

# Services for care experienced children: Exploring radical reform

## Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry

### A response from Cymorth Cymru

17<sup>th</sup> February 2023

#### **About Cymorth Cymru:**

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**Cymorth Cymru is the representative body for providers of homelessness, housing and support services in Wales. We act as the voice of the sector, influencing the development and implementation of policy, legislation and practice that affects our members and the people they support.**

Our members provide a wide range of services that support people to overcome tough times, rebuild their confidence and live independently in their own homes. This includes people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, young people and care leavers, older people, people fleeing violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence, people living with a learning disability, people experiencing mental health problems, people with substance misuse issues and many more.

We want to be part of a social movement that ends homelessness and creates a Wales where everyone can live safely and independently in their own homes and thrive in their communities. We are committed to working with people who use services, our members and partners to effect change. We believe that together, we can have a greater impact on people's lives.

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## 1. Introduction

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- 1.1 We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the work of the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into services for care experienced children.
- 1.2 As a homelessness and housing support charity, we are unable to comment on the full scope of this inquiry, so our response focuses on **accommodation and support for care leavers**.
- 1.3 Although the care system is not our area of expertise, we know from working with our members, listening to frontline support staff via our [Frontline Network Wales](#), and speaking to Experts by Experience, that care experienced young people are at an increased risk of homelessness and face multiple barriers when leaving care that can prevent them from living safely and independently in their own home.
- 1.4 **Increased risk of homelessness:** Research<sup>1</sup> has shown that one in four homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives and one in three care-experienced young people became homeless in the first two years of leaving care. Public Health Wales research<sup>2</sup> tells us that care experienced young people who are particularly vulnerable to homelessness include those:
  - with social, emotional and behavioural problems
  - exiting care at 16 and 17 years old
  - who have a history of running away from care
  - who experienced negative placements or placement breakdowns
  - who experienced multiple moves
- 1.5 **Increased barriers to finding and maintaining a home:** High private rents, insufficient Local Housing Allowance rates, and a lack of social housing, are currently making it very difficult for most people to find and maintain a home. This is even more challenging for care experienced young people, who are unlikely to have the same financial or emotional support networks as their peers. Many of these young people have experienced trauma and multiple adverse childhood experiences. Without the right support, they are more likely to face challenges in sustaining a tenancy and living safe, independent lives in their communities.
- 1.6 We would like to thank several of our member organisations, who provide specialist homelessness and housing support services to young people, and have shared their invaluable expertise and experience to inform this response, including:
  - Dewis Housing
  - Digartref
  - End Youth Homelessness Cymru
  - GISDA
  - Llamau

## 2. The challenges of transition

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- 2.1 We believe that the transition from care is a critical period in both the prevention and alleviation of homelessness. The right support and pathway can prevent someone from becoming homeless, whereas the lack of appropriate support could lead the young person to find themselves without a safe and secure place to live. For young people already experiencing homelessness, the transition from care can exacerbate many of the challenges they face and make services even more difficult to access.

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis, [Homelessness prevention for care leavers, prison leavers and survivors of domestic violence](#) (2017)

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals](#) (2022)

