



# We Have A Voice, Follow Our Lead

Young and  
Homeless 2020

**YOU  
TH  
VOICE**  
SPEAK UP FOR CHANGE

## We Have A Voice, Follow Our Lead

### Young and Homeless 2020

**Produced by**  
The Homeless Link Research Team,  
September 2020

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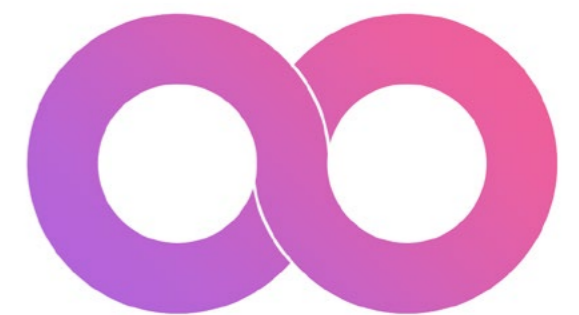
# Executive Summary



**Systemic disadvantages  
have created and  
sustained a youth  
homelessness crisis in  
England for some time.**



**Co-produced with Youth  
Voice, this research brings  
together the stories of 45  
young people with experience  
of homelessness living across  
England.**



## **Key Findings**

**The research highlighted  
the interlinked nature of the  
challenges and enablers at  
play in a young person's life.**

Youth Voice identified five assets that help young people to develop their strengths, resilience and aspirations, which we used to shape our interviews. We called them the '5Cs':

**C**ONFIDENCE

**C**HOICE

**C**OMMUNITY

**C**ONSISTENCY

**C**ONTROL

When present, the 5Cs tended to be mutually reinforcing and supported young people's ability to deal with adversity, gain and share knowledge with peers, develop their skills, aspire to building a career, and much more.



## Challenges

- **Insufficient welfare support**
- **Lack of information**
- **Unreliable support from statutory services**
- **Barriers to accessing and sustaining education, training or work**

Most of the young people we spoke to had been failed by public services in some way.

This had a negative impact on their internal resources, resilience, and wellbeing, as well as their ability to cope with challenges they faced and move on from homelessness.

## Enablers

- **Flexible and tailored support**
- **Participation and co-production**
- **Advocacy**
- **Transparency**

Young people valued organisations that encouraged participation, where their experiences of adversity were recognised, where they were provided with responsive and tailored support, and were supported to build upon their aspirations and strengths.

Building and sustaining trusting relationships with staff and peers was particularly significant in building young people's self-confidence and a sense of control.



**C**ONFIDENCE  
**C**HOICE  
**C**OMMUNITY  
**C**ONSISTENCY  
**C**ONTROL

# Key recommendations for change

This report identifies a series of recommendations for action by government, commissioners and local service providers in collaboration with young people. These important changes would empower young people, improve service provision and help prevent and end youth homelessness for good.

“Homelessness has impacted me so much in my life. Like, I don’t even understand how much it impacted me. I had no confidence, I was ready to give up on myself, and I don’t know where I got that confidence from. I just did it... and it’s given me more confidence than I have ever had in my life.”

Beth, North of England



Develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness



Create a welfare safety net that works for young people



Prioritise prevention by supporting partnerships between key services



Provide long-term capital and revenue investment for a range of housing options



Recognise housing precarity within the responsibility for Children in Need



Fund schools to identify and support young people at risk of homelessness



Invest in mental health provision in non-health, community settings



Ensure social prescribing benefits young people at risk of homelessness

### Government should:

- Urgently develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness. This strategy should be fully funded and accountable, with a focus on supporting partnership working, early intervention and prevention. It should include the development of a framework for identifying young people at risk of homelessness across public services, as well as a public information campaign. The strategy should be developed in consultation with providers, other youth stakeholders, and young people with lived experience of homelessness.

### The Department for Education should:

- Recognise children with housing precarity as a distinct group within its responsibility for Children in Need and work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Work and Pensions to ensure adequate preventative support is offered.
- Support local areas to ensure schools are funded to recognise and respond to young people at risk of homelessness. This should include incorporating risk of homelessness into safeguarding procedures, as well as awareness-raising aimed at both staff and young people on homelessness and the support options available.

### The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should:

- Prioritise prevention by supporting partnerships between the key services and agencies in young people's lives. This should include local authorities, mental health, schools and youth services.
- Provide local areas with long-term capital and revenue investment into a range of supported housing options for young people that recognise the diversity of their needs and experiences. This should include investment in 'staying put' schemes for care leavers, affordable shared accommodation and Housing First for young people.

### The Department of Work and Pensions should:

- Immediately bring forward plans to extend the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers announced in the Budget 2020. Match the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s to the amount over-25s receive, while maintaining the COVID-19 uplift of £20 per week.

### The Department for Health and Social Care should:

- Invest in mental health provision in non-health, community settings, including schools, youth centres and young people's supported accommodation, to offer early and flexible support to young people that need it.
- Ensure that young people at risk of homelessness benefit from social prescribing from mental health and primary care services, by linking in welfare, public health, housing advice and youth community services.



# Introduction

Young people in England have been facing a homelessness crisis for some time. They are over-represented in services; over a third of people accessing supported accommodation in England in 2018 were 16-25.<sup>2</sup> Over the past seven years, Homeless Link has been monitoring this through our annual Young and Homeless reports, exploring the trends in youth homelessness and the prevalence and nature of support.<sup>3</sup>

This year our research takes a fresh look at the issue. Co-producing the project with young people from Youth Voice,<sup>4</sup> we listened to the experiences and perspectives of young people facing homelessness across England on the trends that had emerged through previous Young & Homeless research. Through 45 interviews, young people bring their voices to the fore to help us better understand how disadvantages affect their homelessness journeys, and to learn about the strengths, assets and aspirations, and support that young people require to navigate these challenges.

## Youth homelessness in England today: the wider context

Over a number of years, systemic disadvantages have created and sustained a youth homelessness crisis in England, putting many young people at risk and making it extremely difficult for them to move on from homelessness.

In 2018/19 approximately 91,500 young people aged 16-24 approached their local council for help due to risk of homelessness,<sup>5</sup> and of these 78% received an initial assessment from their council. These figures do not capture all young people who are homeless; research has shown that many young people do not approach their council for support and are in 'hidden' homeless situations, staying in multiple informal

temporary and informal living arrangements. DePaul UK found that 60% of young people accessing homelessness services had at one stage been living with close friends, 23% had stayed with acquaintances and 11% had stayed with strangers.<sup>6</sup>

Young people have different pathways into and experiences of homelessness than adults. They experience distinct structural and systemic disadvantages and discrimination such as higher risks of poverty, insecure employment and discrimination in the housing and labour markets.<sup>7,8</sup> Young people receive a reduced level of Universal Credit,<sup>9</sup> are only entitled to the lowest rate of Local Housing Allowance (shared accommodation rate), and are at greater risk of benefit sanctions.<sup>10</sup> These factors all impact on young people's ability to access and maintain secure accommodation.

For young people who have approached their local authority for support the most common recorded cause of homelessness is "family of friends no longer able to accommodate",<sup>11</sup> echoing Homeless Link's finding that family breakdown is the main cause of youth homelessness.<sup>12</sup> Young people therefore often enter homelessness from living situations where they were economically dependent on an adult. Through experiencing homelessness, young people will have a history of being failed by the authorities, services and individuals that are supposed to protect them.

At the same time, young people are going through key stages of developmental change, including cognitive, physical, psychological and emotional development, which continues well into their twenties.<sup>13,14</sup> Thus for young people, experiences of homelessness occur at a formative time and are likely to leave a long-term imprint on their adulthood.

Age is only one dimension and other parts of a young person's identity will inevitably impact and shape their experience of homelessness. Sexism, racism, homophobia, violence and abuse and experiences of institutional care all put some young people at greater risk of homelessness. For example young LGBTQ+ face a disproportionate risk of homelessness, due to familial rejection because of their sexual or gender identity.<sup>15</sup> Experiences of discrimination and

disadvantage also impact young people while they are homeless, shaping their experiences of systems and services, and their vulnerability to other forms of harm.<sup>16</sup>

As such local authorities and service providers face a challenging backdrop when supporting young people out of homelessness. There is, however, recognition that as young people's experience of homelessness is complex and intersects and interacts with other experiences of disadvantage.

In 2020, the "Positive Pathways" documents created by St Basils and the MHCLG were updated in line with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. These documents provide a flexible framework for local authorities and their partners to use locally to provide a planned approach to homelessness prevention and housing options for young people. They recognise that young people's housing and homelessness cannot be considered separately from their other experiences, and highlight the need for joint working across local authorities, other public bodies, voluntary organisations, young people and where possible, their families.<sup>17</sup>

## The impact of Covid-19

This research was conducted in early 2020, prior to the implementation of measures to control the spread of Covid-19, including the national lockdown and 'Everybody In' directive for those experiencing homelessness.<sup>18</sup> However, inevitably the fall-out of Covid-19 has significant implications for the findings and recommendations stemming from this research.

Recent research from the youth and homelessness sector and Homeless Link's consultations with our members shows that Covid-19 has exacerbated the needs, vulnerabilities and disadvantages young

people already faced, increasing their risk of homelessness, now and in the future.

Our members have reported that in some areas, youth homelessness has sharply increased since Covid-19. Indeed, the Centrepoint helpline has received more than double the usual number of calls from young people sleeping rough during this period, and many of them struggled to get through to council services.<sup>19</sup> Centrepoint's survey of local authorities found that eight out of ten reported closing their face to face services and less than a quarter of councils felt that measures had gone far enough to help young people specifically.

Already three times more likely to be in insecure employment than adults and facing barriers to accessing the welfare safety net,<sup>20,21</sup> young people's economic insecurity has also been worsened by the crisis. One third of 18-24 year-olds (excluding students) have lost jobs or been furloughed as a result of the pandemic, compared to one in six adults.<sup>22</sup>

Young people's mental health and wellbeing has been severely affected, as the pandemic and associated restrictions have impacted disproportionately on the most marginalised. Research from Barnardo's, UK Youth and Young Minds, amongst others, identified increased mental health concerns as a priority area and highlighted difficulties young people have faced in accessing support.<sup>23,24,25</sup>

Family breakdown – always a key driver of youth homelessness – has also increased as lockdown

restrictions exacerbated pre-existing family tensions or abuse. The NSPCC, the Centrepnt and Llamau helplines reported sharp increases in calls from young people concerned about issues at home.<sup>26,27</sup> In addition the disruption lockdown has caused to traditional community safeguards provided by the education system, care system and youth services mean that many young people at risk of homelessness will not be identified.

