We Have A Voice, Follow Our Lead: new research on the growing youth homelessness crisis in England

Policy and practice briefing, October 2020

With reports of shocking rises in young people rough sleeping, our new research report, We Have A Voice, Follow Our Lead, shines a light on the frustrations, injustice, resilience and aspirations that characterise the experience of youth homelessness in England today. The research brings together the stories of 45 young people with experience of homelessness and with the guidance of Youth Voice, explores the shortfalls of the system they rely upon, as well as what services can do to promote young people's strengths and wellbeing.

Wider context: Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 and lockdown measures have put the systemic gaps and shortcomings that drive youth homelessness into sharp relief. Our members have described how Covid-19 has impacted support across prevention and early intervention, as well as for young people in crisis. Compounding this, during 'Everyone In' many areas failed to provide age-appropriate emergency accommodation and struggled to respond effectively to young people newly arriving on the streets, who were frequently forced to leave sofa-surfing arrangements or abusive households.

The impact of this can already be seen in service data. CHAIN releases showed a more than 80% increase in young people rough sleeping in London between April and June 2020, compared to the same time last year and youth homelessness helplines reported a doubling in calls during lockdown.

Research also suggests that young people will bear the brunt of the economic fall-out of Covid-19. Already three times more likely to be insecurely employed, one third of 18-24 year-olds have lost jobs or been furloughed during the pandemic, compared to one-in-six adults. The Resolution Foundation predicts that the youth unemployment rate will be at least around the levels experienced during the 2008 financial crisis.

As we begin to plot our course in this new reality, it is clear that decisive Government action is essential to prevent further escalation of this youth homelessness crisis. Findings from our research provide insights into a new way forward, to ensure

> "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

that the potential of young people is harnessed, and their aspirations supported, by systems and policies that are appropriate and responsive to their needs.

Key research findings

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.

The **absence of effective prevention or early intervention** work was visible in many young people's stories. Risks and harms they experienced, including homelessness and abuse, were often not recognised by different agencies. Local authority **gatekeeping** was a barrier to support for many, especially those fleeing abuse inside or outside the home. For care leavers, a high turnover of social workers undermined relationships and meant safeguarding risks went unnoticed.

Welfare discrimination was another major theme. Young people felt that the system was not responsive to their circumstances and their Universal Credit allowance meant they were often unable to afford basic needs. They also felt blocked from training or work because the impact it

would have on their benefits would mean they could no longer afford to live in supported accommodation.

These frustrations and barriers got in the way of young people's goals and undermined their confidence. Young people described how they affected their ability to cope with day-to-day challenges, to connect and manage relationships, regulate their own behaviours and to navigate systems successfully.

What works? A role for services
Young people valued the organisations that counteracted the negative experiences they had had in their lives by providing consistency in support and some control over the decisions made about their lives. Organisations that fostered transparency, recognised experiences of adversity, and provided personalised support to build upon their aspirations and strengths, stood out across young people's stories.

"I was sofa surfing for eight months before my social worker realised." Tom, East of England

"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

"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

Young people often spoke about individual workers who had their corner and had taken the time to listen and to understand them. Interviews also highlighted the importance of the close communities young people managed to build around themselves. The spaces they created helped them share information and resources, made LGBTQ+ young people feel more secure in their identities and supported overall confidence and wellbeing.

Key policy recommendations
- Develop a cross-departmental youth homelessness strategy that focuses on prevention, youth participation and multi-agency support. Like the current Rough Sleeping Strategy, it should give the fight against youth homelessness the profile and urgency it deserves.
- Immediately bring forward plans to extend the Shared Accommodation Rate exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers. Match the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s to the amount over-25s receive, while maintaining the COVID-19 uplift.
- 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.

Key practice recommendations

- Commission services that are age appropriate and psychologically informed
- Promote participation by providing young people with opportunities to be involved with the design and delivery of services, including outcomes measurements.
- Provide support that promotes social inclusion by, for example, supporting access to education, employment or training; providing safe and inclusive services that support young people who have or may experience exclusion based in their identities; and supporting young people to develop and strengthen healthy social relationships and connections.