- 2.2 According to a report by Public Health Wales, leaving care is considered as a ‘predictable route into homelessness’<sup>3</sup> and around a quarter of homeless young people are care experienced. The report goes on to say that experience of care (including foster care) and involvement in child protection services are all associated with a higher risk of housing insecurity and homelessness. This highlights the risk to young people leaving care – but also the opportunity to put appropriate support in place to ensure that this transition does not result in homelessness.
- 2.3 However, the homelessness and housing support providers we spoke to in preparation for this response, told us that the transition stage from residential and foster care to adult services does not adequately support or prepare care leavers for adulthood. They feel that ‘the odds are stacked against them’ and there is a ‘grey area’ regarding who is responsible to house and care for care leavers. These accounts chime with the ‘care cliff’ identified by the charity *Become*<sup>4</sup>, when care leavers experience a sudden shift to independent responsibility and not enough support and preparation available.
- 2.4 The approach to pathway planning and preparation for independent living by social services is often a factor in a care leavers risk of homelessness and social instability. Evidence from a report by the Welsh Centre for Public Policy in 2015<sup>5</sup> highlighted the ad-hoc nature of preparations for leaving care. The report said that care leavers identified by local authorities as being at very high risk of homelessness were those ‘aged 18 and over who go into tenancies on their own but are too young or inexperienced to manage living alone and “fail” as a result.’ These observations are consistent with the views of housing support providers, who have described pathway planning as ‘inconsistent’, ‘reactive’ and ‘crisis driven’, with no to little consideration of the young person’s complex support needs or past traumas.
- 2.5 Several people we spoke to – both care experienced young people and service providers – argued for the transition period to be extended, to provide care experienced young people with greater flexibility and continued access to care and support during this period.
- “Should be an option to stay until 21. I don’t feel like an adult at 18/19.” (Expert by Experience)*
- 2.6 However, as well as a longer transition period, many of the people we spoke to argued for a greater collaborative, multi-agency approach across social services, housing and other support services to better identify the needs of care leavers at-risk of homelessness or already homeless, to create a more streamlined and trauma-informed approach to the transition stage that prevents long-term negative outcomes.
- 2.7 A positive example of a collaborative approach is the Team Around the Young Person<sup>6</sup> (TAPI) pilot run by the HHS provider GISDA across Gwynedd between March 2022 and August 2022. The project worked with Gwynedd Council, Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board, Housing Associations and Department for Work and Pensions. The pilot was based on the recognition of ‘good practice in planning services based on young people’s skills, planning interventions based on expeditionary and social activities, and the importance of close relationships with staff and volunteers with a positive attitude and similar backgrounds’ and the need to ensure that ‘schemes have a long-term impact’ while understanding service users’ previous experiences.<sup>7</sup> Through assessment of the pilot by Bangor University, data collected by GISDA highlighted a significant increase in the confidence, wellbeing and employability of the young people involved, as well as progress in social inclusion and the avoidance of negative outcomes that would have resulted without the support provided.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals](#) (2022)

<sup>4</sup> Become Charity, [Campaign to #EndTheCareCliff](#)

<sup>5</sup> WCPP, [Provision for Young Care Leavers at Risk of Homelessness](#), 2015

<sup>6</sup> GISDA, [Team Around the Young Person](#)

<sup>7</sup> Bangor University ‘Evaluation Research: Team Around the Young Person’ p.2

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

### 3. Housing and housing-related support

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- 3.1 Access to appropriate and safe housing options are critical to the transition process. However, according to a recent Public Health Wales report<sup>9</sup>, over 1 in 20 people end up in unsuitable accommodation upon leaving care. Most care experienced young people who moved to an independent living arrangement continued to receive formalised advice or support in their accommodation arrangement, with 74% moving into a hostel, YMCA, foyer or other projects for those leaving care. 26% did not receive any ongoing formalised support, living in bed and breakfasts, bedsits, their own flat, or with friends.
- 3.2 Although these figures imply that the majority of care leavers move into 'suitable accommodation', housing support providers raised concerns about the appropriateness and safety of some forms of accommodation, particularly for the most vulnerable young people.

#### Temporary accommodation

- 3.3 This was further evidenced by some of the young people we spoke to as part of our Experts by Experience project, who had been placed in temporary accommodation which was clearly unsuitable and made them feel unsafe. Young people had, in some cases, been placed in hostels where they were around older adults who were using substances and becoming violent and abusive, posing a significant risk to their wellbeing and raising serious safeguarding concerns. Another young person was placed in an emergency hostel room for three weeks, using a sleeping bag and the staff shower facilities.
- 3.4 There were also concerns about the lack of specialist staff expertise in generic temporary or supported accommodation, where care experienced young people are not getting the specialist support they need. It is also extremely concerning that some young people are being placed in temporary accommodation such as B&Bs without any on-site support.
- 3.5 The most recent Welsh Government statistics show that over 9,000 people are in temporary accommodation, highlighting the significant pressures on the homelessness system and huge demand for housing. However, it is essential that young care experienced people are provided with safe and appropriate accommodation, with access to high quality support.