While the world has significantly changed since our interviews with young people, the trends and systemic weaknesses that drive youth homelessness have remained constant, and most likely worsened. Thus, this research serves an important purpose and should inform decisions at the local and national level to address the impact of Covid-19 on young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

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# Methodology



Over the past seven years, Homeless Link has carried out research on youth homelessness, resulting in our annual Young and Homeless reports. This research provides an invaluable national data set on youth homelessness, which explores the trends impacting young people who are homeless, and the solutions and support needed. This research provided valuable quantitative data showing changes over time and giving a snapshot of the sector. The survey instrument is developed in consultation with Youth Voice, a national group of young people aged 16-25 who have experienced homelessness facilitated by the charity St Basils.<sup>28</sup>

Many of the issues affecting young people and the services that support them persist year on year, and statistics often fail to capture the many complex and intersecting drivers of youth homelessness. Consequently, in 2019 Homeless Link, in consultation with Youth Voice and experts in the youth homelessness field decided to transition from an annual survey to a new approach. We will conduct the Young and Homeless quantitative survey every second year and carry out deep-dive qualitative research on the intervening years. Biennial qualitative research will allow us to expand our co-production with young people and explore the issues identified in greater depth in order to find opportunities to influence change for and with young people.

This year, qualitative methods allowed us to further explore the picture behind headline statistics and interrogate assumptions about the drivers and nature of youth homelessness. In doing so, we aimed to **explore how experiences of homelessness interact with young people's strengths, assets and aspirations.**



## Co-production workshops with National Youth Voice

This research was co-produced with National Youth Voice, which is organised and facilitated by the charity St Basils. Members of National Youth Voice are aged 16-25 and have all experienced homelessness. They are fully trained by St Basils to actively and safely share their life experiences to support the work of organisations. Homeless Link worked with Youth Voice through a series of three workshops that shaped the design, development and dissemination of this research.

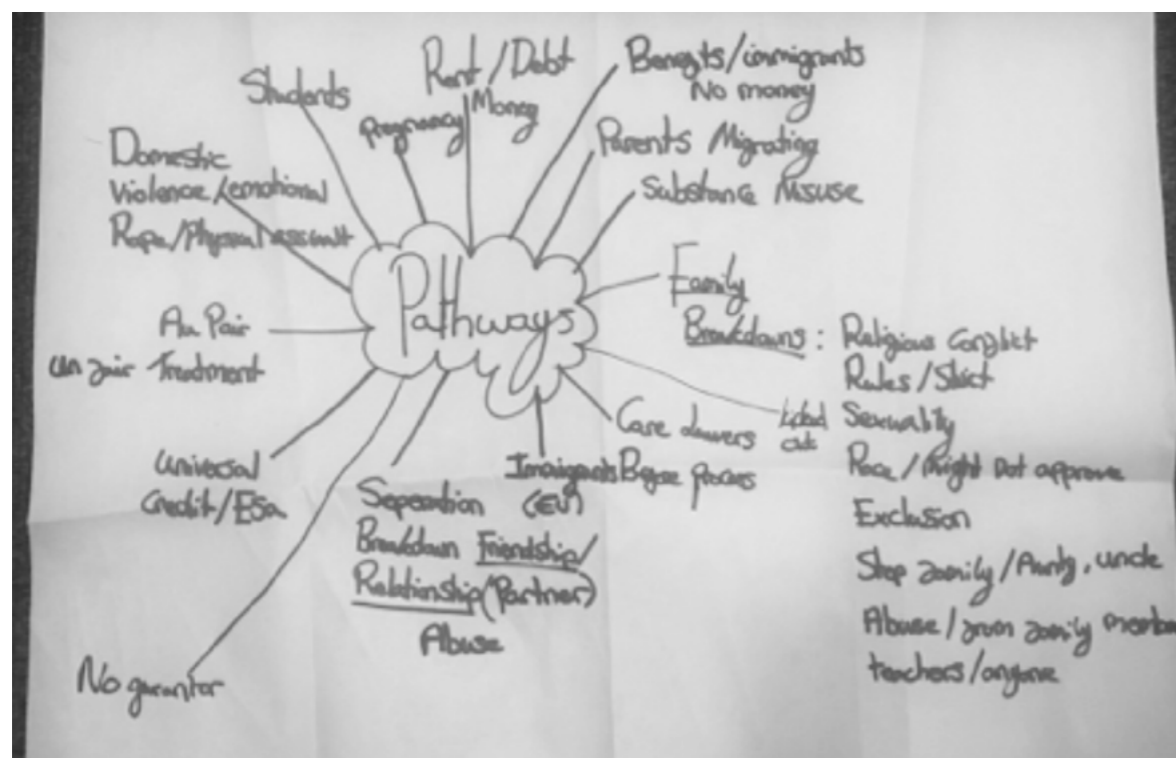
Working with Youth Voice members in developing the research project meant being flexible and realistic. We moved our timeline to fit school holidays and tried to minimise disruption to the young people's routine. While the first workshop ran for one full day and was conducted face-to-face, the onset of Covid-19 meant that the remaining workshop had to be conducted over video-call. We discuss this further in the 'Learnings from Co-Production' section below.

During the first workshop, Youth Voice advisors developed thematic mind maps to explore experiences

of and pathways into homelessness (see image 1, below). Using a 'Dragons Den'-style exercise, the group also designed the 'perfect' service and did group presentations on why their service worked for young people. Both of these exercises helped to provide a framework for the identification of key challenges and barriers, as well as positive factors that support young people during homelessness, and directed the thematic focus of the research. Interview questions and guides were written following this workshop, based on an analysis of the experiences and narratives Youth Voice members shared.

At the second workshop, Homeless Link staff presented an overview of the findings from the interviews, and a presentation of how to develop a research communications plan. This included, identifying key audiences for the report, the tone and messages of the report and the overall look of the research report. Finally, at the third workshop the young people from Youth Voice came back and provided feedback and guidance on the communications plan for this project, including visual style, the key audiences to engage and how this should be done. Youth Voice members then discussed and fed back what they would like to see in the presentation of the report and communications planning.

An example of one of the mind maps developed by Youth Voice members, describing drivers of youth homelessness.



## Interviews with young people

Supported by thematic interview guides, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 young people from across England. Interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded, and written consent was given, prior to conducting the interview. The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software.

### Region: Percentage of Interview participant

East of England	18%
West of England	13%
South of England	11%
North of England	20%
Midlands	11%
London	27%

### Age:

16 -18yrs old	16%
19 - 25yrs old	84%

Participants were selected to provide a balance of diversity based on a number of characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, location (urban/rural and region) and sexuality. Through our Homeless England database, we advertised the fieldwork for participants and specifically targeted areas where we needed more representation. We also spoke to young people who were care leavers, young carers and who had experience of sofa surfing, sleeping rough, and offending. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

## Policy roundtable

A consultative roundtable was held with a range of policy stakeholders in June 2019 to discuss preliminary findings and policy implications in the current context. This was attended by representatives of frontline youth homelessness organisations and accommodation providers, the Department for Education, the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government, the Department for Work and Pensions and the wider youth sector.

# Research Findings

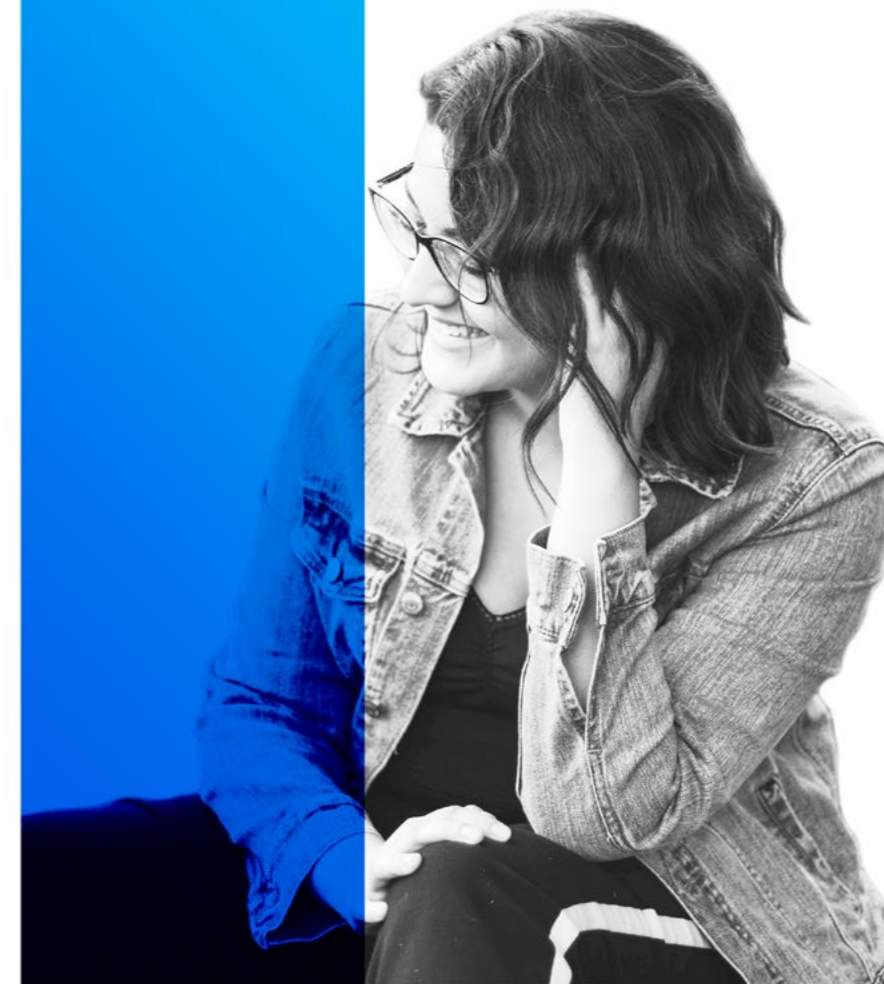


## Navigating the homelessness system: young people's experiences

In this section, we explore the main themes that emerged in interviews when young people described their journeys into and out of homelessness. Interactions with the 'homelessness system', access to services, and the appropriateness and quality of services available were the dominant themes that shaped the experiences – and wellbeing – of the young people we spoke to. The section is divided into a number of subsections: Statutory homelessness support; Welfare; Education, training and work; Social services; Mental health; Information about services. For each theme we explore challenges and positive experiences of young people, as well as the impact these experiences had on their lives and wellbeing.

