

Supported accommodation: a study

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Getting by, but is that good enough?

Introduction

Moving on from care to adulthood and to having your own place to stay is a daunting experience and presents significant challenges for care experienced young people. There are a range of accommodation options available within and across local authority areas but these can vary in their purpose and design.

Having been in care myself and then 'encouraged' to move aged 16 into homeless and temporary accommodation (adult-type hostels, B&Bs, temporary furnished accommodation) I was keen to explore what, if anything, had changed since I left care seven years ago. At the time I wasn't made fully unaware of the options available to me and I know now that I certainly wasn't ready.

My own experience wasn't particularly positive, having 25 moves between the ages of 16-18. Some services were better than others but the temporary nature of accommodation and support offered fuelled a sense of insecurity at a time when I needed stability most – I felt I always had to have a black bag ready as I never knew when or where I'd be moving next.

As such I have a real interest in helping improve services for other care experienced young people and had an idea for a supported accommodation project. To help me understand more about what is currently available and how these services operate, I undertook a short qualitative study of independent supported accommodation providers commissioned by local authorities in Scotland. Whilst these were registered as adult services aimed more broadly at young homeless people, they were primarily offering services for care experienced young people. Even when moving on from care, a young person had to be regarded as 'homeless' to be referred into these services.

The study visits gave me an opportunity to get a better understanding of the type of services and support provided. Visits were arranged and semi-structured interviews undertaken with managers and staff from the four identified services. In order to gain as full and honest a picture as possible, all responses have been anonymised and no individual service or local authority area will be identified. I am grateful for their willingness to be involved and thank them for their openness and insight into their service. I met some committed and caring staff working in a complex and challenging system, and much of what I learned, both positive and negative, chimes with my own experience and that of my care experienced friends and acquaintances.



Overview of Services

I found that the managers and staff I spoke to were frank and honest and genuinely motivated to provide the best service they could to the young people living in the accommodation. One of the consistent factors that emerged was the emphasis that they placed on values and relationships, highlighting the need to take a very person-centred, individualised approach to support. As one participant stated:

“We are a housing registered service but it’s not just housing, it’s much more.”

Another service was keen to point out that:

“Its people we’re dealing with, not rooms.”

This highlighted a clear tension between the expectations of the commissioning authorities and the needs and issues of the young people staying there. Whilst each of the services were registered as generic supported accommodation for young homeless people, in the main they were now offering supported accommodation primarily to young care leavers.

“... mostly all are care experienced, it is rare to get no care experienced.”

This raises a great concern for me as it appears that young people are being moved out of care too soon, and into services that are not really designed to cater for their needs. As one manager commented:

“We can be at the mercy of referrals and sometimes management pressure (internally and externally) is brought to bear for us to accept inappropriate referrals.”

What strikes me is that both providers and commissioning authorities seem to accept this as normal, that it’s OK for vulnerable young people and young care leavers to be placed in ‘adult registered housing accommodation’ in what one staff member described as:

“...this mismatch between referrals and services.”

The issue of appropriately matching young people’s needs to resources was a consistent theme and as one staff member commented:

“We get the Friday 5 o’clock referral, the last resort approach... emergency placement meant to last a week but ending up lasting months.”

For several of the services, the local authority funded placements by a ‘block purchase’ approach, meaning that they had a contract for a set number of placements and could control referrals, regardless of whether the staff thought their service wasn’t best suited to meet the needs of a particular young person.

There was no average length of stay ('one month to one year') although each of the services said that young people tend to be staying a bit longer, and they were keen to make sure that young people weren't moved on too soon. One manager, clearly frustrated however, reported examples of 'questions being asked' if a young person was there for longer than a year. Young people can be referred into these services in emergency situations, which isn't ideal. Arriving in a crisis means it's unplanned, it's often not the most suitable placement and so it can be extra-stressful. Young people can then be moved out sometimes too soon within 24-48 hours' notice, not emotionally or practically ready for the next step. No wonder some young people struggle to settle in, invest and build relationships, when things can change for them so fast.