#### Youth-specific housing support services

- 3.6 Our members who work with young people deliver high quality, specialist young people's accommodation projects, provide a safe home and providing invaluable support to many care experienced young people. This includes emotional support and help to develop independent living skills, alongside a range of wellbeing, social, recreational and educational activities. These services are predominantly commissioned and funded through the Housing Support Grant, led by the local authority housing department, often in partnership with social services.
- 3.7 A number of these organisations provide high quality supported accommodation, which is relatively small in scale, and designed specifically for young people. These housing support providers take a psychologically informed approach to service delivery, with staff trained in trauma-informed approaches, and a physical environment as welcoming and home-like as possible for the young people. It is important that services for young people are led by organisations with specialist expertise and commissioned to be truly trauma-informed in their approach. This means that funding through the Housing Support Grant must facilitate appropriate caseloads, provide training for staff, enable staff to engage in reflective practice, and ensure they can access psychological support for any vicarious trauma they experience.
- 3.8 Housing First for Youth services have recently been established in Wales and are delivered in line with the Housing First for Youth principles<sup>10</sup>. This is a model of housing and support for young people, aged 16-25, who have experienced or are experiencing multiple complex

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<sup>9</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals](#) (2022)

<sup>10</sup> Housing First Wales Network, [Housing First for Youth principles](#), 2021

issues (e.g. trauma, mental health issues and/or substance use issues) and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These are often young people for whom existing services have proved ineffective or who have been failed by established systems. The model has been shown to be effective when offered to care-experienced young people<sup>11</sup> and requires intensive multi-agency support to be provided.

- 3.9 Staff within housing support services are highly skilled and make a tremendous difference to young people's lives. However, it is important that their roles are respected and understood by other professionals. Housing support services are not a replacement for statutory social services, but should complement them. Multi-agency support is essential to ensure that care experienced young people get the support they need, and it is critical that statutory services such as health and social care continue to play an active role in the young person's life when they are living within supported accommodation services. Improved collaboration and communication should be a priority, to achieve the best outcomes for the young person.

### **Access and affordability of settled accommodation**

- 3.10 The costs and availability of housing make it extremely difficult for people leaving care to find an affordable home. There is not enough social housing available and the private rented sector is becoming increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible to people leaving care. Local Housing Allowance has been frozen for a number of years and Bevan Foundation research<sup>12</sup> indicates that just 24 properties advertised in May were available at LHA rates. While care leavers under the age of 25 are exempt from the 'shared accommodation rate', they still do not receive enough in housing benefit to afford the vast majority of one-bedroom properties. They also struggle to find bond or rent in advance, and to find a guarantor.
- 3.11 Some housing support providers referenced difficulties in accessing social housing for care experienced young people and called for better partnership working with social landlords. In 2020, End Youth Homelessness identified an 'over-reliance' on risk assessments as the basis to which someone is offered accommodation<sup>13</sup> and in some cases, care leavers are 'not considered to be facing homelessness until they are homeless'.<sup>14</sup>
- 3.12 The lack of access to affordable housing for care experienced young people means that some are stuck in supported accommodation for longer than they would like. They may have developed the confidence and independent living to move into their own home, but cannot find somewhere affordable, or in the right place, for them to live. This, in turn, results in other young people having to wait longer than necessary to access supported accommodation.

### **Support when transitioning into an independent, settled home**

- 3.13 Young people, including those who are care experienced, have also told us about the importance of housing-related support when they move into an independent, settled home. This includes moving from a children's home, foster care or supported accommodation. This is another transition that they have to manage, and continuity of support to help them to settle in and manage their tenancy, as well as any challenges is critical, particularly for a care experienced young person who doesn't have a family support network to rely on. Some people talked about the experience of moving from a children's home to an independent tenancy as 'very scary' and 'unknown', calling for more support to alleviate their fears.

