

WHO CARES?

The link between care experienced young people and homelessness, and recommended strategies to address the issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth homelessness has reached unprecedented levels in the UK. This is the fifth consecutive year that the number of young people seeking help from their local council for homelessness has increased (*Centrepoin, 2021*)¹ and data suggests that around one-quarter of this number are care experienced (*NAO, 2015*)².

Care experienced young people are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society (*Mendes, 2006*)³, disproportionately affected by homelessness and its knock-on effects, which can last a lifetime: broken relationships, low educational attainment and poor mental, emotional and physical health. So, what is not working?

Youth homelessness is a complex issue and providing accommodation alone will not address the underlying issues to provide a long-term solution. Drawing on the experience of the youth charity, Step by Step, and referencing existing research, this paper looks at why care experienced young people are vulnerable to homelessness and four key, interrelated factors that contribute:

1. Lack of a stable homelife.
2. NEET – not in employment, education or training.
3. Financial instability.
4. Complex mental and emotional health needs.

Care experienced young people deserve a better chance at living successful, independent lives and service providers must address all of these issues to bring about real and lasting change. Safe and secure accommodation must be underpinned by holistic mental health and emotional wellbeing support and should include:

- A stable, safe homelife with reliable and consistent relationships.
- Education and training opportunities that move young care leavers into education, employment or training (EET) as quickly as possible.
- Life skills training and mentorship.
- Wraparound mental health counselling and emotional wellbeing therapy.

This paper provides tried and tested recommendations that may be used for anyone involved in working with care experienced young people to help them transition successfully to independent living.

1 Centrepoin databank report, 2021
2 NAO, 2015
3 Mendes, 2006

Youth homelessness is a major issue in the UK. More than 122,000 young people in 2020/21 presented to their council as homeless, the fifth consecutive year that this number has increased (*Centrepoin, 2020/21*)⁵. Care experienced young people are disproportionately affected; data suggests that they account for up to 25% of homelessness figures (*NAO, 2015*)⁶. One third of care leavers become homeless in the first two years after leaving care (*Morris, 2010*)⁷ and half of people first experiencing homelessness are aged under 21 (*Thomas, 2014*)⁸. Youth homelessness is a complex issue and providing a place to stay by itself is not a long-term solution.

The path to adulthood

For most of us, the path to adulthood is a relatively stable time of learning and personal development, a forward trajectory towards independence, and any turbulence along the way is smoothed out with the help of a protective and nurturing family. Most young people can rely on their family during times of difficulty or financial insecurity and living at home with parents is now the most common living arrangement for young adults aged 18-34 (*ONS, 2019*)⁹. In contrast, for care experienced young people, who may not have this supportive safety net, the path to adulthood can be erratic

and uncertain, and often ends abruptly bringing unexpected and overwhelming responsibilities. When interviewed, more than a third felt that they left care too early without the skills required to live independently (*Ofsted, 2022*)¹⁰.

Step by Step

Step by Step, a youth charity based in Hampshire, has been working with young people facing homelessness and difficult life challenges for more than thirty years. The charity provides accommodation in shared foyers and hundreds of Supported Lodgings in the south-central area. Importantly, the charity's accommodation provision is underpinned by tailored wraparound support including life skills training, one-to-one mentoring, mental health counselling and emotional wellbeing therapy.

Debbie Moreton, the charity's Chief Executive Officer says, "Changes to government funding in the last decade have meant that an increasing proportion of the young people coming to us for help are care experienced. Our mission is to provide them with a safe and stable place to live and to empower them with the skills, resilience and confidence they need to move on successfully."

"Young people leaving out of home care are arguably one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society."

(Mendes, 2006¹)

LACK OF STABLE HOME LIFE

To ensure that care experienced young people have the best possible opportunity of transitioning to successful independent living, they need safe and stable place accommodation with tailored wraparound support that addresses the underlying drivers of homelessness:

1. Lack of a stable homelife.
2. NEET – not in education, employment or training.
3. Financial insecurity.
4. Complex mental and emotional health needs.

Whilst there is a complex interrelation between these different drivers of youth homelessness, each one will be discussed in turn with Step by Step's experienced-based insights and recommendations.

