



Youth Homelessness in the UK:

A review for The OVO Foundation

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November 2015



Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned and funded by The OVO Foundation, and our thanks are due to Gaby Sethi and Justin Dekoszmovszky for their support with this work. We would also like to record our thanks to all of the key informants from across the UK who very generously found time to help us with this study. Particular thanks are owed to those key informants who provided feedback on an earlier version of this report and to Professors Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Glen Bramley for their comments and input on an early draft.

Disclaimer: All views and any errors contained in this report are the responsibility of the authors. The views expressed should not be assumed to be those of The OVO Foundation or of any of the key informants who assisted with this work.

About The OVO Foundation

The OVO Foundation is OVO Group's charitable arm. We support inspiring organisations with smart ideas to give young people a better future. Alongside energy and the environment, and education, The OVO Foundation focuses on youth poverty. The OVO Foundation plans to help address youth poverty by finding new and sustainable ways to improve young people's lives in the long term. As well as targeting the underlying causes of youth poverty, including youth homelessness, the Foundation works with partners and experts to support projects to help end this problem.

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

This study reviews changes in youth homelessness policy and practice across the UK since 2008. It draws on academic research, 'grey literature', and available data and statistics, combined with qualitative interviews and focus groups with 26 youth homelessness experts from the four UK nations. The review aims to identify key gaps in provision and practical models that offer the most effective responses to youth homelessness.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS POLICY IN THE UK

Young homeless people have different legal entitlements in each of the UK nations. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, only some 'priority' categories of young people are entitled to rehousing by their local authority, namely those with children, 16-17 year olds, 18-20 year old care leavers and those considered 'vulnerable' under homelessness legislation. The 2009 House of Lords ruling (the Southwark Judgement) has led to improved responses to homeless 16-17 year olds and more recent developments in case law may mean that a greater proportion of young people are considered 'vulnerable' and entitled to rehousing in the future.

In Scotland, 'priority' categories have been removed, meaning that virtually all young homeless people are now entitled to settled housing, a duty usually fulfilled through the offer of a social housing tenancy. In England and Wales, local authorities are now able to meet their rehousing duty using (less secure) private rented sector accommodation. Prevention-focused 'housing options' approaches are now well established in England, Wales and Scotland, though have not yet been introduced in Northern Ireland. Much praised new legislation requires Welsh local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent

homelessness for all eligible households, in addition to rehousing 'priority' groups for whom prevention fails.

The Coalition Government's period in office (2010-2015) saw investment in a number of programmes focused on homelessness, with specific funding streams launched to target homelessness among young people with the most complex needs (Fair Chance Fund) and to provide low-cost stable accommodation for young people seeking to work or study (Platform for Life). The needs of young homeless people have been the focus of particular attention in England through the development of the 'Positive Youth Accommodation Pathway' framework by youth homelessness charities in partnership with government/local authorities and in Scotland through a Scottish Parliament inquiry into youth homelessness prevention.

Restrictions to the welfare entitlements of young people – in particular the programme of welfare reform initiated by the Coalition Government and continued by the current majority-Conservative Government – have caused substantial concern. Those prompting greatest concern amongst stakeholders have included the introduction of Local Housing Allowance caps, the Shared Accommodation Rate, the intensification of benefit conditionality and the sharp rise in the use of sanctions, which disproportionately affect under 25 year old benefit claimants. It is feared that the removal of automatic Housing Benefit entitlement from 18-21 year olds from April 2017 will lead to an increase in youth homelessness. These welfare reforms are occurring within a broader context of budget cuts, which have led to a significant reduction in generic youth service provision such as youth centres and youth worker outreach teams.

These policy developments have taken place in challenging wider macroeconomic and social policy contexts. Most notably, the fallout from the post-2007 recession continues to impact the labour market opportunities of young people. Youth unemployment is three times the unemployment rate for the working-age population as a whole, and young

people in work are often on low pay and insecure contracts. Young people also face severe challenges within the housing market, including in being able to access and afford housing in the private and social rented sectors.

THE SCALE OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE UK

Calculating the scale of youth homelessness is challenging given the limitations of available data and its sometimes ‘hidden’ nature. There have been significant declines in levels of ‘official’ statutory youth homelessness (the number of young people owed the rehousing duty by local authorities) in England, Scotland and Wales since 2008/09. This is primarily attributed to the introduction of preventative ‘housing options’ approaches, though may also in England and Wales reflect the impact of the Southwark Judgement. There are concerns that the decline may also in part be the result of young people being dissuaded from applying as homeless (an unlawful practice known as ‘gatekeeping’).