### **Rapid rehousing**

- 3.14 As local authorities plan for rapid rehousing, they should consider how to best meet the housing and support needs of care leavers, including access to social and private rented housing, and provision of specialist supported accommodation and Housing First for Youth.

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<sup>11</sup> Rock Trust, [Housing First for Youth Pilot Evaluation Report](#) (2020)

<sup>12</sup> Bevan Foundation, [Wales' Housing Crisis: an update on the private rental market in Wales](#) (2022)

<sup>13</sup> End Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Don't Let Me Fall Through the Cracks Summary](#) (2020) p.13

<sup>14</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing homelessness in care experienced individuals](#) (2022) p.21

## 4. Accessing and navigating other services

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- 4.1 Housing support providers told us that the current approach to the referral of care leavers to other support services as part of the transition process lacks clarity. Equally, the inconsistency, repetition and impersonal nature of referrals and risk assessments can leave the young person feeling that their needs have been misunderstood, or in some cases exacerbates the complex support needs of the young person.<sup>15</sup>
- 4.2 The duplication and fragmentation of referrals and pathway reviews were a significant concern among the providers we approached, particularly in ensuring that the transition period encompassed a trauma-informed approach. One example given by Dewis saw a young person referred to a total of nine services at one time, creating the risk of the young person repeating their story across multiple reviews and therefore reliving traumatic experiences as a result.
- 4.3 Access to mental health services was highlighted by providers as a particular challenge during the transition period, with lengthy waiting times creating confusion as to whether a young person should be referred to CAMHS (due to their age at referral) or adult mental health services (due to their likely age once they reach the end of the waiting list). According to a review of services for homeless care leavers by End Youth Homelessness Cymru, the transition from CAMHS to adult mental health services was often difficult to navigate therefore impacting their ability to overcome and successfully manage mental health issues.<sup>16</sup> There are also concerns about the impact on care experienced young people of transitioning from CAMHS to adult mental health services, where the threshold for support or range of support options could change dramatically – thus leaving them with very different treatment and support after the transition.
- 4.4 Additionally, some providers highlighted a gap in the communications from local authorities and Health Boards to housing support providers regarding referrals to mental health services. In many cases, this leaves housing support providers (who are often helping to the young person to navigate the system) unaware of the pathways available to a young person, particularly those on the threshold for further referral.
- 4.5 These findings were previously highlighted in our Experts by Experience report<sup>17</sup> to the Homelessness Action Group, which called for services to prepare young people for adulthood at a much younger age and to better communicate the options available to them. Participants called for people to be able stay in care longer, for better planning in advance of people leaving care, maintaining support once people have moved on, more counselling and social support and to teach young people practical life skills and how to keep safe. One person said:

*“Transition from child to adult is still a huge problem. Everything stops.” (Expert by Experience)*

### Importance of a trusted advocate and navigator

- 4.6 The role of a trusted advocate and navigator to help young people to interact with services was championed by the people we spoke to. The system is incredibly complex, and help to navigate services with someone who is trusted by the young person can be extremely helpful, particularly if the young person is empowered to inform and influence the referrals and shape their experience. Work carried out by Public Health Wales has also highlighted the importance of harnessing peer support relationships, from those that have either experienced the care system or homelessness themselves, who may be able to provide support and advice that may help other care leavers access useful resources and services.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ending Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Don't Let Me Fall Through the Cracks Summary](#) (2020) p.13

<sup>16</sup> Ending Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Don't Let Me Fall Through the Cracks Summary](#) (2020) p.18

<sup>17</sup> Cymorth Cymru, [How we should end homelessness by people who have experienced it](#) (2020)

<sup>18</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing Homelessness in Care Experience Individuals](#) (2022) p.14