Co-production workshops and interviews highlighted the power of young people's own strengths and skills to shape their experiences and aspirations, as well as how they were able to negotiate daunting challenges and barriers they faced.

The interview findings have been divided in to three sections. The first section explores interview participants' experiences of homelessness and the homelessness system, with a focus on the challenges they faced when accessing support and services and the impact of system shortfalls on their lives. The second section focuses on the internal and external assets in young people's lives that helped them to deal with adversity. The last section looks at the role of services in empowering and supporting young people and uses examples shared by young people during their interviews.



# Statutory homelessness support

Participants spoke about the challenges they faced when presenting to their local housing department for homelessness support, including not being offered any support at all.<sup>29</sup>

Experiences of domestic abuse were the cause of homelessness for many young people participating in the research. Worryingly, even these young people described how they were often not believed, asked for proof they could not obtain and placed at further risk by local authority staff.

**“The council couldn’t help me, I had nowhere to go so I climbed a tree so people couldn’t attack me and slept outside for a few weeks. I remembered it from Hunger Games. I met people in the streets that told me about this place.”**

Sophie, Midlands

29. Under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) everyone who approaches their local authority should receive an initial assessment that determines whether they are owed a prevention or relief duty. Where homelessness isn’t prevented or relieved after 56 days, a main duty assessment should be carried out to determine whether a main housing duty is owed (a person is unintentionally homeless, eligible and priority need, therefore statutorily homeless).

**“I was full of anxiety and honestly depressed, my brother who was my guardian was physically assaulting me and verbally abusive. When I went to the council so I can move out, they called him and told him if this is true? Like he’s going to say yes. I couldn’t go back.”**

Khalid, London

In addition to putting them at further risk of abuse, gatekeeping and disbelief by local authorities had a negative impact on the mental health of the young people affected.

**“Proving that your parents are homophobic is ...I can’t swear but you know what I’m thinking. I’m dealing with abuse, its messing with me mentally and then I’m having to deal with people from the council saying, have you tried expressing your views... sorry what the fuck?”**

Cameron, North of England

Even when housing and support was provided, participants reported that it was often unresponsive to their needs and failed to address their mental health and wellbeing in a holistic way. This often left them isolated and at risk of losing their tenancy:

**“No one offered me mental health support, I was a victim of domestic violence and the council did nothing. I should have just stayed, so what if I get punched, at least I have a warm bed and food in my belly. I’m asking for help and no one can help me. The council put me in a place, it had no flooring nothing. I haven’t had to make any decisions for 8 years, not even what I wear. How was I supposed to do all that without help? I am still sleeping on the streets after my money runs out and I can’t afford to sofa surf.”**

Nicole, North of England

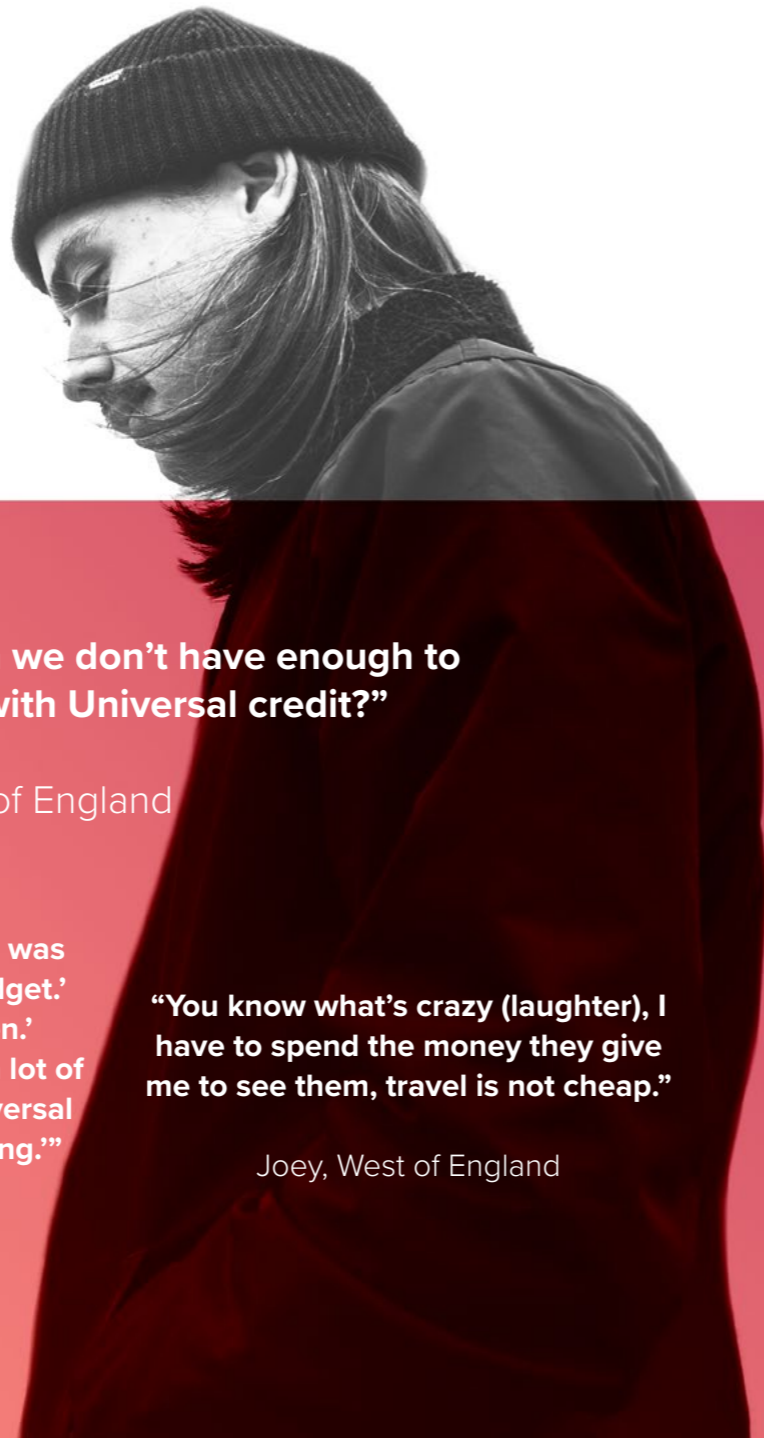
# Welfare

Universal Credit was repeatedly raised by interview participants as one of the hardest things to navigate and manage. Young people felt that the system was not responsive to the reality of their circumstances, and hindered their independence. Issues with IT and inconsistent communication with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) affected their ability to maintain their UC claim, and young people gave examples of how disempowering this was and the consequent impact this had on their wellbeing.

**A critical point raised throughout young people's narratives was the inability to live on the budget provided by Universal Credit, and how this affected their sense of self and resilience.**

# Budgeting

Under 25s receive a reduced universal credit standard allowance than claimants over 25, despite having the same living costs. The young people we spoke to were clear that this allowance was not enough to meet basic needs, and certainly did not allow them to budget and plan for the future.



**“How can we budget, when we don't have enough to live on? Who came up with Universal credit?”**

Arron, East of England

**“I was telling one independent living worker. He was like, ‘What's your budget?’ I said, ‘This is my budget.’ He said, ‘Wow. This is the lowest I've ever seen.’ (Laughter) Most of the time, young people have a lot of budget issues. I said, ‘What can I do? I'm on Universal Credit. We don't have money to live, just surviving.’”**

Khalid, London

**“You know what's crazy (laughter), I have to spend the money they give me to see them, travel is not cheap.”**

Joey, West of England

This scarcity forced young people to make difficult choices, often falling behind on rent in order to survive:

**“But then you're making decisions like I was, ‘Right, well, I'm not going to pay the rent because that's £200, then I can eat and pay bills.’”**

Shawn, North of England

These issues were exacerbated when young people were subject to sanctions and had difficulty communicating with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In addition, the five-week-wait for a UC claim to be processed was a major issue, which forced young people to enter into debt by getting an advance.

**“They said I can take an advance and I didn't really have a choice, how was I supposed to survive, the money I get isn't even the full amount, it's just mad!”**

Dom, London

# Claiming Universal Credit


Participants raised that the process of claiming Universal Credit was challenging. Often this related to communication with DWP workers, with young people not being provided information in an accessible way that would enable them to understand what was required. In some cases, this was due to lack of appropriate support, for example not having translators:

**“They gave me an appointment and I went to an appointment. They said to me, ‘You need to find a job,’ and I told them, ‘I need to improve my English a little bit,’ because I can't do all things now, like that. A lot of the time he would say things fast; I did not understand him. I kept saying, ‘Go slower.’”**

Omari, London

An interpreter was not offered to Omari and there were clear language barriers. Omari often went to the youth centre who then would communicate what he has been asked to do.

For others it was about a lack of clear messaging and contact, leaving them feeling frustrated and alone:



“Oh, my God. Yes, that’s the best one for me. It’s just this is something I’ve struggled - I think this is the thing I’ve struggled with the most. Inconsistency is the worst thing. I can handle something being horrible. I can handle it. It’s not nice, but I can handle it, because I’m used to it. But something going... That drop is just terrible. It’s the worst thing, yes.”

Beth, North of England

Where young people were supported, their stories highlighted how without this they wouldn’t have been able to cope or manage a system on their own.

“If [support worker] wasn’t here to help me with all this Universal Credit crap, I’d be still on the streets!”

Kevin, London

## Impact on wellbeing

The negative impact of navigating an unclear and inconsistent system on young people’s wellbeing became clear throughout the interviews.

