

**Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc
ac Addysg**

**Children, Young People
and Education Committee**

John Griffiths MS

Chair of the Local Government and Housing
Committee

28 February 2023

Housing issues facing birth parents and care leavers

Dear John,

As you may know, we are currently carrying out an inquiry into services for care experienced children. Our inquiry has been driven by the voices of children and young people. We are determined that their views and experiences will shape our final report and its recommendations.

During the autumn we carried out informal engagement visits throughout Wales to talk to birth parents (parents who have had/are in the process of having a child removed from their care) - many of whom are themselves care experienced - and to care leavers about their experiences and views of the care system. On 26 January we held a stakeholder event with birth parents to complement our engagement visits to give as many young parents the opportunity to feed into our work as possible.

Many of the things that the young people told us were deeply distressing and concerning. I would like to raise one of their concerns with you specifically: there is a major, national shortage of high quality, small (one/two bedroom) houses and flats for birth parents and care leavers. We have heard that this shortage is driving up the rates of children in care in Wales. As you will know, local authorities – including their housing departments - have responsibilities as corporate parents of care experienced children. We are concerned that local authorities may be struggling to meet their corporate parenting obligations in relation to the provision of accommodation for children once they leave the care system.

I have highlighted some of the specific challenges birth parents and care leavers, and staff who work with them, have raised with us below.

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Birth parents

The lack of safe, quality, long-term accommodation can count against birth parents in court

proceedings. A court will consider whether a birth parent has suitable, long-term accommodation for them and their child when it makes decisions about whether the child should stay with their parent(s). It will also consider whether the birth parent is in close proximity to any support network. If a birth parent cannot secure suitable long-term accommodation near their family and friends, or, worse, cannot secure suitable long-term accommodation at all, this will directly contribute to the likelihood of a child being removed from their parents' care.

These challenges are compounded for some birth parents who are mandated to attend parenting assessment centres (sometimes referred to as mother and baby units). The purpose of parenting assessment centres is to establish a birth parent's fitness to be a parent. A typical assessment period is around 12 weeks. Unfortunately, many birth parents are not able to keep their accommodation for that time, and therefore face leaving the assessment centre without safe, quality and long-term accommodation for them and their child to return to. Again, we have been told that this can count against them in court proceedings.

Care leavers

Many care experienced young people struggle to find suitable accommodation to move into once they leave the care system or once they leave transitional, supported accommodation. We heard that there are strict limits on referrals for social housing on behalf of care leavers from third sector organisations, and that care leavers themselves have no priority over other applicants if they apply for social housing independently.

Delays in finding appropriate accommodation for care leavers strains transitional accommodation services, which will try to continue to provide accommodation for a young person until there is somewhere safe for them to move into. This blocks beds for other young people leaving the care system and in need of that transitional, supported accommodation before they feel confident living independently.

More importantly, it can be incredibly distressing and traumatic for the young people. Many care leavers are vulnerable young people, having experienced abuse as a child alongside the instability of frequent changes of foster placements, social workers, and schools. The challenges they face in securing accommodation can leave many vulnerable to exploitation, homelessness, substance misuse and crime.

It is worth stressing that, for birth parents who have themselves been in care (which we believe is a high proportion of all birth parents), the housing shortage also affects them as care leavers, as noted above.

We will be publishing summary findings of both our engagement work and our stakeholder events shortly, which will set out these concerns in more detail.

However, for various reasons, such as the limitations of our Committee's remit, we will not be able to give this critically important issue the time and attention it deserves as part of this inquiry.

I very much hope that you find this information useful and that you are able to consider it as part of any current or future work you undertake into housing for vulnerable people. If you have any questions about our work please contact our clerks directly, who would be happy to provide additional briefing material on our findings to date.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jayne Bryant". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jayne Bryant MS

Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.