## 5. Independent living and financial management skills

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- 5.1 We believe that support to develop independent living skills, such as cooking skills, tenancy maintenance, and financial management skills are key to enabling a successful transition period and helping young care leavers to avoid the adverse outcomes of the 'care cliff', while helping care leavers to prevent or exit homelessness.
- 5.2 Budgeting and financial capabilities have been identified in previous research as the most important skill for young people and care leavers, with many feeling that a lack of understanding of their own finances contributed to the failure of their tenancy.<sup>19</sup>
- 5.3 Alongside financial management skills, many care leavers also require adequate funds in the form of Universal Credit or housing benefit. Housing support providers feel that the current welfare system is inadequate and fails to provide enough financial support to enable young people to access and manage to cost of accommodation. As referenced in paragraph 3.12, Local Housing Allowance rates are completely out of touch with the real cost of renting and people are not receiving enough housing benefit to afford private rented accommodation. As a consequence, young people end up in rent arrears unable to access further financial support or using Discretionary Housing Payments. Many housing support providers have told us that the Universal Credit system acts as a disincentive to work for people in supported accommodation, as the loss in housing benefit means they cannot afford their rent.
- 5.4 The lack of inadequate financial support through the welfare system can sometimes push people into the underground economy to find extra income, which can leave them at risk of exploitation or criminality.
- 5.5 Some concerns have been raised about the impact of the Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilot, as this has created challenges with claiming benefits, particularly housing benefit. In addition to issues with benefits, the UBI pilot also has the potential to pose a risk to vulnerable young people due to the influx in cash, including being at risk of exploitation or exacerbating complex needs, such as substance use issues. Based on the providers we spoke to, many said that although they were supportive of the UBI pilot in principle, the current implementation does not fully realise the practicalities and realities on the ground. The staggering of payments has been suggested as a potential solution to both mitigate vulnerabilities but also help them to better manage funds when they lack the experience of managing large sums of money. There are also concerns about a lack of planning for transitioning away from the UBI when the pilot stops.
- 5.6 Getting care leavers and other young people work ready is also a key part of the transition process, with providers such as Llamau offering valuable guidance and training through their education programmes.

## 6. The role of social services

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### Continuity of social worker support

- 6.1 Through our engagement with housing support providers in Wales, a commonly raised issue was the drop off in support received from social services and social workers following a placement in supported accommodation, despite a need for continued intervention from statutory services. This can be extremely concerning for the housing support workers, who have told us that they can find it difficult to get social services involved again. The lack of communication about the decrease in support can also be frustrating for the young person.

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<sup>19</sup> Ending Youth Homelessness Cymru, [Don't Let Me Fall Through the Cracks Summary](#) (2020) p.14

- 6.2 Some housing support providers recognised that this was often caused by staffing pressures and recruitment issues within social services. This can also lead to inconsistency in the support given to young people, with high staff turnover resulting in care leavers being placed with multiple social workers, from 4 to 5 in the most common of cases to around 25 to 30 in the most extreme cases, therefore impacting the continuity of care and their ability to build trusting relationships.<sup>20</sup> Common effects of inconsistent care include:
- Distrust in services
  - Reluctance to fully engage with support of any kind, either from social services or housing support
  - Emotional destabilisation and exacerbation of mental health issues