“They’re not as helpful as you think, like, I was messaging them, like, October, and they didn’t get to me until, like, the end of November, and it’s, like, you’re meant to be there 24/7 for the journal to, like, thingy, and the only reason why they actually replied to me is because [support worker] put a complaint in, so it’s a fact of, ‘you’re meant to be there, but then you’re not’. So, it, kind of, did wind me up a bit, felt stressed, I had no money, but [support worker] got me through it. And it was, like, I was proper angry, like, for months. I’m, like, ‘Why the hell can’t they just sort it out?’ and she’s, like, ‘Calm down, calm down, we’ll sort it out.’”

Amy, Midlands

Young people described the feelings of isolation they experienced due to not being able to see friends or access or engage with the wider community, and how this exacerbated their feelings of loneliness and shame around their homelessness.

“I think what most people learn when they’re in their 20s, I learnt in my teens. I struggle now in a different way. With friends, you’re not as flexible and you’re not as free. I sometimes want to be. I want to give myself that. Even when I have money, I want to be able to be like, ‘Oh, I’ll just...’ But I can’t. I just don’t want to be stupid.”

Lily, South of England

**“I do a weekly £10 shop from Iceland for food for the week, I can’t go out, I can’t see friends! If I go out, it would mean I won’t be able to afford food. It gets incredibly lonely.”**

Lizzie, Midlands

In addition to the stigma young people felt about their homelessness, they also raised feelings of shame while accessing food banks. Leigh made a point to say she does not want to be seen near a food bank, and will only have the food parcel her supported accommodation provides:

**“I have used the food parcel from here. I know it sounds stupid, but I think it’s degrading. I do. I know it’s not, but that is how I feel about it. I keep my head down and try my best not to be seen with a food parcel. Don’t have a choice though, need to eat.”**

Leigh, West of England

## Education, training & work

Many participants had fallen out of, or moved away from education and training, which was often linked to the reasons they became homeless or homelessness itself. For a few young people, thinking about education, training and work was not possible. However, nearly all had aspirations, hopes and goals they wanted to achieve.

Their ability to pursue these goals varied, the most prominent factors that influenced their engagement with education training or work were access to services, relationships with support staff and costs of supported accommodation.

**“I enjoy dance and I’ve been going to some dance classes.”**

Ciara, London

**“I love acting, I’m in like four different drama groups.”**

Hayley, London



## Access to services

Young people’s ability to pursue their interests and education was dependent on the support or facilities available to them, as well as the service’s ability to adapt to their needs. Young people in some areas, such as London and other cities, had a greater number and range of options available to them, while others’ careers were constrained by limited local job markets. Often participants described having to give up hobbies and interests when they became homeless, which was frequently influenced by the location of their supported accommodation:

Young people highlighted the importance of flexibility in the way education and training was delivered and designed, in order to suit their needs. They gave examples of how the services they accessed adapted the way they deliver courses and how this flexibility allowed them to take advantage of classes and courses available:

**“I used to play rugby, but there’s nowhere to play here.”**

Josh, South of England

**“I produce my own music; the youth club has helped me out with get access to some studio time.”**

Kane, London

**“I want to be a tattoo artist, but it seems like it’s impossible, it’s always jobs working in a factory that you get.”**

Mike, West of England

**“I was so nervous when I came to this place, stayed in my room, the [member of staff] came onsite to do classes and it gave me the confidence after a couple of session to go to the main centre and come here for classes. It’s funny I am trying to raise money for charity, something I would never do but I’m pretty good at it.”**

Taylor, West of England

**“They tell me to go to ESOL class to improve my English, I improve my English better here [Youth Centre]. I’m talking to people, ESOL is not the best way to learn English. I do a film course here; I learn more English then I would the whole year doing ESOL.”**

Omari, London

## Relationships with professionals

Participants highlighted that relationships with staff were central to their experiences while in education and homelessness settings. A trusting relationship with an education professional could make all the difference to a young person's situation and positive support from other staff made them more able to engage in education and training activities.

“My tutor told me about this place and really helped me out. The council was useless. He checked up on me loads. Don't think I could have finished school without him.”

Harvey, East of England

“I was just written off, they just sent me to PRU [pupil referral unit] and didn't care. PRU is shit, you can't learn anything in that place.”

Daniel, London

For those participants who wanted to access further education the loss of the support, relationships and security they had built while in supported accommodation was an understandable source of anxiety, and a barrier to them moving away.

“The most meaningful choice, I would say, yes, no, I think I would say with my support worker, Lewis, years ago, when he basically asked me if I wanted to just get more involved with the stuff they do. I don't know. Then, that started leading me onto things like D of E [Duke of Edinburgh] and doing all these different things, even working with youth clubs or whatever. I don't know. It just brought me out a bit and I started doing stuff, even though I felt like I was in a really crappy place. Going to London to do a photography course, which will be good- My support worker sorted it out.”

Bradley, West of England

Where relationships were negative, participants described a lack of understanding of homelessness in education settings, feeling written off and excluded. These experiences had a negative impact young people's wellbeing and ability to complete education.

“Throughout my whole life, I've never really had it. You know, in school, yes, you have your teachers that are there, but you either come or you don't to them, really. And then you get your high school teachers, they start to come out. “Why are you not coming in?” They start to care that little bit. But like I say, no one's consistently there. They're only there to help you for a short period of time. And once they've helped you the best, they think they can, that's the end of it and they're gone”.

Nicole, North of England

## Costs

Participants repeatedly raised that they were unable to enter training or employment as this would impact the benefits they were entitled to and they would no longer be able to afford to live in supported accommodation.



“I want a job but if I get a job, my rent goes from £110 per month to nearly £300 per week. I can't afford that with the job. I would still be just surviving, and I can't move out because I need the support. It's one or the other.”

Maya, South of England

“If I was to find full-time employment whilst living with [supported accommodation], I would have to leave because I would then have to pay, like, nearly £1,500 because it is an alcohol-free service and, like, a rehabilitation service. So, I'd have to find, like, £1,500 a month just to live there, which isn't sustainable in full-time employment. So, that's why I ideally want to move on, because I'm ready to move on with me.”

Max, North of England

## Social services

The majority of participants described their experiences with social workers (or Personal Advisors (PAs)) as negative, and a lack of consistency in the support they received was the greatest challenge. Young people reported that staff turnover meant they had several social workers throughout and prior to their experiences of homelessness. This undermined young people's ability to have meaningful contact and to build trust, and meant safeguarding risks were not identified, placing young people at further risk of homelessness and harm:

**"I don't trust them, I lost count how many I've had."**

Mike, West of England

**"I got a PA [Personal Advisor] six months ago, not got in contact with me once yet. Not shocked really."**

Julie, East of England

**"I was sofa surfing for eight months before my social worker realised."**

Tom, East of England

**"And then you start- you know, they come and they go. They don't come and see your day-to-day life, so when I have to repeat my story and go through my struggles again, I'm going home and I'm upset and I'm hurting myself and you don't see that. Because to you, you're perfect. You go home, you've got a house, you've got husbands, wives, you've got kids, you've got money, you've got all of that. Your job; you know, it's your job so you're just doing it. And I see that a lot of times. People just do it because it's their job. If it wasn't their job, they'd turn the other cheek, they wouldn't care less."**

Nicole, North of England

Care leavers, who are legally entitled to support from a Personal Advisor, highlighted that while their experiences were negative, they were conscious that they were better off than those who were entitled to even less:

**"I have had 8 social workers in two years, now that I'm 18 I have a new social worker, just know their name and it's been 8 months no contact. Things are so inconsistent. Don't get me wrong I'm better off than my mate. I can leave when I am 25 but she has to leave after two years. Again not consistent."**

Joseph, North of England

However, negative experiences with PAs were not universal. Some young people gave examples of positive relationships leading to good outcomes for them:



**"My PA got me a place here, I really like him. He does sort things out for me."**


Rose, East of England



# Mental health

The need for better mental health support was raised by many participants. **Often young people's mental health needs were linked to the experiences that lead to them becoming homeless, but as highlighted above, poor experiences with services and financial strain often contributed to mental health difficulties.**

A lack of access to mental health services and the lack of trauma-informed approaches in other services young people were accessing, meant that these concerns were not being addressed. Many young people repeatedly raised that their experiences of abuse were not recognised or addressed by services, and that this led to the further deterioration of their wellbeing. Participants also described the impact their mental health had on their capacity to manage their accommodation.



“Because I have had a council property before, but I got evicted through my mental health, so then I saw it as I'd got given a second chance and the way I see it is, this second chance, if I mess it up then there are no more. There are no more chances that I can get. I suppose you get scared and you don't quite know what is going to happen, how you're going to feel.”


Max, North of England

One of the key issues young people often raised was that statutory mental health support in their areas did not meet their needs. They highlighted that by the time they made it to the top of the waiting list, they had turned 18 and had to go to the adult service, often starting the referral process from the beginning.

“Children and Young People's Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is absolute crap, thank god there's counselling available here and there's a domestic abuse worker.”

Sophie, Midlands

Where available, participants felt most supported by specialist workers within homelessness settings that were able to respond to and understand their specific experiences and needs:



“[Complex needs support worker] is like a mum to me she done more for me then Children and Young People's Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has ever done. She knows my triggers and knows how to react and support me. CAMHS just tell you, 'you're bi-polar, bye'.”

Rhianna, Midlands

## Information about services

A recurring challenge young people highlighted was that they did not know where to turn when they found themselves at risk of homelessness. This poor access to information and lack of awareness of their entitlements placed them at greater risk of sleeping rough or 'hidden homelessness', such as staying with friends or strangers.

**"It would help so much if we had an Ask Frank for Homelessness."**

James, North of England

When information about local services did reach young people at risk, it was mostly through friends, chance meetings and education settings.