- 4 Mendes, 2006, From Dependence to Interdependence
- 5 Centrepoin
- 6 National Audit Office, 2015
- 7 Morris, 2010
- 8 Thomas, 2014
- 9 ONS, 2019
- 10 Ofsted, 2022



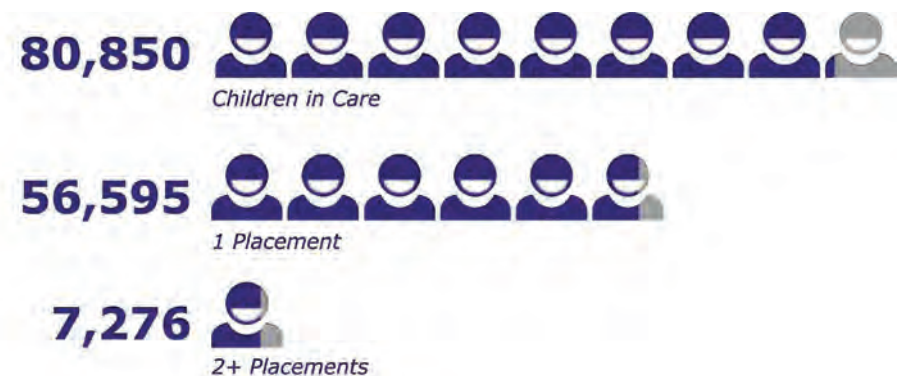
For a large proportion of the 81,000 children looked after in England (*DfE, 2021*)¹¹, their lives will have been chaotic and traumatic, marked by disruptions at home and at school and by a lack of healthy, loving relationships, affecting everything from their mental health to their attainment of education, qualifications, and life skills. "Young people experiencing high levels of placement instability have been found to have the poorest levels of adjustment in terms of employment, social relationships, financial management and housing" (*Biehal et al. 1995*)¹².

The need for a stable homelife is so important that the Children's Commissioner for England launched the stability monitor in 2017 to "shed a light on the issue of stability"¹³ amongst children looked after. The most recent report showed that 10% of children in care had seen multiple moves in the

year with older children being more likely to have placement instability, at a formative stage of their development.¹⁴

"Stability can support a child to flourish in their home and school whilst in care and reduces the impact of any difficulties they have already had to endure or any compounding problems." (*Clarke, 2020*)¹⁵.

Research shows that placement instability reduces a child's opportunities to develop secure attachments and may also exacerbate any existing behavioural and emotional difficulties (*Beek, 2005*)¹⁶ making it difficult for children to establish relationships with carers and contributing to placement breakdown and feelings of rejection. A stable placement with reliable and consistent relationships lay the foundations for a far smoother journey towards independence.



The Step by Step Approach



Step by Step's Supported Lodgings provide young people with a room in a host's home where they benefit from a safe, stable and nurturing family environment. The charity recruits hosts with a range of skills and experience from diverse backgrounds who are trained to mentor their young person and teach them essential life skills, which they may be lacking. Support workers provide specialist mental health care and work closely with hosts to ensure any issues are out quickly resolved. The charity's success in Supported Lodgings is based on:

1. Building understanding

Staff and young people get to know each other, then together they make decisions about accommodation and support needs. Staff build a relationship from the start, finding out about the young person's strengths, likes, dislikes and goals for the future, and, importantly, what they are looking for in a host. The vital contribution of external service teams and social workers can not be underestimated and support workers build strong relationships with external service teams and social workers to understand the young person's background and any behavioural issues or support needs. They work together with the young person to create a self-care and development plan with successful independent living as the end goal. The charity's support workers, or STEP workers - Skills, Talent, Empowerment, Progress – ensure young people gain the skills they need to achieve this goal.

Kelly Headen, Head of Step by Step's Supported Lodgings, says, "this investment of time at the beginning of the young person's journey with us is crucial to building a strong and trusting relationship and helps us find the best match with a host family in the right geographical area."

2. Finding great hosts

Success in Supported Lodgings depends on finding great hosts; people with a desire to make a meaningful difference in a young person's life. Many of Step by Step's hosts have first-hand experience of care themselves or a background in social care and teaching, a shared experience, which helps build stronger, more empathetic relationships.

3. Host support

A STEP worker is allocated to each placement and supports the host as well as the young person, ensuring that problems are ironed out quickly and that the placement runs smoothly. The charity has developed innovative methods to support and retain hosts including a 24/7 advice line, access to an online support forum and regular community-building events in host areas. Headen says, "We help our hosts create a strong and inclusive support network in the community that will help young people going forward."

