

# Young Radicals on Homelessness

## INTRODUCTION

At Who Cares? Scotland's (WCS), we have a vision of a lifetime of equality, respect and love for care experienced people. At the heart of this vision lies relationships – with professionals, corporate parents, friends and family. Relationships teach a person how to iron their clothes for a job interview; relationships offer a shoulder to cry on when things aren't going well; relationships offer support in financial crisis; relationships advocate for better living conditions; relationships make a house a home.

For many young people leaving care can be a difficult time in which existing relationships are strained. They are often thrust into independent living where they must fend for themselves at, in most cases, a very young age. In fact, the average age for leaving care in Scotland currently sits at 17 years old. This is comparatively much lower than the average age for young people outside of the care system, who leave home at the average age of 25 years old. At WCS we know that this can result in young people struggling to sustain accommodation and becoming homeless. For many, homeless accommodation is also the only option available when they leave care.

As a rights organisation we also look at homelessness in the context of human rights. In particular:

- Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and
- Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified by the UK in 1976).

These guarantee the right to housing as part of the right to an adequate standard of living.

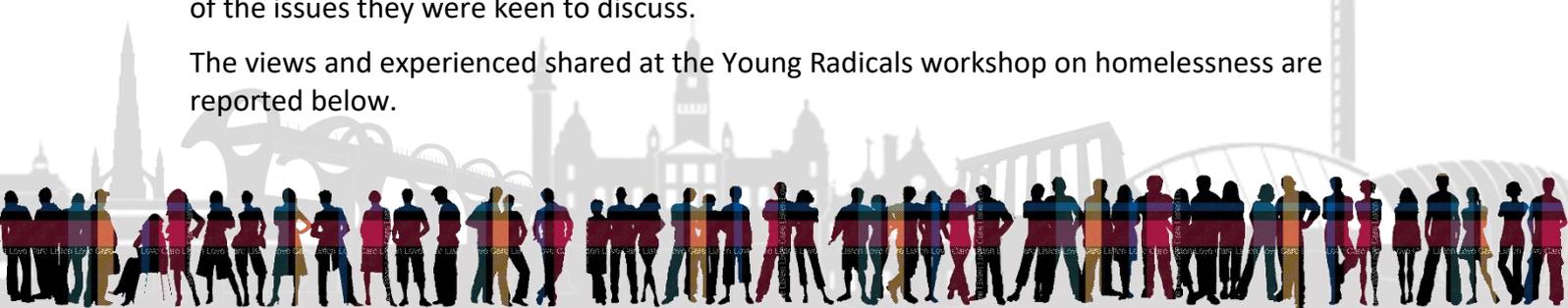
Whilst important legislation has been passed in Scotland regarding continuing care and after care to help safeguard these rights, we wanted to hear directly from care experienced young people about their opinions and experiences of homelessness.

## YOUNG RADICALS

Since March 2017, WCS has facilitated a regular issue-based group for care experienced young people called the “Young Radicals”. The aim, as with all WCS's work with young people, is to create a safe, welcoming and nourishing space within which young people can build capacity and confidence and empower themselves and one another.

Young Radicals takes place at the WCS national office in Glasgow and is one of the ways we connect care experienced young people with corporate parenting functions and broader influencing work of WCS. Through practical groupwork, the young people who attend are introduced to activism, the power of narrative and the challenge of thinking critically and structurally about the care system in its broader social context. Since the group began, workshops have taken place on a wide range of issues including gender identity, the role of police, mental health and homelessness. Homelessness was identified by the group as one of the issues they were keen to discuss.

The views and experiences shared at the Young Radicals workshop on homelessness are reported below.



## METHODOLOGY

The session took place on the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 2017 and began by looking at the stereotypes and stigma around homelessness in general. In two small groups, the young people discussed what “homeless” means, who can become homeless, and why people become homeless.

The second part of the evening was a discussion-based activity around 2 different case studies featuring care experienced young people who had become homeless. To capture the discussion, the facilitator explained that the staff would be using voice recorders to record the conversations. The facilitator confirmed that all members had given their consent to being recorded.