**"They came to my school and did assembly and what they do in the centre, two years later when I was on the street, I remembered that I could go to the centre for help."**

Sian, South of England

**"There's nowhere to go and find out what's available and there's a lot of misinformation, I found out about this place because of a friend who went through something similar."**

Alex, East of England

**"I think it's hard to access services, just because there is a lack of awareness. I didn't know this service existed, I just happened to... Funny story. I just happened to pop... I was somewhere in Westminster, and I ran into [name] who is manager of this place. He was like... I started telling him about my story. He goes, 'Why don't you just come to [organisation]?' That's how I found this place, that was the only reason I found this place. I think there's a lack of awareness of what is available to young people too. The ones that are made aware, they're getting closed down."**

Hannah, London

## Sian's story: Building community

Sian left home due to domestic violence and later felt she was stuck in an abusive relationship due to the fact she stayed in her partner's flat. Sian remembered from school that there was an organisation she could go to if she was at risk of homelessness. She left her relationship and sought out help. Sian has said she has made lifelong friends and likes how people care and help each other out, a situation that is clearly demonstrated by the quote below.

**"I do the cooking, she hates cooking and she does the cleaning, I hate cleaning [laughter]. Works out really well. We do a food shop and go halves as well - saves us money."**

Sian, South of England

# Five assets for a solid foundation:



## The 5 C's

The first workshop with members of Youth Voice identified five assets that, when present, helped young people to develop strengths, skills and aspirations and contributed to a positive, empowering environment. We called them the '5Cs':

Confidence  
Community  
Control  
Choice  
Consistency

When prompted, the young people we interviewed described how the presence of one, some or all of the 5Cs influenced their experience of their journey into and out of homelessness. The 5Cs manifested in different ways for different young people and were influenced by both internal and external factors. For example, consistency and control could be provided to a young person by the model or mere presence of a service, and choice could be generated by a young person's confidence in their ability to demand it. Confidence and community were frequently influenced by the relationships young people had built with the peers and professionals around them and were closely intertwined.

When present, the 5Cs tended to be mutually reinforcing and supported young people's ability to deal with adversity, gain and share knowledge with peers, build their skills, aspire to building a career, and much more.

In this section we explore how each of these assets manifested in the stories of the young people we interviewed; how young people themselves sought and developed them in their lives and how their presence changed or shaped a young person's experience for the better.

## Confidence

**Initially participants found it difficult to identify confidence in themselves, but with further discussion, many came to realise that they display confidence in a number of different ways. Self-confidence was identified as an important asset, particularly when young people are going through homelessness, as it enabled them to take difficult decisions when they had to, and hope for a better future.**

Beth identifies as non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. Beth grew up in what they described as a 'cult', and their relationship with their family was strained. Eventually Beth decided to leave home, which meant isolating themselves from most of their existing relationships. However, they had confidence that they would survive and overcome these challenges. Now Beth is a part of a community garden project and in Beth's free time they like to read about astrophysics.

Luke (17) is in college doing a music course and hopes to be a DJ. Luke was working in sweatshops to make money while trying to rent privately when his social worker got him a place in a supported accommodation project. Although one of the youngest in the accommodation, Luke has shown initiative by setting up and running the breakfast club, all while attending college full-time.

**"Homelessness has impacted me so much in my life. Like, I don't even understand how much it impacted me. Like, I had no confidence, I was ready to give up on myself, and I don't know where I got that confidence from. I just did it out of my leeway, and it's given me more confidence than I have ever had in my life."**

Beth, North of England

**"I am confident with adults or older people with fancy job titles. We wanted a breakfast club, so we wrote to the CEO, got a meeting with him and then we were given a budget to run breakfast for free for everyone living here. I do two days a week and there's others who organise and set up on different days."**

Luke, Midlands

# Community

Many young people who become homeless are isolated from their family and community they grew up with. Interview participants described the many ways in which they build and maintain a sense of community once they became homeless or entered homelessness services. They spoke about the huge importance these new communities have had in their lives. Their communities helped them by sharing information, making them feel more secure in their particular identities (especially for LGBTQ+ young people) and overall supporting their confidence and wellbeing. Young people interviewed took strength from close communities they had managed to build around them.

Most of the participants felt that the community at large, or society, was not 'built for young people'. They noted that free spaces like youth centres were becoming increasingly rare, making them feel forgotten about.

Omari is a refugee who fled a civil war. When he came to the UK he stayed in NASS (National Asylum Support Service) accommodation. He was very isolated, confused and scared. After getting refugee status he made his way to London seeking a more multicultural community. When he arrived, he had no accommodation or money and spoke broken English. Since accessing the services of the organisation which supports him today, he has improved his English by talking with his peers and staff. He plays football and is doing a documentary making course. Omari hopes to go to university and get a degree in Maths.

**“When I was staying near Liverpool, there was no one that I could speak to and no one from my culture or colour. The local people were not friendly. I am much happy in London.”**

Omari, London

**“I came to London and this is where I found friends, I play football and because I like to learn. They call me professor. I like the name professor.”**

Omari, London

Young people's communities were also integral to their access to information and services, and their pathways out of homelessness. James spent a long period sleeping rough around the country, often sleeping on buses. It was through the young people he encountered that he was told about the service where he was now living.

Participants were enthusiastic about contributing to their community, building it and improving it for themselves and others. Tom is a care leaver who had sofa-surfed for eight months. An aspiring performer, he was directing a pantomime for his local community theatre club.

**“When I was sleeping rough, it was other young people who were sleeping rough that told me about this place. We look out for each other.”**

James, North of England

**“Obviously, because I've had work on holiday parks and I used to help to direct the pantomimes on the holiday parks... I've only done, what, six months in total on there, but, it's the fact that they trust me to do it, I thought, 'I'll take it on.' ... That's, literally, providing for the community by the community. That's what that's about. It's stuff that I like doing.”**

Tom, East of England



Shawn is a transgender male whose gender identity was unfortunately not accepted by his mother. He was kicked out of the family home and made homeless. He experienced sofa surfing, sleeping rough and living in supported accommodation.

Despite facing adversity, including transphobic hate crime, he built friendships and relationships within the

LGBTQI+ community and LGBTQI+ allies. He found a LGBTQ+ service that was right for him and gave him the support he needed to continue to take positive steps, such as going to the gym and having a routine. He spoke passionately about his love for dance and how now he has the confidence to start dancing publicly. He eventually wants to be a professional dancer and is working towards that goal.

**“Since coming out, I feel so much more in control, yes, it’s a bit shit that me Ma wants nothing to with me, but I have a bunch of people here who accept me. I have more control over my health, I’ve been able to work part-time, and the aim is to go full-time soon.”**

Shawn, North of England

## Control

Control was extremely important to many participants and closely linked to choice. Most of the young people who are going through or have gone through the trauma of homelessness did not feel they had much control.

Participants reflected that experience of becoming homeless made them feel powerless. It became clear in interviews that when young people felt that they have control over their lives it leads to the development of other positive factors, such as confidence.

Joey took care of his dad and step siblings from a very young age, it got too much for him, so he ran away from home. After periods of sofa surfing, having a safe place to live and reliable support gave Joey a sense of control.

**“When I’ve been in a good place... At the times, at the start, when I got my jobs... Now I’m in this house now, it’s like I’ve got control over what’s going on. Maybe I haven’t got control over my bedroom window, but... I think it’s more about the fact that I’ve got control over my life. I know I feel, maybe, that things aren’t going to go wrong at the moment. I know, in myself, that if I feel that things are starting to go downhill, I will go and get the help for it. I know where to go to get it.”**

Joey, West of England

Participants also reflected that self-control was important to them. They spoke about the importance of being able to regulate or manage their emotions, particularly when facing challenges situations such as not receiving their benefits, not being listened to by professionals and when first engaging with new activities such as a new hobby or education.

**“I’ve learned how to deal with difficult situations and not just to lash out if something’s going wrong.”**

Lina, North of England



# Choice

**When young people felt that they had meaningful choice and different options open to them in their lives, they had the best chance to achieve their potential and find fulfilment. Having choice also influenced their sense of control over their lives. Young people wanted choice around the support they received, the people they worked with, and what they would do with their futures.**

They wanted services that allowed for a personalised approach that recognised the diversity of young people's aspirations and needs.

**"They have staff here that are special support workers for people who are domestically abused, there's a young mum's group here, a health workshop about eating right and being healthy. They even have toys for the little ones to play with, they try and do bits for everyone at the centre."**

Nicole, North of England

The availability of specialist services, for example for young women and LGBTQ+ young people, is crucial to the idea of choice. But equally, true choice meant young people feeling safe and comfortable in mainstream services regardless of any of their characteristics. Simone, a trans woman, told us how important it was to her to have found an environment that let her to simply live as a woman. She expressed the need for more mainstream services to be better equipped to work with LGBTQ+ communities, rather than forcing them to rely solely on scarce specialist organisations.

**"It's not all fucking rainbows and unicorns, I want to just be a woman and be able to go into mainstream services and still get the support I need, that's actual choice."**

Simone, London

Travis' experience also demonstrated how there is no 'one-size-fits-all' when it comes to where young people are asked to live. After running away from a foster home, he slept rough and sofa-surfed. He was not happy about staying in Nightstop accommodation<sup>30</sup>, so he contacted the supported accommodation project he is now in, asking for another option that suited him better.