4. Safety

Ensuring the young person's safety is of paramount importance. Safeguarding practices are embedded across the organisation starting with robust procedures for host and staff

recruitment and regular accommodation checks. Headen adds, "A key teaching area for hosts is personal safety skills for their young person, both out in the community or online. Hosts help their young person to identify people and locations that may present a risk and help them build strategies for staying safe including confidence and communication skills."

The results speak for themselves with 92% of young people coming to Step by Step for help, moving on successfully.

The aim of Supported Lodgings is to provide a safe and stable home

environment with trusted hosts, which can help to overcome the disruption and chaos that many of these young people will have experienced. This is the starting point to a successful transition to independence.

- 11 Dept for Education, 2021
- 12 Biehal, 1995
- 13 Children's Commissioner for England, 2017
- 14 Stability Index 2019/2020
- 15 Clarke, 2020
- 16 Beek, 2005
- 17 Mendes, 2009

Children who experience supportive and stable placements... are far more likely to overcome the adversities resulting from their pre-care and in-care experiences, and prosper when they leave care

Mendes, 2009



Years of government austerity measures and cuts to essential services, the COVID pandemic and now, the cost-of-living crisis, have all taken a huge toll on young people, particularly those who are most vulnerable, affecting not only their mental and physical health but also education, employment, and training opportunities. According to research by the charity, Action for Children, funding for children's services fell by £2.2 billion between 2010 - 2019, a 23% reduction¹⁹. As a result, councils have reduced funding for early intervention services by almost half during this period. These cuts disproportionately affect children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, impacting education and training opportunities with a knock-on effect on employment figures.

Whilst figures for NEET are at a record low generally (11% for 16–24-year-olds), the figure is almost four times greater for care experienced young people, and only 6% of care leavers go on to university compared to 47% of peers (*Dept for Education, 2021*).

Care experienced young people face ongoing challenges and disadvantages in education, employment and training opportunities and are more likely than their non-care experienced peers to have difficulty gaining employment, to work in unskilled jobs, to have weak support networks, lower earnings, and lack preparation for independent living.²⁰

Time spent out of education, employment and training negatively impacts every area of a young person's life: their confidence and self-esteem, relationships, financial security and ultimately, their successful transition to adulthood. Education and training opportunities are the springboard for moving forward in life, and transitioning from NEET to EET as quickly as possible should be a priority. The first step towards successful EET progression is providing a stable homelife, especially as the stress of leaving care often coincides with GCSE exams or moving to further education.

“Step by Step has helped me in many ways from getting things sorted that needed to be done, supporting me with appointments and helping me sort my life out. They have been there when I have needed them, giving me support and someone to turn to when I needed to offload about my day-to-day issues. The difference between Step by Step and other organisations is that STEP workers care for you on a personal level - they do their job because they want to, not because they have to.”

“Looked after children aren't less clever than other children, they are just less lucky”.

(CSJ, n.d)¹⁸

The Step by Step Approach



As soon as young people are settled into their new home, hosts and STEP workers get to work on moving them into education, employment or training. Hosts support and mentor their young person, helping them research courses, apply for funding or practise interviews and teach skills such as CV writing and form-filling.

STEP workers focus on building relationships with schools, colleges and training providers in an area, helping to ensure that opportunities are available. The charity has built successful partnerships with corporates who offer apprenticeships to the young people.

There are also opportunities for volunteering and work experience with partner organisations.

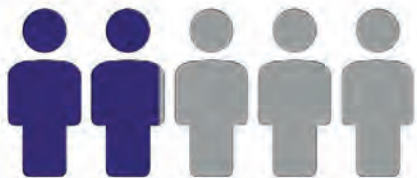
CEO Debbie Moreton says, "There is no one-size fits all to addressing NEET. Each person has different needs, abilities and goals and therefore each person's development plan is specific to their needs. We believe that education and training can change the course of a young person's life and we make absolutely sure that there are opportunities available to all the young people we support."

"Falling into the NEET status is first and foremost a loss of young people's potential."

(Kyriakopoulou, 2021)²¹



10.5% of 16-24 year olds are not in education, employment or training



39% of care experienced 16-24 year olds are not in education, employment or training

The best defence against social exclusion is to have a job [...] the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training [...] The young people involved are disproportionately from poor backgrounds in deprived areas [...] social exclusion in later life is disproportionately the result, They [NEETs] are much more likely to be unemployed, dependent on benefits, to live in unstable family structures and to be depressed about their lives.

(Social Exclusion Unit, 1999:6-8)

Meaningful employment is the right of every young person, enabling them to thrive as contributing members of society and service providers should prioritise the transition from NEET to EET as quickly as possible.