The facilitator of the session made members aware that they were free to share their view, opinions and/or experiences but could step back and leave the session at any point if they felt they needed to.

The young people then returned to their two smaller groups and were given the case studies to discuss. The case studies were not about any one individual but were instead composite stories based on numerous examples, known to staff, of care experienced young people who had become homeless. The group facilitators read the case studies aloud and the young people were given hard copies to share. The young people were then given two questions to prompt discussion;

1. What should have happened so that the young person did not end up in a homeless situation?
2. If the young person does become homeless, what support should be available to the them?

These conversations led into broader discussions and across the groups four key themes emerged:

- Leaving Care - Independence and life skills
- Relationships and support networks
- Suitable accommodation
- Having a back-up plan

## LEAVING CARE - INDEPENDENCE AND LIFE SKILLS

### Key Points:

- **Care experienced people are expected to become independent at a much earlier age than their non-care experienced peers.**
- **Care placements can have an impact on level of life skills learned.**
- **The definition of independence is fluid and subjective.**

There was general agreement within the group that care experienced young people are expected to be independent at a much younger age than their non-care experienced peers. This impacts how supported they feel when transitioning out of the care system, which was evident during the discussions of the session.





One young person explained:

*“That’s a common thing though, care placements ending at 16, I was put out the unit at 16 – it was like ‘kay you’re a big girl now, bye.’”*

Other young people in the group expressed that they also had felt pushed to leave care:

*“What I’ve noticed from my experience when I was 16, my local authority and the children’s reporter decided - you’re 16 now, care placements ending, you are going back home even if I didn’t want to.”*

During the discussion, young people highlighted that, partly because people leave care at such a young age, many do not have the life skills they need to sustain a tenancy:

*“...see if someone was being put into care when they’ve been quite young, they get used to it, they get used to kinda the routine, and then when you turn 16 they’re like aw that’s you, you’re 16 now go on. I find that quite hard to believe that like... you’ve just... done everything for this person and you’ve not really taught them anything, now you’re wanting them just to just go off, just hope they do it...function by themselves.”*

Both groups discussed the fluidity of the term ‘independence’ and how it is defined differently by professionals and young people. For example, one young person noted that because he was at university, he was seen to be doing well and therefore did not get offered the extra support needed:

*“I had very little to no support because I was at Uni. I was doing well so my leaving care worker never got in contact with me for 8 months. Even when I moved into my own flat and I had like no support what so ever. There was no like, are you cooking? Are you cleaning? There was just a presumption made that I was at Uni, I’m doing good.”*

Another young person said that ‘independence’ was defined by professionals through tick box activities:

*“I think it’s a tick box thing. Like last week I had a keyworker come and ask me how I was getting on and said, “what do I need?”, and I was like “I don’t know” and they were like, “can you do this, can you do this, can you do this, can you do this” and I was like “yeah kinda...” and after that they said I didn’t need support and I was independent enough to do it myself.”*