**"I sent an email and said, "Look, what can I do? I'm not saying you need to help me but give me some choices." I think, two days after I was offered this new house."**

Travis, West of England

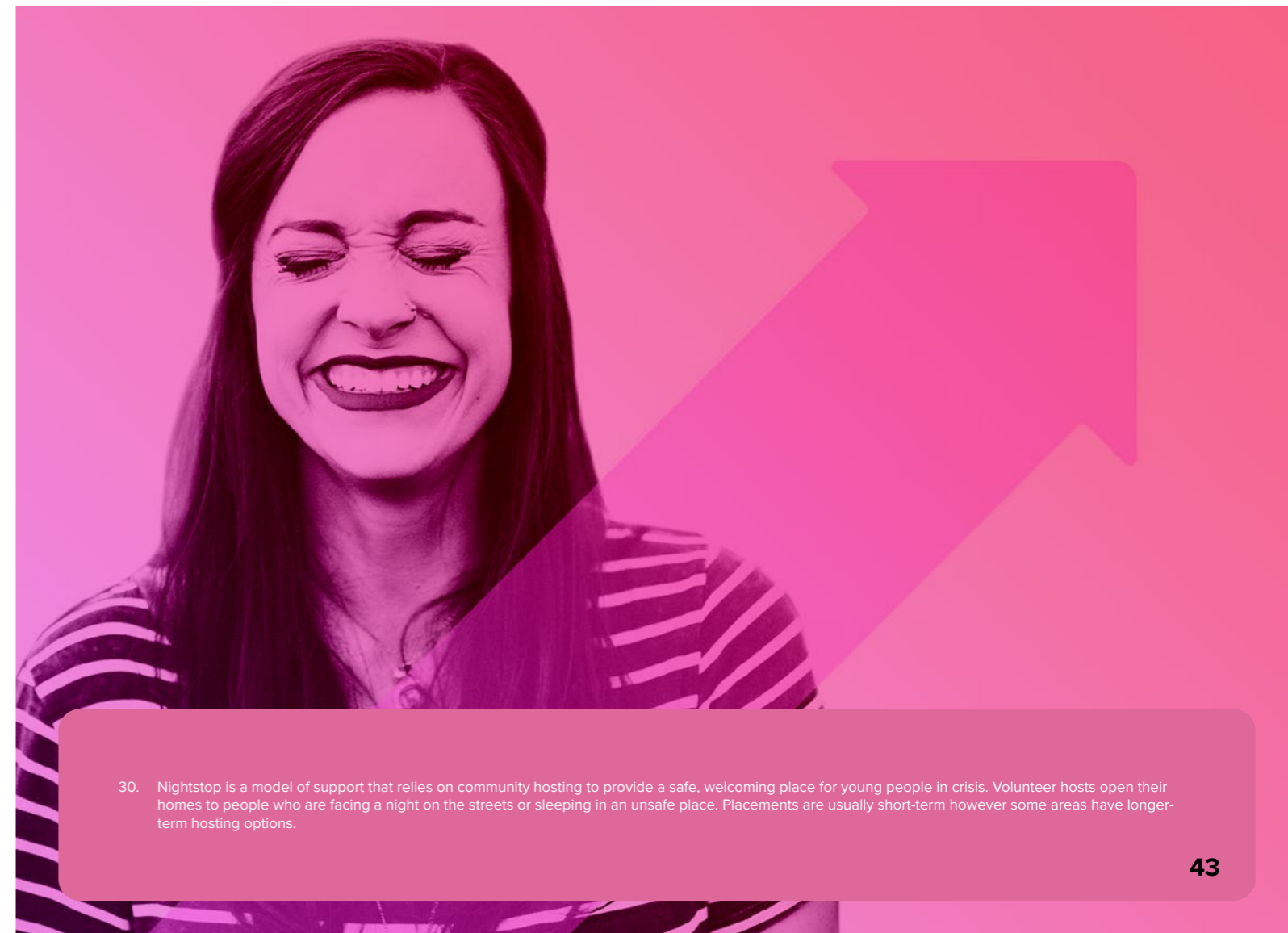
# Consistency

Most of the young people interviewed had had negative experiences of consistency. This was largely related to a general sense of inconsistency in their lives, as well as inconsistency of support from family members and services. However, consistency was still highly valued. The consensus among participants was that when adults, including housing staff, teachers and other professionals like GPs, were trustworthy and dependable, young people were better able to achieve stability and routine and felt they had a better chance to achieve their aspirations.

Harvey is a care leaver in supported accommodation. The consistent support he received from his college tutor enabled him to be disciplined in his school work and achieve his goal of going to university. Harvey hopes to be a graphic designer and is incredibly proud that he will be the first in his family to ever go to university.

**"I'm off to university next year, I've always been consistent with college and doing my work. Actually, handed in my last piece of work today, two months early. Finally reaching my goal."**

Harvey, East of England



30. Nightstop is a model of support that relies on community hosting to provide a safe, welcoming place for young people in crisis. Volunteer hosts open their homes to people who are facing a night on the streets or sleeping in an unsafe place. Placements are usually short-term however some areas have longer-term hosting options.



## The role of services in building young people's strengths

Organisations supporting young people play a role in promoting confidence, community, choice, control and consistency. As discussed above the 5Cs were often mutually reinforcing, and participants gave examples of how the resources and opportunities made available to them through services and workers impacted different areas of their lives. Key themes that emerged were services providing opportunities to participate, services and workers listening and responding to what young people identify as their needs, and services and workers being open and honest with young people.

## Encouraging participation

The importance of being provided with opportunities to participate and make decisions about the spaces they were living, opportunities they had access to and how services are run cut across participants narratives. Whether consulted collectively or individually, participation improved a sense of independence, and engagement with the service and community. Participants spoke about how open dialogue and feedback between staff and residents increased their feelings of control over their housing. They spoke about how participating built their confidence which fed into other areas of their lives.

**"I've been part of interview panels hiring staff, absolutely love it. It's a good idea as well because we know all know what kind of person you need to be working here."**

Jessica, South of England

Joey pitched an idea to the organisation on how to support and give young people more choice in the way they interact with the service. He wrote a proposal and has worked out how much it would cost and how beneficial it would be.

**"Down to the fact of, I made an idea- I made an idea up, the other day, to [organisation]. If you get someone that comes in wanting support or help for something, but they don't want to speak to someone face to face, set up an online service so they go online and do it. Or just an anonymous chat online. It's not about them having to provide it, but it's about them saying, "There is this available for you, but you can do it online while you're waiting."**

Joey, West of England

Joey became the informal representative for his accommodation project, highlighting issues to managers, landlords and senior management teams on behalf of other residents.

## Responsive and tailored support

Young people enter homelessness services with a diverse range of experiences, and as such require different types of support and opportunities at different times. This diversity was reflected across participant's stories, for example some were ready to re-engage in education and for some this would have been an overwhelming first step. Participants stories highlighted the importance of services being able to listen and interpret young people's needs and support them to engage with activities or services that would help them. They also highlighted both the need for and importance of advocacy while they navigated complex systems such as social care, housing, health and welfare.

Lina needed support around her mental health, however, was struggling to access statutory mental health services who often have high thresholds of support and long waiting times. The homelessness service she was accessing had an in-house councillor who was able to provide specialist support:

**"Getting a mental health appointment is hard but a good thing about [organisation] is that they provide it in here. They know it is needed."**

Lina, North of England

Jerome became homeless after release from a young offender's institution. Jerome explained how the flexibility and choice he was offered at his college made a huge difference to his engagement with education.

**“Well, like I was saying before, the college I went to was great. A lot of their stuff was small classes. You only went in three days a week, so you would do your English on a Monday and you would go in for two hours on a Monday to do your English. That’s your day. Go in for two hours on a Tuesday to do your Maths, and then the other day you would do your vocation. So, I was in the garage, fitting tyres and stuff like that, and I got my Level 1 Diploma through them. It was really great. They were always really supportive. I did have a lot of options.”**

Jerome, London



During her support sessions, Rose had mentioned to her support worker how lonely and anxious she often felt. Her support worker explored the different things that made her feel anxious and her interests. Together they found an activity that Rose was comfortable with, that also challenged her to move outside of her comfort zone.

**“I have been feeling quite isolated and I think that contributes to me not feeling so confident. I can come across shy and quiet. [Organisation] have signed me up for a community gardening club because I said I like gardening. I also have someone meet me once a week and she helps me with bidding for council properties, I have so much anxiety with bidding.”**

Rose, East of England

Lizzie needed help with online applications, often getting frustrated with the process when completing them by herself. Her support worker identified her need for support in this area and helped her access dedicated workshops that focussed on writing an online job application as many of the young people in the service raised it as a challenge.

**“I feel like a lot of opportunities or choice are online. You need to fill in these complicated forms and it can be really hard. I had to fill in this one application and they want to know where I lived for the past three years it was so stressful, because I’ve moved about a lot. They helped me here and sorted it out and they really do help me with all these online job applications.”**

Lizzie, Midlands

## Transparency

Participants raised the point that they were not naive to the limited funding that youth homelessness and other organisations have access to. As such, they recognise the limitations services face, and how this impacts what they can offer young people, and consequently young people's choices. They spoke about the importance of workers and services being transparent about these limitations, and treating young people as equals who can understand and process negative information.

**“[Organisation] will be open but it’s like having a petrol station, if the petrol station is open but have no fuel, it’s open but the actual thing you want can’t be given to you so why is it even open for?”**

Jerome, London

**“I think it’s about being honest with the young people and saying, ‘At the moment, we can’t offer you this support. There is this, this, and that instead’.”**

Joey, West of England





## Kevin's story

Kevin left care at 18 and lived in a council property while he was trying to complete his performing arts degree. Towards the end of his degree, Kevin was made homeless and the council labelled him as intentionally homeless.

One of the major reasons Kevin was unable to sustain his tenancy is that his baby unfortunately passed away, and the impact of losing a child resulted in the end of the relationship with his partner. The trauma of losing a child, added to the trauma he faced while in care was all too much for him. He was sofa surfing for five months and managed to complete his degree. After sofa surfing, he eventually started sleeping rough on the streets for two years.

Kevin talks about the physical and mental abuse he faced from members of the public while sleeping rough, and how he has been subject to and witnessed racial profiling by the police in the past, which limited his choices in seeking help.

Kevin eventually found the service that secured a place for him to sleep in a shelter. The service he accessed gave him routine, which was extremely important to him, and the place itself was welcoming. He was offered tea or coffee well as breakfast and lunch. They helped him with his finances, and he is attending a few workshops in the centre. The organisation gave him clothes, and he was able to use its free washing machines.



## Conclusion

This report represents an important contribution to our understanding of the frustrations, injustice, resilience and aspirations that characterise the lived experience of youth homelessness in England. By bringing together the stories of 45 young people, under the guidance of Youth Voice members, we have explored young people's experiences of homelessness and the shortfalls of the services and the system they rely upon. Importantly, we also examined how young people mobilise their own agency and assets to improve their circumstances, as well as what services can do to support them to move hopefully towards their futures.



## A homelessness system falling short

Most of the young people we spoke to had been failed by public services in some way, including being denied support they were statutorily entitled to receive. Barriers to accessing local authority support, inadequate and inflexible welfare support, patchy and limited education and training opportunities and sporadic, unreliable support from social services have shaped their stories and affected their wellbeing. Underpinning all of this, was young people's poor awareness and understanding of the support available and a fragmented, under-resourced system which allowed too many to fall through its gaps.