This means ensuring that there is the right support in place to help them develop new practical skills, build confidence and resilience and build communication skills.

- 18 Centre for Social Justice, 2021
- 19 Action for Children, 2021
- 20 Dept for Education, 2021
- 21 Kyriakopoulou, 2021



The transition to adulthood for children looked after is usually determined by a deadline and can be abrupt and sudden, bringing financial freedom and responsibility but with limited means and financial awareness. Research shows that care leavers feel they often leave care too early, are not sufficiently prepared for living independently, and that they experience problems including financial and accommodation insecurity (Furey, 2021)²². Too often, they lack the money management skills usually acquired at home from parents and carers.

Compounding this lack of financial awareness, the UK benefits system is complex with long wait times for payments, government support such as the Leaving Care Grant is often paid in lump sums making it more difficult to budget, and restricted Housing Benefit for young people is usually paid directly to the person's bank account rather than to the landlord.

Furthermore, there is a chronic lack of affordable housing available, which means turning to the private rental sector where large deposits are needed, and rent must be paid in advance. This is all set against a backdrop of rising costs and rising inflation. For care experienced young people, without the bank of mum and dad to fall back on, and often lacking essential money management skills, this financial insecurity can lead to debt, mental health issues and homelessness.

Finding work, ideally with a career path that leads to greater earning potential, is also key to a more financially secure future, but when there are more immediate needs to meet, this may not be a priority or even a possibility. Employment, therefore, is often in

“part-time, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs, which makes it difficult to plan a future-oriented career with greater earnings potential (Furey, 2021)²³.”

Whilst work experience and apprenticeships are ideal opportunities for young people to gain new skills and confidence, they can often leave them more financially worse off than being unemployed. The Centre for Social Justice has set out a series of policy recommendations, focusing particularly on traineeships and apprenticeships²⁴. These include:

- Allowing care leavers to retain their benefits during the first month of an apprenticeship.
- Allowing care leavers to retain their Housing Benefit at the existing level for the first month of an apprenticeship or traineeship.
- Extending the policy of looked-after children able to stay in foster care until the age of 21 to residential care leavers.
- Making higher education funding portable for 16–19-year-olds.
- Creating a national forum for local authorities, voluntary organisations and stakeholders to share best practice.
- Enhancing the role, status and training of personal advisers role.

Skills training and mentorship are crucial to ensure that each young person is equipped with the tools they will need to manage their finances and should be part of any long-term strategy to avoiding homelessness.



The Step by Step Approach

96% of the young people coming to Step by Step for help lack some essential life skills. Hosts provide ongoing skills training across a wide range of areas including personal care and health through to DIY and cooking. Money management is one of the most important areas covered and hosts teach practical skills such as how to open a bank account, through to helping with benefits entitlements, form-filling and arranging meetings at the bank or job centre. Staff measure and track each person's achievements

in regular meetings and young people are motivated by seeing their progress. Head of the charity's Fostering and Supported Lodgings, Kelly Headen, adds, "Financial insecurity is a huge problem area for our young people and most need help learning about budgeting and money management. We also make sure they are aware of the risks of using credit, loan sharks and payday loan advertising. These are all vital skills to help our young people become financially secure."