Despite these challenging scenarios, which were all too common, the staff were committed to ensuring their focus was on building positive relationships with young people. This was at the heart of all their mission statements and philosophies of care. I was able to witness some of this in action, spending time in the main office of one service observing staff engaging with the young people. This was really positive.

Young People

Almost all of the young people accessing these services were moving on from care placements, and staff considered they were often too young, and unprepared for the responsibilities of adult life. I can relate to that and so do many of my care experienced friends. Whilst some came to the service via referral groups or assessment forums, too often it was on an emergency basis.

"99% of the young people are care experienced – it is the main move-on option."

Services described these young people as coming with lots of personal issues and challenges – low self-esteem and self-worth, or with mental health self-harming and issues, isolated and often exploited, unresolved childhood trauma, emotional and psychological issues, addictions, social isolation, negative peer pressure - the list could go on. They are often bringing the same issues from care into a less structured environment – a rapid change from a child care home into adult supported accommodation.

"The average age of referral is 16-18."

The services all mentioned the underlying issues for these young people, and that the service set-up was often at odds with the very complex needs of this group of young people.

"[some] young people's support needs are too complex for the service to deal with."

Given their previous care experience and their move on from care, this can leave young people with no feelings of belonging and an inability to ask for help. Now I know that care experienced young people have lots of skills and abilities and acres of potential, the same dreams and hopes and aspirations as everybody else. But quite simply many aren't ready for the reality of adult living. This is something I can totally relate to, and seven

years after leaving the care system myself, I'm really concerned that these are still ongoing issues. As one service said, its "Getting by, but that's not good enough."

Approach

I was interested in finding out more about the approach that services took in supporting and caring for the young people who live there. Given that many of these young people are still regarded legally as 'children' under Scots law, how were 'adult registered services' meeting their needs?

Despite the commissioning and structural issues and challenges that the 'system' seems to present, my impression was that the staff I spoke to had a greater insight into young people's issues and a more compassionate understanding of their needs. They spoke of being able to be much more flexible regarding rules for example, promoting young people's needs and tailoring support based much more on individual needs. One example was of a service working with a clinical psychologist who attended team meetings to support staff and give feedback. Another service had a training programme for staff with a very deliberate focus on mental health, trauma and attachment – things you might normally expect to see within children and families services but now an absolute necessity in 16+ supported accommodation services.

Another service had a specific service for teenage mums and babies. This allowed young mums to stay with their babies while assessments were carried out to assess what support they might need. However the maximum timescale was nine months before the young mums had to move on.

All the services spoke strongly of taking a person-centred view, of the focus being on the young people rather than the accommodation or the rooms. Although they were registered as adult services most of them spoke of applying a GIRFEC approach and one spoke clearly of using the SHANARRI indicators to inform support plans - they even had the poster on the wall. That for me is important because I don't think anybody becomes an 'instant adult' and it's about viewing growing up as a journey and not an event.

Participation

One of the positive things that came across strongly was the value that was placed on hearing young people voices, and trying to make sure young people had an effective say in not only their own support plan (goes without saying!) but also how services were evaluated and developed.

For example, in one service, young people were involved in the interview process for new staff and in another involved in the 360° staff appraisal system. Feedback boards, suggestion boxes, regular residents meetings, Youth Ambassador, Peer Mentors and the development of a 'Lived Experience' Group were some of the ways in which the services tried to make sure young people were actively involved. There was no single most effective way but I was impressed with the way that staff spoke enthusiastically about this, as it ultimately a genuine approach to co-production which benefits both them and the young people. All these things are good ideas but they will only work well if staff are able to form genuine caring relationships with the young people staying there.