While in theory the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA) should reduce inconsistencies in homelessness support across England and improve early engagement with young people at risk, our research supported the findings of others in showing that, in some areas, gatekeeping practices continue. While under current guidance, councils will often first aim to keep applicants in their current accommodation - often

the family home - our interviews highlighted how some councils might not take account of the risks young people are exposed to at home. This was particularly concerning when young people reported experiencing domestic abuse and were unable to access support due to the high burden of proof placed on their claim.

With regard to welfare, interviews highlighted how the inadequacy of provision for young people often results in their basic needs not being met and experiences of isolation. This is perhaps unsurprising given that young people receive a reduced level of Universal Credit, are only entitled to lowest rate of Local Housing Allowance and are at a higher risk of benefits sanctions than adults.

When it came to the support young people received to pursue their interests and passions, interviews painted a worrying picture of patchy opportunities, highly dependent on location.

With regard to support from social services, inconsistent contact and lack of continuity with individual social workers meant that young people often felt unsupported and frustrated. Indeed, the high turnover of children's social workers is an acknowledged issue, amidst ever-increasing demand on their services. It was apparent throughout young people's stories that the risks and harms they were experiencing, including homelessness and abuse, both within and outside of the family home, were often not recognised or responded to early enough, across different agencies.

Our findings also support the considerable body of evidence on the extensive delays and barriers to accessing young people's mental health services, and the deterioration in mental health that many young people face while waiting. Interviews highlighted the need for flexible, trauma-informed support that responds to the diversity of young people's

experiences. Young people also emphasised the impact their mental health had on their ability to cope with day-to-day challenges, and consequently their housing security. Participants spoke about how their mental health affected their resilience, their ability to connect and manage relationships with others, to regulate their own behaviours and navigate systems, such as Universal Credit.

Finally, a lack of information about support available is often cited as a key challenge by young people who have experienced homelessness and our findings support previous research in this regard. Our interviews highlighted that young people are most likely to seek help from their peers, and suggested that education settings could be a useful space to reach young people, in addition to other settings like youth clubs and public spaces.

31. <https://centrepoin.org.uk/media/4203/1-caught-by-the-act-the-scale-of-youth-homelessness-in-the-uk.pdf>

32. Homeless Link (2018), Young & Homeless 2018: [www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research](http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/young-and-homeless-research)

33. The Institute for Government. Performance Tracker 2019. Children's social care. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-2019/children-social-care>

## Promoting young people's agency: The role of services

Traditionally linear understandings of youth homelessness often fail to take account of the interlinked challenges and enablers at play in a young person's life, as well as the power of young people's own agency as a driving force. Building the foundations for young people to thrive requires us to consider both the internal and external factors at play in their lives. Often the systemic failures young people had experienced had negatively impacted their internal resources, resilience, and wellbeing.

Exploration of the role of the '5Cs' in young people lives, as well as the power of youth homelessness services in developing them, revealed the importance of promoting young people's agency and choice. When young people are in an environment that embodies choice, community, confidence, control and consistency, they can flourish. The value of organisations that foster environments where experiences of adversity are recognised and

responded to, and young people are supported to build upon their aspirations and strengths, stood out across young people's stories.

Building and sustaining trusting relationships with staff and peers was a particularly significant factor affecting young people's self-confidence, and sense of control in their lives, which often impacted their ability to engage with further opportunities and wider communities. Integral to this were personalised, transparent services that were delivered on young people's terms. The importance of homelessness services and professionals advocating for young people was also frequently raised, and was often linked to the building of trusting relationships. Young people described how this support helped to build their confidence, improve their engagement with education and other services and supported their mental health.

34. Young Minds, (2018), #FightingFor report, available at: <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2258/youngminds-fightingfor-report.pdf>
35. Young Minds, (2020) A New era for you people's mental health, <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2620/a-new-era-for-young-peoples-mental-health.pdf>
36. Young Minds, (2018) Addressing Adversity: Prioritising adversity and trauma-informed care for children and young people in England, <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2715/ym-addressing-adversity-book-web-2.pdf>
37. Youth Voice. 2019. Youth Homeless Parliament Report 2019. Available at: <https://stbasils.org.uk/news/2019-youth-homeless-parliament-report-launched/>

## Implications for policy

As noted above, the outbreak of Covid-19 has put systemic gaps and shortcomings into sharp relief. With increased numbers of young people in crisis during Covid-19 and an expected surge in tenant evictions on the horizon, the challenges described in our report are now more acute than ever. ,

As the wider homelessness system begins to adapt to this shock and local transition plans are formed, we must take this opportunity to prevent and end youth homelessness. This will require an enhanced and cross-departmental focus on prevention and safeguarding, including mental health support, equivalent to the current government Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Youth clubs and services are a valuable way to support young people's interests and passions, as well as to build community and confidence. However, the patchy access to activities reported by the young people we spoke to reflect the dramatic 71% cuts made to spending on youth services since 2010/11.

Announcements of a £500 million investment to rebuild youth services are welcome but fall short of what has been lost.

We must use transition plans to set standards to meet the particular needs of young people and ensure that they are not forced into homelessness or into inappropriate adult provision. Investment under the Next Steps Accommodation Programme must be used to address the national shortage of suitable supported accommodation and move-on options for young people. , Long-term capital and revenue investment is needed to enable local authorities to plug this accommodation and support gap.

Finally, if a reminder was needed, this research has shown that young people are capable, passionate agents for change. They deserve a greater role in the decisions that affect them at every level. In order to break the shameful deadlock of youth homelessness that has blighted England for so many years, now is the time to hear them, and act to invest in their futures.

38. Centrepont (2020) Locked Out: Youth Homelessness during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf>
39. Shelter. 2020. Home Truths report. Available at: [https://england.shelter.org.uk/support\\_us/campaigns/home\\_truths\\_report](https://england.shelter.org.uk/support_us/campaigns/home_truths_report)
40. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-rough-sleeping-strategy](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-rough-sleeping-strategy)
41. YMCA. 2020. Out of Service. Available at: <https://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/YMCA-Out-of-Service-report.pdf>
42. Children & Young People Now. 2019. JAVID ANNOUNCES £500M FOR YOUTH FUND. Available at: <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/javid-announces-500m-for-youth-fund>
43. Homeless Link. 2020. £266 million Next Steps funding programme open for bids. <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2020/jul/20/%C2%A3266-million-next-steps-funding-programme-open-for-bids>
44. Centrepont (2018) Ready to Move On, Available at <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/3048/ready-to-move-on.pdf>

# Recommendations for Change

The findings of this research have a number of important implications for policymakers and practitioners concerned with youth homelessness. Our recommendations have been framed by the 5C's, showing how action is needed across all areas to build young people's strengths and resilience, and support them successfully exit homelessness, while transitioning into adulthood. A summary of our recommendations for each audience can be found in the appendix.



## As a priority, Central Government should:

Urgently develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness. With similar profile to the Rough Sleeping Strategy, this strategy should be fully funded and include measures to hold government departments and local areas accountable, with a focus on supporting multi-agency approaches, early intervention and prevention. It should include the development of a common identification and enquiry framework for determining need across public services, as well as a public information campaign on youth homelessness.

The strategy should be developed in consultation with youth homelessness providers, other youth stakeholders, and young people with lived experience of homelessness.

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## IMPROVING THE **CONSISTENCY** OF SUPPORT WITHIN AND ACROSS SERVICES

Action is needed to improve the consistency of support, housing options and opportunities available to young people across the country. This is even more critical in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak.

### The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should:

- Use the Next Steps Accommodation Programme to deliver funding to local areas for provision of youth-only supported accommodation and move-on options. The funding should deliver dedicated, flexible pathways out of homelessness for young people and help the sector to recover from long-term shortfalls in appropriate accommodation provision.
- Provide local areas with long-term and stable capital and revenue investment to address the national shortage of suitable emergency, supported and move-on accommodation options for young people.

### The Department for Education should:

- Recognise children with housing precarity as a distinct group within its responsibility for Children in Need and work with MHCLG and DWP to ensure adequate preventative support is offered.

### The Department for Health and Social Care should:

- Review the effectiveness of current child safeguarding approaches with regard to the distinct developmental needs and behaviours of adolescents and young adults, and consequent safeguarding risks, using learning from recent innovations such as contextual, complex and transitional safeguarding approaches.
- Build local capacity for system redesign and innovation to better meet the safeguarding needs of adolescents and young adults aged 14-25.

## PROVIDING CHOICES TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people should be provided with meaningful choice and options to have the best chances to achieve their potential and find fulfilment, and greater independence. This should be reflected across housing options, support and opportunities, and should be underpinned by youth consultation and youth involvement.

### **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should:**

- Provide local areas with long-term capital and revenue investment into a range of housing options for young people to address the national shortage of suitable emergency, supported and move-on accommodation options for young people that recognise the diversity of young people's needs and experiences. This should include investment in 'staying put' schemes for care leavers, affordable shared accommodation and Housing First for young people. It should be carried out in line with the current Next Steps Accommodation Programme but with a longer term funding approach.
- Address the lack of housing options for young people by revising national allocations guidance to ensure they are not excluded from social housing.

### **In collaboration with young people, commissioners and local service providers should:**

- Provide a range of housing options for young people which include:
  - Dedicated emergency accommodation for young people including accredited emergency hosting schemes;
  - Private rented access schemes, working directly with landlords to secure housing and provide support to access and sustain tenancies;
  - 'Staying put' schemes for care leavers.
- Develop and expand existing housing models so they are youth appropriate, such as Housing First for young people, and specialist supported accommodation for young people who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence.
- Commission and deliver services that foster an environment where young people are given choice and control and provide opportunities for young people to have open dialogue with people who make decisions. Examples are:
  - Monthly meetings with senior members of staff;
  - Youth inclusion on interview panels;
  - A young people's panel that feeds into the wider organisation.

## SUPPORTING AGENCY AND CONTROL

Systems and services should support young people to have greater agency over their lives and provide them with the tools required to build control. Key to this is age appropriate and psychologically informed support that is responsive to the impact homelessness has on young people's wellbeing and their transition to greater independence.