47% of all young people go to university

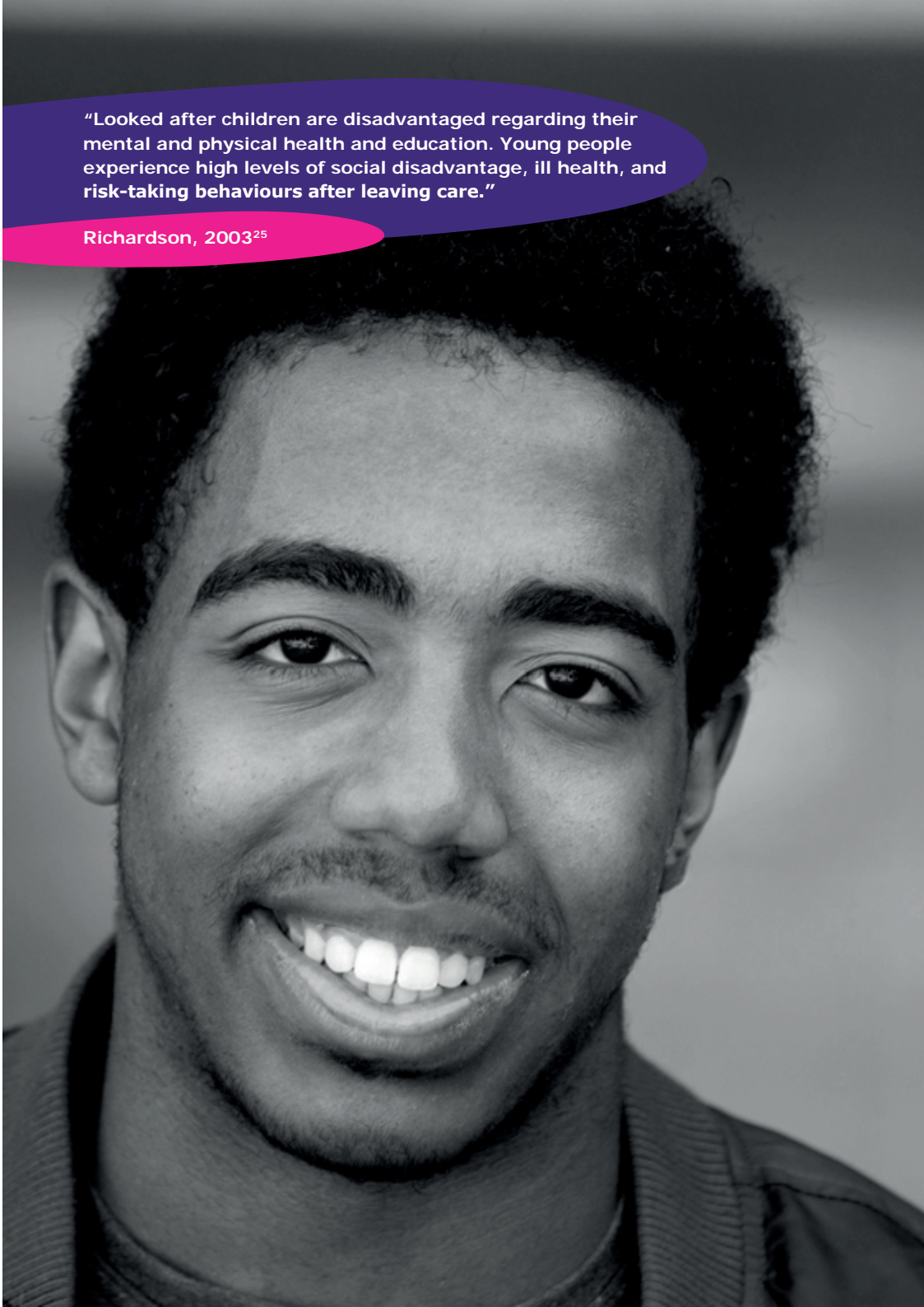


6% of care leavers go to university

22 Furey, 2021
 23 Furey, 2021
 24 Centre for Social Justice



"Step by Step has taught me that my past doesn't have to affect my future and anything I put my mind to I can achieve."



“Looked after children are disadvantaged regarding their mental and physical health and education. Young people experience high levels of social disadvantage, ill health, and risk-taking behaviours after leaving care.”

Richardson, 2003²⁵

COMPLEX MENTAL & EMOTIONAL HEALTH NEEDS

Care experienced young people will often have deep-seated and complex emotional needs, and this can lead to self-harming behaviour, substance abuse and patterns of offending. Research shows that the rate of psychiatric disorder in young people in care is up to 67% compared with 15% in a non-care experienced group (McCann, 1996)²⁶. Feelings of abandonment and rejection from being separated from family can contribute to low self-esteem and confidence and can lead to an inability to cope and form positive relationships. To compound this situation, young people in care are often stigmatised and discriminated against, causing issues when dealing with authorities and landlords and impacting their access to education, work and housing. These young people

have some of the poorest outcomes in society and without a protective family to support and guide them, may struggle to access the help they need.