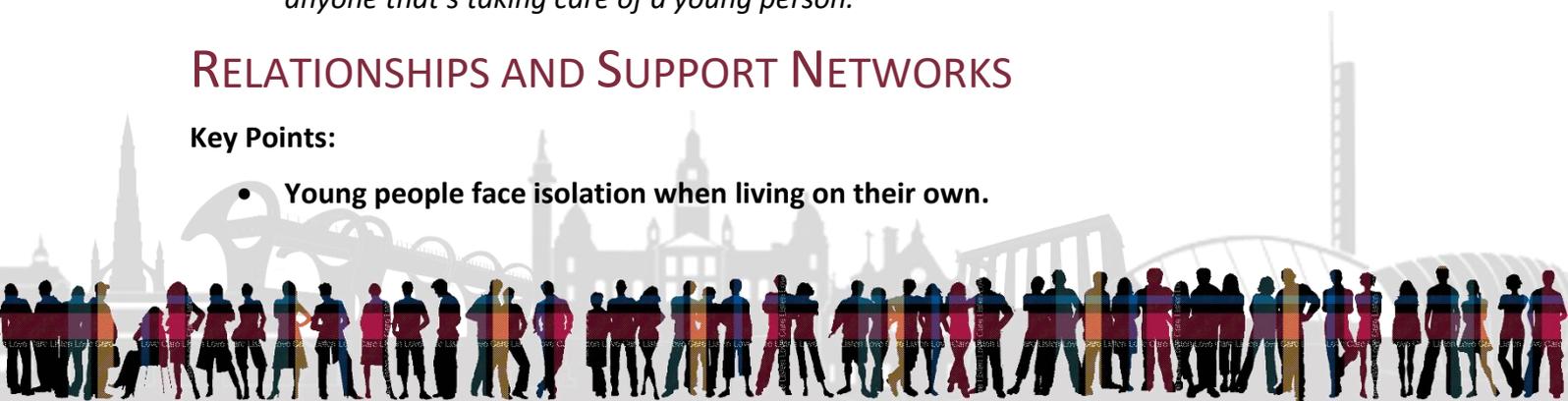
Young people in the group felt strongly that the learning of independent living skills should be an intrinsic part of the care they receive throughout their upbringing. For example, one young person said:

*“It’s just the kind of things other people, like generally speaking, are taught by their parents sort of as they go along, throughout their childhood. Whereas for us you can’t just assume that it’s going to be picked up, it has to be part of the criteria for anyone that’s taking care of a young person.”*

## RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

### Key Points:

- Young people face isolation when living on their own.





- **Isolation and loneliness has a big impact on mental health.**
- **There is a lack of continuity in relationships when leaving care.**
- **Professional boundaries can restrict the growth of meaningful relationships.**

Another key set of issues which came up throughout discussion, was the lack of positive relationships that young people leave care with. Many of the young people spoke about feeling isolated and lonely when they moved into their own accommodation due to the lack of continuity of relationships from care placements.

One young person said that after living with lots of other young people, it can be hard to suddenly then live on your own:

*“It’s also quite hard if like you’re in like a unit, then you’re obviously going to have staff or young people. You kinda get used to the company and then if you’re just moving out and you get a flat and you’re like right I can’t cook, I can’t clean, and I don’t know what to do with my time. Some people would turn maybe to drink or drugs or get in with a bad crowd. Having people check-up and making sure you’re alright makes the world of difference instead of leaving you to your own devices because a lot of people won’t be able to kinda adapt to it.”*

Another young person spoke about the personal affects isolation can have when living independently after care:

*“People say the first night on your own is like the worst. Going from like that transition from being around so many people to being on your own can be quite traumatic.”*

Social isolation was linked in the discussion with how these experiences can have adverse effects on young people’s mental health:

*“The companionship side of things is absolutely massive. Like even to this day if both my flatmates are away for the weekend, I feel it. Like if you’re stressed or if you’re thinking about stuff, being able to go, aw like just put the kettle on to have a cup of tea. It sounds so stupid but that’s a massive thing just having other people around if you want to go vent. Like what you were saying about the mental health issues, like its... I can’t think of a single mental health issue that’s going to be benefited by isolation.”*

*“It’s really dangerous, isolation.”*

This then lead to the group to discuss the comparative disadvantage that care experienced young people faced in comparison to their non-care experienced peers. Leaving the question: Who do care experienced young people without a support network turn to when they are facing difficulties?

The groups repeatedly highlighted that this lack of support was especially stark in certain situations. For example, when starting university, which is a tough process for many young people:

*“We don’t have the support network as well... many people at Uni, came to Uni absolutely clueless, but it was fine because... they could call up their parents at home.”*





The groups also discussed relationships with staff in different types of accommodation and how they were affected once they had left care. It was a common theme that meaningful and personal relationships were restricted, due to job roles and strict boundaries imposed on staff.