### **The Department for Work and Pensions should:**

- Immediately bring forward plans to extend the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers announced in the Budget 2020.
- As a minimum, maintain the Local Housing Allowance at the 30th percentile.
- Raise the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s living independently to match the amount over-25s receive, while maintaining the COVID-19 uplift of £20 per week.

### **In collaboration with young people, commissioners and local providers should:**

- Commission services that are developmentally, psychologically and trauma-informed, recognising the long-term impact of experiences of homelessness, poverty, inequality and trauma on the needs of young people.
- Commission and provide services that offer relational and holistic support that takes account of young people's mental wellbeing. This could be supported by employing a complex needs worker, and offering counselling and pre-therapeutic support work onsite, for example.
- Promote youth participation through providing young people opportunities to be involved with the design and delivery of services including outcomes measurements.

## INVESTING IN AND BUILDING **COMMUNITIES**

Strong communities should be built around young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness, so that are able to identify and respond to risks young people face and promote their welfare.

### **The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should:**

- Prioritise prevention by supporting partnerships between the key services and agencies in young people's lives. This should include local authorities, mental health, schools and youth services.

### **The Department for Health and Social Care should:**

- Invest in mental health provision in non-health, community settings, including schools, youth centres and young people's supported accommodation, to offer early and flexible support to young people that need it.
- Ensure that young people at risk of homelessness benefit from social prescribing from mental health and primary care services, by linking in welfare, housing advice and youth community services.
- Focus on early identification of housing precarity; preventing early school leaving; family mediation and counselling, where appropriate.
- Support for the NHS to cope with a rise in demand for mental health support and commit to accelerating the mental health ambitions of the NHS Long-Term Plan.

### **The Department for Education should:**

- Support local areas to ensure schools are funded to recognise and respond to young people at risk of homelessness. This should include a review of school safeguarding procedures – incorporating risk of homelessness – as well as awareness-raising interventions aimed at both staff and young people on youth homelessness and the support options available.

### **In collaboration with young people, commissioners and local providers should:**

- Promote partnership working through raising awareness of commissioned youth services within local areas and facilitating relationships between different providers.
- Provide support that promotes social inclusion for example:
  - Support young people to access or maintain access to education, employment or training;
  - Provide safe, confidential and inclusive services that support young people who have or may experience exclusion based in their identities;
  - Support young people to access other settings and services where they may feel unsafe or have experienced discrimination such as health services;
  - Support young people to develop and strengthen healthy social relationships and connections, enhancing family supports where safe, appropriate and requested by young people;
  - Provide opportunities and support young people to access other community-based supports, services and meaningful activities.

## EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE AND **BUILDING CONFIDENCE**

Young people should be empowered to utilise their strengths and skills and have confidence in their ability to reach their aspirations and shape their experiences, through provision of youth specific responsive support.

### **The Department for Education should:**

- Deliver additional long-term funding commitments to redevelop youth services across England.

### **The Department for Work and Pensions should:**

- Ensure youth advocates are present at every Job Centre to support young people to navigate their claims. Dedicated emergency accommodation for young people including accredited emergency hosting schemes;

### **In collaboration with young people, commissioners and local providers should:**

- Actively encourage youth participation within services through providing young people opportunities to be involved with the design, development and delivery of services.
- Provide responsive and tailored support that recognises diverse range of experiences young people will have when accessing homelessness services, and as such the need for different types of support and opportunities at different times.
- Utilise positive approaches that focus on and mobilise young people's strengths and skills, and provide or identify meaningful opportunities.

46. Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH).

# Appendix 1: Recommendations for change by audience

## Central Government

- Urgently develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness. With similar profile to the Rough Sleeping Strategy, this strategy should be fully funded and include measures to hold government departments and local areas accountable, with a focus on supporting multi-agency approaches, early intervention and prevention. It should include the development of a common identification and enquiry framework for determining need across public services, as well as a public information campaign on youth homelessness. This strategy should be developed in consultation with youth homelessness providers, other youth stakeholders, and young people with lived experience of homelessness.

## The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

- Use the Next Steps Accommodation Programme to deliver funding to local areas for provision of youth-only supported accommodation and move-on options. The funding should deliver dedicated, flexible pathways out of homelessness for young people and help the sector to recover from long-term shortfalls in appropriate accommodation provision.
- Provide local areas with long-term capital and revenue investment into a range of housing options for young people to address the national shortage of suitable emergency, supported and move-on accommodation options for young people that recognise the diversity of young people's needs and experiences. This should include investment in 'staying put' schemes for care leavers, affordable shared accommodation and Housing First for young people. It should be carried out in line with the current Next Steps Accommodation Programme but with a longer term funding approach.
- Address the lack of housing options for young people by revising national allocations guidance to ensure they are not excluded from social housing.
- Prioritise prevention by supporting partnerships between the key services and agencies in young people's lives. This should include local authorities, mental health, schools and youth services.

## The Department for Work and Pensions

- Immediately bring forward plans to extend the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers announced in the Budget 2020.
- As a minimum, maintain the Local Housing Allowance at the 30th percentile.
- Raise the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s living independently to match the amount over-25s receive, while maintaining the COVID-19 uplift of £20 per week.
- Ensure youth advocates are present at every Job Centre to support young people to navigate their claims.

## The Department for Education

- Recognise children with housing precarity as a distinct group within its responsibility for Children in Need and work with MHCLG and DWP to ensure adequate preventative support is offered.
- Support local areas to ensure schools are funded to recognise and respond to young people at risk of homelessness. This should include a review of school safeguarding procedures – incorporating risk of homelessness – as well as awareness-raising interventions aimed at both staff and young people on youth homelessness and the support options available.
- Deliver additional long-term funding commitments to redevelop youth services across England.

## The Department for Health and Social Care

- Review the effectiveness of current child safeguarding approaches with regard to the distinct developmental needs and behaviours of adolescents and young adults, and consequent safeguarding risks, using learning from recent innovations such as contextual, complex and transitional safeguarding approaches.
- Build local capacity for system redesign and innovation to better meet the safeguarding needs of adolescents and young adults aged 14-25.
- Focus on early identification of housing precarity; preventing early school leaving; family mediation and counselling, where appropriate.
- Invest in mental health provision in non-health, community settings, including schools, youth centres and young people's supported accommodation, to offer early and flexible support to young people that need it.
- Ensure that young people at risk of homelessness benefit from social prescribing from mental health and primary care services, by linking in welfare, housing advice and youth community services.
- Support for the NHS to cope with a rise in demand for mental health support and commit to accelerating the mental health ambitions of the NHS Long-Term Plan.

## Commissioners and local providers in collaboration with young people

- Provide a range of housing options for young people which include:
  - Dedicated emergency accommodation for young people including accredited emergency hosting schemes;
  - Private rented access schemes, working directly with landlords to secure housing and provide support to access and sustain tenancies;
  - 'Staying put' schemes for care leavers.
- Develop and expand existing housing models so they are youth appropriate, such as Housing First for young people, and specialist supported accommodation for young people who have experienced sexual and gender-based violence.
- Commission and deliver services that foster an environment where young people are given choice and control and actively encourage youth participation within services through providing young people opportunities to be involved with the design, development and delivery of services
- Commission and deliver services that are developmentally, psychologically and trauma-informed, that offer relational and holistic support that takes account of young people's mental wellbeing and their diverse range of experiences.
- Promote partnership working through raising awareness of commissioned youth services within local areas and facilitating relationships between different providers.
- Provide support that promotes social inclusion for example:
  - Support young people to access or maintain access to education, employment or training;
  - Provide safe, confidential and inclusive services that support young people who have or may experience exclusion based in their identities;
  - Support young people to access other settings and services where they may feel unsafe or have experienced discrimination such as health services;
  - Support young people to develop and strengthen healthy social relationships and connections, enhancing family supports where safe, appropriate and requested by young people;
  - Provide opportunities and support young people to access other community-based supports, services and meaningful activities.
- Utilise positive approaches that focus on and mobilise young people's strengths and skills, and provide or identify meaningful opportunities.

47. Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH).

48. Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH).

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

**Introduction:** Tell me a bit about yourself? **Prompts:** What are your interests / aspirations / hobbies?

Young people from Youth Voice who have experience of homelessness have been advising us on this research and what we should focus on. They told us that there are a few key things that are really important to them, and we'd like to know your thoughts too.

1. What do choice, consistency, confidence, community and control mean to you?
2. Thinking about your experience and maybe that of your peers, how can we improve choice, consistency, confidence, control and community?
3. Throughout your life experience so far, (so in housing, work, studying etc...) - where would you say you had meaningful choice?
4. Where were you living before you came here? – can talk about consistency in support, community, choice and control. **Prompt:** How many outreach workers, key workers, access to wider services etc...?
5. Do you feel confident about the prospect of moving on from where you're currently living? **Prompt:** What would be useful in terms of getting ready to move on, what practical things can be done?
6. Thinking about Housing, Education/ Training and careers - What kind of support have you had? **Prompt:** What are you hoping to do next?
7. What support would you find useful and why?
8. What do you think young people who are experiencing homelessness are worried about and how may homelessness effect that? (skills, violence etc.)
9. How easy / difficult is it to access services in your area? (ask about youth clubs)
10. What skills and strengths have you gained personally and has your homelessness impacted on them?
11. Who (significant figure, adults/ peers, community) has had a positive impact on your experience of homelessness? **Prompt** is the wider community built for young people in mind?
12. Again, thinking about the ideas of choice, consistency, confidence, community and control, if you were to rank them, which would be your top 3 and why?



**homeless link**

### What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

### YOU<sup>TH</sup> VOICE

SPEAK UP FOR CHANGE

**SPEAK UP FOR CHANGE**

Youth Voice is made up of young people between 16-25 years old that have experienced homelessness, sharing their lived experience to support and bring about change. The more young people can be engaged in making decisions about their own lives, their environment, and their communities, the more likely they are to successfully move into independence.

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Homeless Link  
Minorities House, 2-5 Minorities  
London EC3N 1BJ

020 7840 4430

[www.homeless.org.uk](http://www.homeless.org.uk)

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