

Petitioner submission of 14 November 2023

PE1958/C: Extend aftercare for previously looked after young people, and remove the continuing care age cap

Thanks to the Committee for progressing my petition and acknowledging myself during the opening of the meeting. I've written to the Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise, Natalie Don MSP to thank her as well.

The Minister highlighted the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver The Promise and recognised the hard work the workforce is doing. I echo the commitment in relation to the workforce, as an employee within a local authority with lived experience of care who is committed to listening to the voices of the community throughout my practice.

Families with experience of care face multiple barriers. This is why it's vital that care experience is looked at as a lifelong impact. I've not aged out of the community because I'm over 26 years old. My petition asks to extend continuing care throughout Care Experienced people's lives, on the basis of individual need.

I ask that when referring to the Care Experienced community, to recognise care experience as the lifelong identity that it is, the Committee does not limit its description to 'children and young people'.

The Minister mentioned the work the Scottish Government are doing to engage with the care community through consultation projects alongside the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum (STAF) as part of the 100 Days of Listening project. I attended the opening day where I and other Care Experienced people discussed the reality of being Care Experienced as adults and recently coming out of the care system. I spoke with the First Minister and discussed the stigma that Care Experienced parents experience. Our medical records are flagged with "Looked After child", and this resulted in intense observation of my pregnancy that felt more like intrusive scrutiny than the support it was intended to provide. During pregnancy, I realised I was too old to access support as a care leaver. However, I was young enough to face prejudice as a Care Experienced adult.

This is why I am asking for the lifelong aspect of my petition to be recognised.

During the Committee's session with Care Experienced people in April 2023, participants highlighted the barriers they experienced due to the age cap such as poverty, homelessness, financial difficulty, removal from a country they know and love, and lack of advocacy and awareness of rights.

In relation to my ask Care Experienced people are able to enjoy lifelong rights and achieve equality with non-Care Experienced people, this includes ensuring that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the findings of The Promise are fully implemented in Scotland.

The Minister highlighted that there is a robust process in place to ensure the process of removing young people off their compulsory supervision order (CSO) has a GIRFEC approach, within the guidelines. However, the data from advocacy workers, the care community and the professional roundtable discussion shows that many young people have a lack of awareness of the lifelong implications when being removed from their CSO's before their 16th birthday, which creates a cycle where young people are being placed in preventable, vulnerable situations such as homelessness, lack of financial support, removal from the country, and early deaths.

During my evidence session, I highlighted that for many Care Experienced people the thought of leaving a system that has such a traumatic impact on your life can look very attractive, as you desire to be normal and live a so-called normal life, but there is no real explanation of the long-term barriers when accessing services. I also raised how I personally asked to be placed back on CSO when I became a victim of homelessness before my 16th birthday, with the support of advocacy from my friend's mother. This highlights that Care Experienced people are not fully aware of their rights. I'm aware that local authorities now have Children's Rights Workers to ensure that young people are made aware of their rights, however, I believe that there should be an additional requirement in place for advocacy to be independent from the local authority.

It's important that the Committee recognises the need to extend aftercare provision in Scotland to 'previously looked after' young people who left care before their 16th birthday.

The Minister suggested there is no need for a change in legislation, however evidence does not support this. My fear is that many Care Experienced people are still subjected to an unclear process, resulting in them navigating stormy waters without a lifeline. If there is an unclear process and system, it is effectively leaving young people vulnerable to challenges later in life. Reflecting on the lived experience session, many people highlighted that there was no clear understanding of the implications of coming off a CSO before their 16th birthday.

The Minister said that there is work being done on the Promise Bill, with the aim of the completion being 2025. However, data shows that there are young people currently who are slipping through the cracks and essentially being forgotten. The care community has lost countless lives and yet again a date will determine fate.

I welcome the work the Scottish Government are looking to do through consultations, however the care community have already experienced a care review and provided real life accounts which resulted in the Promise being published 4 years ago. I provided my own evidence to the team and now I am on the Promise Oversight Board. I'm mindful that another consultation is effectively asking more people to relive trauma, and this might not get the answers when the community must wait another 2 years.

I originally started this journey in 2018. I have waited 14 months to have a response from my corporate parent. I do not believe the care community should wait any longer. We cannot afford to lose more people and experience more trauma in a system we did not ask to be a part of. It's important we control the narrative for the future of the care community, to be a fairer, loving, and caring Scotland.