parenting by responding to the needs of children in care and those who have left care.
- Adult care, health and mental health services, care leaving services, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services must work together to plan early and guarantee continued access to services beyond 18.
- Local authorities must provide the most vulnerable children and young people with therapeutic care placements that actively develop emotional well-being, address psychological trauma, and help them develop resilient and positive relationships.

3. The good corporate parent must look after the whole child and always keep them safe, including when young people return home.

- Local authorities must improve early planning and assessment, involving family members where appropriate, to prepare young people 16+ to return home and ensure decisions are appropriate and supported and;
 - Use Family Group conferencing and mediation to support this process where a young person is likely to have regular contact with family members or return home after care.
 - The Welsh Government should protect the care leaving status of young people who return home at 16 or older and allow them to return to the system up to 21 if arrangements with family break down.
 - The Welsh Government should give young people and their families a stronger entitlement to support when they return home from care and they should always be made aware of this entitlement.
- 4. The good corporate parent must not give up when young people's lives are at their most complex and challenging.**
- The Welsh Government should introduce an entitlement for young people to remain in residential care until the age of 21.

- National and local government should give priority to securing flexible, supported accommodation arrangements for the most vulnerable young people not in foster care.
- The Welsh Government must set out how When I am Ready arrangements will meet the needs of the most vulnerable young people and ensure placements are financed and supported.

Appendix 1

Young people involved in the research.

Age Range	17- 25 years
Number of Care Leavers	28
Number of young people edge of care	3
Wales	13
England	18
Male	14
Female	17
Young Parents	9
Learning disability /significant health condition	6
Significant offending history (e.g. prison sentence or care as an alternative to custody)	5
Significant current substance misuse	4
Unaccompanied young person or refugee / asylum issues	3
Significant mental health issues	10
Experienced Homelessness and/ or placed in B and B	11
Left Care Early (16/17)	9

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Action for Children - Gweithredu dros Blant

St David's Court
68a Cowbridge Rd East
Cardiff
CF11 9DN

Telephone: **029 2022 2127**

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