One young person spoke about the transactional relationship with workers in her support accommodation:

*“The staff where I live, like they’re told they’re not support workers, they’re just staff and their boundaries are supposed to be you hand in your keys when you go out the building and you get your keys when you come in the building and that’s it. And they do a check on you, 10 o’clock at night and 8 o’clock in the morning and that’s it. But, the staff get really annoyed because if you’re coming in and being like I don’t know how to fill in my housing benefit forms, so I might lose my room and I don’t know how to work my hob in my room or my shower or whatever then the staff go help you, they get into trouble.”*

This shows how a young person who had left care and was in a transitional phase did not have a support system to help them become independent.

Another young person spoke about their friend’s parents becoming their supported carers and how this label has an impact on the relationship they previously had with whilst they were still in care:

*“I’ve got that kind of friend’s mum and dad kind of relationship with them. And now they’re becoming my ‘supported carers’ so if there’s all those boundaries and restrictions and all that, so I can’t do like certain things. I just feel like that relationship is just gonna go down the drain. Purely just because they’re getting paid for having me being there. That is basically it, the label just completely pisses me off.”*

During the discussions, it was felt that relationships, in any setting, should be allowed to flourish naturally, rather than being dictated by rules and regulations.

*“No other child has to worry about restrictions or legal implications to what they do, so how on earth can we build genuine relationships when we’re told it has to fit criteria?”*

## SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION

### Key Points

- **B&B’s are an unsuitable type of accommodation for young people.**
- **There is a lack of housing options.**
- **Young people should be at the centre of decisions about appropriate accommodation for them.**

The group unanimously held the opinion that B&B style accommodation is not suitable for any care experienced young person. However, young people felt it was the ‘norm’ and it was expected that care experienced young people would be placed in this type of accommodation if they became homeless:





*“We talk about it in care like, oh this really vulnerable young person is put in a B&B and it’s like aw, that...again. It’s almost normalised because of the situation you grew up in which is really awful, ‘cause these are the people that are most vulnerable to exploitation, drug addiction etc.”*

Another young person expanded on this point by highlighting how the clear evidence of B&B’s negative impact on care experienced people was consistently being ignored:

*“I’ve never heard of a single story across any council in any age or demographic of young people that have been care experienced where a B&B has had a good outcome. There has never been a positive story which has involved being forced into a B&B accommodation placement. It’s always ended in an addiction or homelessness or just a worse scenario than you were before. Why they keep doing it baffles me and the only thing that it can come down to is funding a lack of effort.”*

The group agreed that supported accommodation was a much better alternative for care experienced young people. However, they felt strongly that a young person should always be at the centre of the decisions which are made about the best type of accommodation for them:

*“So, every supported accommodation does things differently, yknow what I mean? But it’s whether or not it works for you. And that’s when it becomes difficult for mental health I think, ‘cause I was in like about five or six different supported accommodations between the ages of 16 and 20 and I’d say only one of them worked.”*

The group also expressed their frustration at the lack of accommodation available after care and how the limited options given to young people has a direct and negative impact on their ability to sustain an independent tenancy.

## HAVING A “BACK-UP PLAN”

### Key Points

- **There is a lack of safety nets in place for care experienced people**
- **Young people should not be set up to fail**
- **Support should be offered to young people when facing difficulties with housing**