And that is where the real participation lies, in the everyday relationships. As one service told me, 'picking the right staff' with the right set of qualities, is key. Being respectful, non-judgemental, and resilient, having an understanding of trauma, good communication skills, being reflective, patient, flexible, committed, and able to have fun. Several services actually used the word 'nurturing' not just for the young people but for their staff, too. In another service, young people were involved in staff training and development sessions, using their experiences to help workers better understand the issues and needs of the young people using the service. They also spoke of getting involved in fundraising activities to support young peoples' socialisation, to provide extra activities and opportunities. A summer activity programme, with residential and away days was also part of one project's approach.

My gut feeling, the vibe I felt, was there was a real willingness to build trust and understand young people's experiences. This was all very encouraging to hear and I think quite a bit different to how it was for me when I was using these types of services.

Aftercare Support

One of the important things for young people when moving into more independent living is good aftercare support. In Scotland, care experienced young people are now entitled to that by law up to their 26th birthday – meaning ongoing help with a range of practical and financial supports, and importantly ongoing supportive professional help. That is, people who know you, have a good relationship with you, and who can provide you with the right sort of personal and practical support when you need it.

Good aftercare support is also about making sure young people are 'ready' to move on, and not moving on too soon. That can be a challenge.

"Sometimes the local authority move young people on too soon, as they want the space for someone else."

Also, some young people want to move on too quickly, and as one service said,

"There is difference between wanting to leave and being ready to leave."

Despite all the effort going into building relationships with young people, services also reported that they weren't always able to continue supporting young people as they move on.

"Funding changes mean that we are not funded now to deliver aftercare support."

In practice this means that some independent services are offering limited, or no, aftercare support because in some cases local authorities have stopped funding them for this. Other services were lucky because their funding at the moment is secure and allows them to offer an aftercare service, but for others this was real challenge. One service had staff visiting young people out with the service funding arrangements, and sometimes in their own time. Preparation for moving on was seen as really important, as one service said, stressing the importance to young people of:

“...giving them time before moving out to discuss fears and wants and desires.”

For some services it was about how to manage the transition or handover to new workers over time, but it still involved a change of support worker for the young person. This doesn't really fit with my idea of relationship based practice and 'stickability'. However, it seemed a bit better than the service that told me that when young people moved on from them (with no funded aftercare) the local authority put the young people onto a 'duty' list with no named support worker. Quite simply it seems like a mixed picture, with services trying hard to be person-centred and to base their approach on relationships, but sometimes struggling due to the way the system is structured.

The main theme was of services, and particularly workers, going 'above and beyond' for young people. Even where there was no funded aftercare service, they still offered outreach support and made sure the 'door was left open' for support. But it made me wonder about the whole idea of 'positive destinations' and what 'ready' really looks like.

Summary

I visited four independent providers, providing supported accommodation for 'homeless young people' in Scotland. In reality these services were providing 'move on' accommodation for care leavers between the ages of 16 and 18. All the services told me that these young people were generally arriving too young to easily manage the responsibilities of adult life, and it is generally the most vulnerable/unsettled young people who move into this type of accommodation. What I found was a 'mixed bag' of strengths and challenges, and for me it's difficult to draw common conclusions.

Main strengths

All of the services were able to show that relationships were at the heart of how they support young people, and services worked best when:

- They could take a person-centred nurturing approach
- There was individual staff commitment – getting the 'right' people
- Services focused on the young person as an individual
- The accommodation was seen as a 'home' not a just a 'tenancy'

Main challenges

- The age at which young people are coming into these services
- Moving young people out too soon when they're not ready
- No guaranteed aftercare for young care leavers
- Lack of funding and resources for appropriate services
- Suitability of accommodation and mismatch of needs

It seems to me that these services are trying hard to deliver good caring person-centred support despite of, rather than because of, the way the system is set up. But it raised further questions which I think really need to be explored further, namely:

- When young people now have the right to stay in care up until 21 years of age, why is 16-18 still the main age for young people moving into these services?
- Why do young people have to be regarded as 'homeless' to access these services? Surely they are being made homeless by their corporate parents?
- Why does it seem like there's a rush to get young people to move on, particularly when they are often too young, unprepared and lacking good aftercare support?
- What's going on with care planning, and why is this happening?

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