Given this background, service providers should adopt a strengths-based, trauma informed approach that prioritises mental health for both young people and staff. This means investing in experienced mental health practitioners who are trained in trauma informed recovery and who are skilled relationship builders. They should be able to quickly gain the trust of young people who will often initially reject any form of help. A trauma informed approach is the best way to help these young people acquire the tools and coping mechanisms they will need to manage their complex needs and improve their mental health and



15% of young people not in care have a classifiable mental health disorder



67% of young people in care have a classifiable mental health disorder

The Step by Step Approach



Young people come to Step by Step under extreme circumstances and often present with complex needs and vulnerabilities including substance abuse, offending, learning difficulties, mental health issues and poor educational attainment. Step by Step has embedded a trauma informed approach across its entire service and from the first meeting, staff focus on drawing out strengths, talents and aspirations instead of looking for problems and challenges. CEO Debbie Moreton says, "Young people who have faced adverse childhood experiences such as a family breakdown, often don't believe they have anything positive to contribute. Our STEP workers are skilled at building trust and getting young people to open up and talk about their hidden skills and dreams for their future. Hosts and STEP workers support their young person to build on strengths towards independence, helping each young person to better manage their mental and physical health. Well-maintained and welcoming accommodation also makes a huge difference in aiding recovery and we set high standards for our Supported Lodgings so that young people feel welcomed and proud of where they live."

Step by Step's accommodation provision is based on individual needs and is underpinned by tailored wraparound mental health support and counselling. Kelly Headen says, "Each young person coming to Step by Step receives between seven to ten support hours each week focussed on education, employment and skills training, and additional support from trained mental health practitioners, if needed." Making sure that the young person is included in developing their

self-care plan is important because it encourages a sense of ownership and personal responsibility for their mental wellbeing. An important part of the self-care plan is learning healthy coping mechanisms, and hosts in a supported lodging environment are ideally placed to help their young person practice and embed these new skills.

Re-traumatisation can be caused by the young person having to repeatedly tell their story; it entrenches the trauma and can exacerbate any mental health issues. Support workers should be skilled communicators, able to build strong relationships with external agencies and social workers to share relevant and appropriate information. This means they will be fully informed and can tell the young person's story on their behalf to hosts or other professionals involved in care. This helps to remove pressure, stress and the fear of judgement, and minimises the risk of placement breakdown.

Debbie Moreton adds, "This can be demanding work, both psychologically & practically. We support our staff and hosts to avoid vicarious trauma with supervised opportunities for reflection individually and during team meetings, as well as personal counselling. Our staff and hosts are our greatest assets when it comes to helping young people and we make sure we give them the right support in their work."

The Charity includes young people in its service development meetings as an opportunity for the young person to build communication skills, self-esteem and confidence. This could be as simple as asking for feedback at the end of their placement through to helping shape services and protocols.

Step by Step's Young Persons Advisory Group is a group of young people accessing different parts of its service who meet to review policies, procedures, accommodation and the development of support services. The charity believes that young people play a crucial role. CEO Debbie Moreton

says, "The challenges and issues these young people have faced put them in a unique position to help others in similar situations. We find that help and information is more impactful and better received when delivered peer to peer."



"It really opened my eyes to the causes of my problems I'd never thought about and how to deal with them."

Mental health counselling and emotional wellbeing therapy are vital to support these vulnerable young people through traumatic and overwhelming times and should be an intrinsic part of any accommodation provision. The stable and safe environment provided by Supported Lodgings is the ideal

environment in which vulnerable young people can start to recover and heal from their experiences and build the emotional strength and resilience they will need going forward.

25 Richardson, 2003
26 McCann, 1996

A ROADMAP FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Care experienced young people often face huge challenges as they grow towards adulthood, leaving them significantly more at risk of homelessness than their peers. To overcome these challenges and ensure that these young people have the best chance of successful independent living, providers in this sector must facilitate:

1. Stable and secure placements: stability must be the starting point before moving forwards with a development plan. Accommodation provision should be based on a deep understanding of individual needs, with trusted, reliable hosts supported by skilled staff.

2. Help with moving from NEET to EET: education and training provide the opportunities for moving forward in life. Enabling young people to transition from NEET to EET as quickly as possible should be a priority. Providers should seek to build strong relationships with schools, colleges and training organisations in the local area to maximise opportunities for work experience and qualifications, paving the way to future employment and career options.

3. Financial security: young people leaving care are often not prepared for the financial responsibility that follows. Providers must ensure they offer training in financial awareness and money management and must ensure they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deal with financial institutions, the UK benefits system and housing providers.

4. Wraparound mental and emotional health support: any accommodation provision should be underpinned by tailored support delivered by trained and skilled support workers. This will help to ensure these young people build appropriate coping mechanisms and develop the confidence and resilience they will need to transition successfully to independent living.

This combination of accommodation and support will help to create a stable and safe environment conducive to growth and personal development where young people facing difficult and often overwhelming challenges can learn the skills and coping mechanisms they will need to achieve their goals.

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Young People. Hard Times. Bright Futures.



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