### Managing expectations regarding housing solutions

- 6.3 The social worker can play an important part in managing the expectations of the young person during the transition period and placement in adult accommodation. In many cases, when leaving residential care, care leavers are perceived to want or expect to be placed in their own property i.e. single bed flat. However, this is often legally or financially unattainable due to issues such as rent prices, conditions of rent agreements, a lack of single bed properties, the reluctance of PRS landlords to take on young people on benefits, and the heightened risk of vulnerability to the young person.
- 6.4 Housing support providers have told us that high expectations can sometimes be driven by social workers, which are often higher than what is both realistic and reasonable for the young person. This can lead to reluctance from the young person to engage with services, as they expect more than what is being offered, which in turn may exacerbate emotional or behavioural issues, and issues with distrust. Housing support workers also highlighted that it impacts on efforts to help young people become independent as they become dependent on services to provide them with what they want and/or need rather than learning how to deal with the issue themselves.
- 6.5 Some housing support providers highlighted the potential to review training for social workers to help them to understand what is both appropriate and realistic when placing care leavers in adult accommodation. They felt that it was important that social workers understand the types of accommodation available to homeless and at-risk care leavers, and the services available to them within that accommodation. For example, the difference between residential care and supported accommodation, or what supported accommodation providers have the capacity to do by comparison. Overall, there was agreement that social workers should receive greater training on housing to enable them to more effectively interact with providers, thus advocating for a more collaborative and joined up approach to the transition period.
- 6.6 An example of a current good practice which seeks to better engage trainee social workers with the housing and homelessness sector, is the offer of work placements alongside housing support workers. For example, charity and supported housing provider Digartref, has previously taken on social workers during their placement year, giving them a greater insight into the functions and role of supported accommodation.
- 6.7 There is also a need refocus how social workers prepare care leavers in advance of leaving of residential care, including resilience training and independent living skills as a way of managing those expectations ready and strengthening the transition period for when care leavers enter adult accommodation. The charity Barnardo's already offers materials including the Pathway to Independent Living for local authorities with Shelter Cymru looking to relaunch the guidance with a focus on improving its initial implementation.

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<sup>20</sup> Public Health Wales, [Preventing Homelessness in Care Experience Individuals](#) (2022) p.3



## 7. Ending stigma: Trauma informed approaches

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- 7.1 It is important that all services understand the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experienced on young care experienced young people. This can have a significant impact on their ability and willingness to trust individuals and services, and can also impact on their ability to regulate their emotions when they are upset or frustrated. Services must have an understanding of this and ensure that they deliver a trauma-informed approach so that no-one is left behind. The work of the ACE Hub Wales will be important over the coming years to try and encourage all public services to adopt a trauma informed approach.
- 7.2 Our members have shared examples with us about how attitudes towards care leavers can lead to discrimination and the risk of criminalisation. There is a strong feeling that care leavers start on a different level to non-care leavers, and don't have the same space to make the 'safe mistakes' that those who have not experienced care can make. Behaviour which may be viewed as part of growing up for many, can carry a much higher risk of criminalisation for young people with experience of care due to stigma, and has the potential to end someone's tenancy.
- 7.3 It was pointed out that when a young person at home has a 'melt down' or displays signs of frustration, it is not the default to call the police. However, it can be the default to involve the police if care leavers display the same behaviours.
- 7.4 If the Welsh Government's aim of not criminalising young people is to be realised, it is vital that all services working with, or likely to come into contact with young people, invest in training to ensure all staff are trauma informed and have an understanding of the impact that trauma has on emotional development and regulation, as well as how to support people to cope with trauma.

## 8. Recommendations

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- A longer and more flexible transition period for care experienced young people.
- Greater collaboration and multi-agency approaches to providing care, support and housing.
- Appropriate temporary accommodation and support for care leavers who are homeless.
- Consideration of the needs of care experienced young people as we move to rapid rehousing, including access to social housing and the private rented sector, and the provision of specialist young people's supported accommodation and Housing First for Youth.
- Additional financial support to help care leavers to access an independent home.
- Continued housing-related support to help care experienced young people to move into and maintain an independent home.
- Improvements in the welfare system, including an increase in Local Housing Allowance rates.
- Better join-up and information sharing to avoid care experienced young people having to re-tell their story to multiple agencies and risk re-traumatisation.
- Improved mental health provision and clarity for care experienced young people moving from CAMHs to adult services.
- Trusted advocates and navigators to help care experienced young people to navigate the systems and be empowered to influence their referrals and shape their experience.
- Support to develop independent living and financial management skills for care experienced young people.
- Greater continuity of social worker support following placement in supported accommodation.
- Greater knowledge of housing options and system among social workers.
- A greater focus on trauma-informed approaches across all public services.