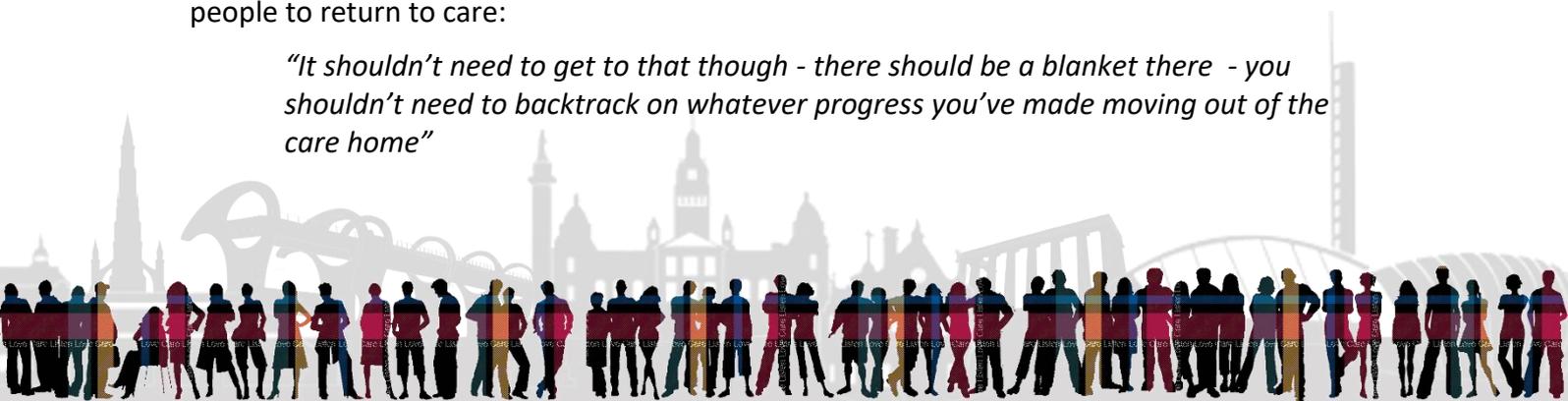
The discussion around housing and homelessness revealed a mixture of views from young people around the need for a “back-up plan”.

When asked if care experienced young people should be able to move back into care if tenancy fails, one young person said:

*“If circumstances need be then aye I could see that happening. If you need to go back ‘cause you’ve got nowhere else to go, aye.”*

However, some young people disagreed and felt that there shouldn’t be a need for young people to return to care:

*“It shouldn’t need to get to that though - there should be a blanket there - you shouldn’t need to backtrack on whatever progress you’ve made moving out of the care home”*





*“Imagine how demoralising that would be if you had to make that transition and you had to move right back to where you were.”*

One young person spoke about the role of professionals in supporting care experienced young people if they are facing difficulties with their accommodation.

*“Don’t just go ‘aw it’s likely to breakdown, what a shame’. It’s your job to make sure there is something in place for when that happens.”*

This range of views from the young people we spoke to, demonstrates the importance of involving young people in decisions around support after leaving care, and how it must be tailored to support their individual needs.

## CONCLUSION

The Young Radicals identified that homelessness is not only a common issue for care experienced young people but that, for many, it is the only option given to them when they leave care. The young age which people leave care and the lack of life skills they are equipped with can play a large role in difficulties they face sustaining accommodation. Relationships made whilst in care are often discontinued and young people are frequently left isolated with no social networks.

The resulting loneliness can have a negative impact on mental health, adding to the pressures of trying to sustain a tenancy. Whilst trying to navigate independent living, care experienced young people can often be placed in inappropriate accommodation which does not foster nurturing relationships. Ultimately, we should be supporting young people throughout their care journey to prepare them for the future but also must understand that for care experienced young people it’s not as easy as “calling Mum and Dad” to bail them out if something doesn’t work out as planned.

It is because of experiences such as these that, as an organisation, we believe structural and cultural change needs to take place so that no care experienced young person ends up homeless. To achieve this, we must encourage supportive and lasting relationships which can help young people to navigate independent living and ensure they feel at home both physically and emotionally. We must also re-examine current policy solutions and ensure that care experienced young people’s human right to housing is protected, respected and fulfilled. Whilst important legislation around continuing care and after care has already been passed, it is crucial that we ensure this legislation is fully understood and consistently implemented by local authorities and other professionals.

Young people who were brought into the care of the state because they were victims of neglect or abuse are ending up homeless. That cannot continue to be normalised. We need to start caring for all care experienced young people. As one of the young radicals said:

***“I think there’s just a whole lack of care, funnily enough, in the whole story. There’s a lack of anyone giving a crap.”***