Existing evidence suggests that declines in official ‘statutory’ homelessness may however have been offset by increases in other forms of homelessness. It was recently estimated that a total of 83,000 young people were in touch with homelessness services in the UK in 2013/14. This estimate combines statutory data on levels of ‘official’ homelessness and other data sources. In light of previous (though not directly comparable) estimates, this suggests that levels of youth homelessness are stable, and may even have increased, over the last decade. A 40% increase in the number of young people sleeping rough in London since 2011/12 has been a cause of grave concern.

Large-scale survey data on levels of overcrowding and rates of household formation suggests that hidden homelessness among young people may be increasing, particularly in London and the South East of England. According to a recent estimate, as many as one in five young people ‘sofa-surfed’ during 2013/14. Though for some young people sofa-surfing appears to be a short-term and safe experience enabling them to get back on their feet and avoid formal homelessness services, for others it involves a lack of privacy, insecurity,

negative impacts on health and employment, and can place them at risk of financial, sexual and/or physical exploitation and abuse.

The overall number of young people experiencing homelessness appears to have remained stable, and may even have increased slightly over the last decade. In the context of substantial cuts to services and the post-2010 programme of welfare reform it is likely to reflect, at least in part, enhanced emphasis on proactive prevention during this period that levels of youth homelessness have not risen substantially.

CAUSES, PROFILE AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Large-scale survey data indicates that young people are three times more likely to have experienced homelessness in the last five years than are older members of the general UK population. The link between young age and homelessness appears to be explained by the disproportionate experience of poverty among young people, rather than their youth, per se.

Young people being asked to leave the family home continues to be the most common immediate trigger of youth homelessness in the UK. The financial pressure many families are experiencing as a result of welfare reform is therefore a growing concern. Young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and some Black and Minority Ethnic groups are more likely to experience homelessness than other young people. There is also concern about the housing needs of young migrants and older young people (i.e. those over 18 years old) given restrictions in the welfare entitlements of these groups.

There is clear evidence that a number of factors are associated with higher risk of homelessness, including: experiencing abuse or neglect as a child; experiencing domestic violence, mental health or substance issues within the family home; running away as a child; truanting or being excluded from school; leaving school with no qualifications; having learning disabilities; and being a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender young person. These

'red flags' offer organisations working with young people and their families indicators of risk to target support and prevent more severe problems developing.

Youth homelessness experts report that an increasing proportion of young people accessing services have 'complex needs', including mental health and behavioural issues, substance misuse, learning difficulties/disabilities, and/or offending. Some stakeholders see this increase as reflecting greater sensitisation to and diagnosis of support needs within the sector, the better prevention of homelessness among those with low support needs, and/or stricter targeting of services at those with higher and more complex needs. On the other hand, this increase is seen by some as the consequence of reduced youth service provision and difficulties accessing services that help young people address complex needs. Mental health issues among young homeless people, combined with limited access to and uptake of mental health services, present particularly acute challenges for the sector.

In line with a long-term decline in the proportion of young people using illicit substances, Class A substance misuse is now reported to be less of a concern for those working in the youth homelessness sector than in the past. The sharp increase in young people's use of New Psychoactive Substances, however, is a major challenge for some providers. These 'legal highs' are reportedly easy to access, low cost, and are associated with negative psychological and behavioural impacts that are particularly problematic in hostel-type accommodation. Use of 'legal highs' is considered to play a role in both causing and delaying the resolution of homelessness for young people.

SERVICE PROVISION FOR YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE

A range of initiatives have been developed to address the needs of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, spanning preventative interventions (both universal and targeted), accommodation options for young people requiring varying levels of support, and approaches seeking to enable young homeless people to access

employment and build their social networks. Although evidence regarding the effectiveness of some initiatives remains weak, this study highlights a range of approaches and interventions that appear to offer particular promise in strengthening youth homelessness provision in the current context.

