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Portsmouth's Aid in Universal Credit "Failure"

Picture Included

Why is the Government's Universal Credit System Failing, and What is Portsmouth Doing to Help?

Between 2013 and 2018, 20 people died of causes relating to homelessness in Portsmouth. Southampton's is higher, with 41. Every single death on the streets is one too many. I wanted to find out what they experience; Who they can trust and where they can go.

As part of my research, I arranged an interview with Catherine "Cait" Smith*, who works at The Foyer, a hostel in Portsmouth that provides temporary accommodation for vulnerable young people who require housing with support. In the building, there is capacity for 56 young people, and there are neighbouring hostels nearby with a combined total of thirty beds.

There is an overwhelming need for this facility as of late, due to the impact of the novel Coronavirus. The facility assists people who have left children's care homes, those in difficult family environments or young people who are "sofa-surfing"- otherwise known as having no fixed abode.

For Cait, a typical day starts early in the morning, with a handover session between the staff and updates on the situations of current residents. This is then followed by a resident welfare and room check. There's then telephone calls to every registered resident that is not in the building.

"There are many reasons that people are made homeless. For young people, the main problem is that they have to leave care at 16. The issue is that they cannot sign a tenancy agreement until they are eighteen".

Psychologically, there's also assistance for behavioural management, drug or alcohol addiction and dealing with any mental health problem that arises. The residents are also expected to look for employment or college courses that they can take.

There are, Cait says, many problematic issues she has to resolve. For her, the main issues: "seem to be relating to issues with mental health- namely depression and self-harming".

She follows: "There are many reasons that people are made homeless. For young people, the main problems are that they have to leave care at 16. The issue is that

they cannot sign a tenancy agreement until they are eighteen". Social services generally house people at The Foyer for this period.

Many other young people become homeless due to social problems with the family. These are inclusive of substance abuse, physical, mental or sexual abuse.

There's also, Cait says, an issue with money management. She says: "Many of the people that I work with are on a high number of benefits; they often do not prioritise their income to maintain their accommodation.

She recalls the days of years gone by: "Many years ago, homeless people were able to access governmental benefits on a daily basis by visiting the JobCentre, however this has since changed to Universal Credit. Furthermore, people now need a dedicated address and access to a smart-phone or computer in order to make a claim for benefits".

Cait does not like the new system, and I agree with her. It feels too restrictive. You have to jump through the Tories' bureaucratic hoops just to get enough money to live.

But where do residents go after The Foyer? It's only ever billed as a temporary accommodation. Cait informs me: "If they have a social worker then they (the residents) are sometimes offered social housing. But if not, it's up to them to find a shared house".

Social services will often end support with care-leavers once they hit 18 years old.

This can often be a problem. Therefore, Cait says: "They can accept those with drug, alcohol or mental health issues.

As a lot of the young people do not have access to enough funds for a month's deposit plus one month's rent in advance, they are not usually able to rent a flat in the private sector. The only group of Foyer residents that usually get their own flat are asylum seekers or refugees; social services have a duty of care to support them financially and educationally until they are 25 years of age.

"If I could give one piece of advice to someone who has just been made homeless", she continues, "I would urge them to go straight to Portsmouth City Council's housing offices to try and get temporary accommodation as soon as possible".

The person would stand in a much better stead if they were in temporary supported accommodation, rather than sleeping on the streets. Use the support that is offered to

you, even though there will be rules and restrictions that you should abide by. But there will be heating; a bed and staff that can help you gain access to Universal Credit and food.

The amount of money that has been allocated nationwide to those who need it most has plummeted. This might be due, in part, to the numerous cutbacks of the Conservatives.

In 2018, an article from The Guardian runs with the headline: “Welfare Spending for UK’s Poorest shrinks by £37bn”.

The effect of the Coronavirus and the fact that we have a no-deal Brexit will serve as a double blow to the United Kingdom’s economy. Those who are homeless may be hit strongly in some areas- businesses may not take on any more jobs in order to save money, for example.

After this, I asked Cait what her opinion was on the leading cause of homelessness in the local area.

Her answers ranging from “family break-ups, lack of education and/or life skills; therefore, resulting in dysfunctional families, unable to manage a tenancy” to the illegal- namely “involvement in criminal activities and substance abuse”. One problem is access to affordable accommodation- most landlords will not accept tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit.

Some people dream of an end to the black and white notions of walking away and pretending the homeless don’t exist. They might dream of a future in glorious Technicolor, where there are enough homes to go around.

No one is cold at night. No one is hungry in the day. Imagining a world where we don’t walk past people who need help, but give it to them instead. It’s not just down to the various governments of the future to throw money at the problem in the vague hope that it goes away. It’s also up to us.

ENDS