PREVENTION

Despite the mainstreaming of preventative 'housing options' approaches across Great Britain, more could be done to effectively identify young people at risk of homelessness and intervene early to prevent further problems developing:

- Clear evidence regarding the groups of young people most likely to experience homelessness should be better utilised to ensure that those working with children, young people and their families are able to target efforts to prevent homelessness. This might be fostered via joint working with educational establishments, health services, youth services, Job Centres and the police.
- The provision of specialist mediation services and whole-family support for young people and their parents/carers should be improved and wherever possible provided before relationship problems reach crisis point. Efforts should additionally be made to improve the uptake of such services where they are already offered.
- Provision of good quality and safe emergency accommodation that offers flexible respite and 'time out' to struggling families, including non-institutional forms of emergency accommodation such as Nightstop, is particularly important.

ACCOMMODATION OPTIONS

In the current context, youth homelessness organisations face a major challenge in providing good quality accommodation that is genuinely affordable to young people both

in work (often on low wages) and out of work (often with limited entitlements to welfare support):

- There is a particular gap in accommodation provision for young homeless people with complex needs who require high levels of support. Approaches seen to offer promising solutions for this group include: high quality, small-scale supported accommodation projects; Supported Lodgings, which offer a room in a private home with trained hosts and support from professionals; and the 'Housing First' model in which homeless people move directly into 'normal' (scatter-site) housing on permanent tenancies and are provided with intensive, flexible and non-time limited support.
- Psychologically informed environments – consciously designed to take into account the psychological and emotional needs of service users – are now seen as crucial in the youth homelessness sector given that a higher proportion of young people using services have complex needs, including mental health and behavioural problems.
- For young people with low support needs, the development of long-term accommodation options that are affordable for individuals on a low income are required. Such provision might include: 'light touch' supported accommodation; Peer Landlord and other shared accommodation models; design and build options that minimise costs and rent-levels; repurposing of former student accommodation; and refurbishment of empty properties.

EMPLOYMENT

The alignment and integration of youth homelessness and employment-focused services is seen to be increasingly critical. Means of improving the employment offer and future prospects of young people who have experienced homelessness include: improving (formerly) homeless young people's employability and work readiness through training and skills programmes and work experience; engaging and supporting employers to enable

them to offer employment opportunities to young people who have experienced homelessness; and encouraging employment and earnings progression for homeless/formerly homeless young people through in-work support.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Supporting young people who have experienced homelessness to develop positive social networks is seen as an important means to support resettlement, improve young people's wellbeing, and reduce the risk of repeat homelessness. Developing 'social networks approaches' to youth homelessness provision that help young people develop informal connections in the local community both during and after homelessness, including through mentoring schemes, were seen as important areas for development.

CONCLUSIONS

There have been a number of recent positive policy developments relevant to youth homelessness in the UK, including the roll out of preventative 'housing options' approaches in England, Wales and Scotland, extended obligations to looked after children and improved protocols regarding responses to 16/17 year olds. The evolution of distinct approaches in the four UK nations will generate insights into the most effective policies in preventing and tackling youth homelessness in the coming years.

These developments have taken place in extremely challenging wider macroeconomic and social policy contexts: the post-2007 recession continues to impact the labour market and opportunities of young people, who also face substantial challenges accessing affordable accommodation in the current housing market. The UK-wide programme of welfare reform and austerity measures initiated in 2010 has significantly weakened the welfare safety net and support services available to young people.

Data on the scale of and trends in youth homelessness indicates that despite concerted efforts to better prevent youth homelessness and dramatic falls in the number of young people accepted as 'officially' homeless by local authorities, overall levels remain stable and may even have increased slightly. It is feared that planned future cuts in the welfare and housing entitlements of young people will put more young people at risk of homelessness in the coming years.

The profile of young people accessing homelessness services appears to be shifting, with a higher proportion reported to have complex needs, including mental health problems, than in the past. Use of 'legal highs' is reportedly now a very significant problem for some providers, particularly in the North of England. These shifts represent a challenge for service providers at a time of substantial financial pressure.

Evidence regarding the effectiveness of the interventions highlighted in this review is in some cases weak, with particular gaps concerning: the effectiveness of different approaches to family mediation, lighter-touch conciliation work and whole-family/parenting support in preventing youth homelessness; the pros and cons of different models of congregate accommodation compared to 'community hosting' models; and the impacts of various initiatives on formerly homeless young people's long-term housing experiences and financial and psychological wellbeing.