

Social Justice And Regeneration Committee

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Policy Review: Youth Homelessness

Shelter Cymru

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

Youth Homelessness

November 2006

The information in this paper is based on Shelter Cymru casework, evidence given to the Archbishop of Wales Inquiry into homelessness and poor housing, the Shelter Cymru Education and Peer Learning services and comments from some of our partner agencies. In addition recent Shelter Cymru work on the private rented sector, homeless families and health and housing have also informed comments in this paper.

The key issues for Shelter Cymru are:

1. The size of the 16-25 year old homelessness problem is significant in Wales but it is important to understand that homelessness includes a wide range of circumstances and causes.
2. That young people suffer disproportionately from factors such as the current state of the housing market, unemployment and benefit restrictions.
3. Homeless young people will sometimes have a range of associated problems, such as family break-up, abuse, crime, alcohol and drug abuse problems, educational under achievement etc. and as such need a similarly broad set of responses and assistance
4. That services to young homeless people can be variable and inconsistent across Wales but that there are many examples of good practice, which should be replicated.
5. Much has been done to recognise and respond to the problems of young homelessness, but there is more that can be done to provide lasting solutions.

Introduction

It is important to remember that homelessness and the causes of homelessness are as varied, if not more so, among 16-24 year olds as they are in the rest of the population. People in this age range could be homeless because of violence or abuse at home or left care without adequate independent living skills, but also because of rent or even mortgage arrears. They could be single, or couples with children or be single parents. It is important not to stereotype people facing housing difficulties in this age range.

This means that there is no one response to homelessness among young people. Some simply need decent secure and affordable housing to be allowed to get on with their lives. Others need more support and assistance to acquire the skills of independent living. Some may need intensive support because of illness or substance misuse, or emotional problems associated with histories of violence or abuse.

What is clear is that to be young and homeless, or facing homelessness, brings with it particular vulnerabilities. As such it is important to ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers to assisting young people in housing need and that indeed an even greater focus on assistance, support and good practice should be encouraged.

Casework evidence

Over the past year Shelter Cymru has assisted 878 people between the ages of 16 and 24. The majority (76%) of these people were either actually homeless or were threatened with homelessness in the short to medium term.

26% of the users had rent arrears problems, almost 20% housing benefit problems.

Other main reasons for seeking help from Shelter Cymru included unsuitable accommodation, relationship breakdowns, leaving prison or leaving care.

The number of young people in the private rented sector (16%) is proportionately higher than the population as a whole (9%).

A significant number (27%) were threatened with homelessness by parents, friends or relatives with whom they were staying. 55 of the young people coming to Shelter Cymru during the year were actually street homeless.

A very high number of the young people coming to Shelter Cymru were on low incomes (89%) – these included Job Seekers (57%), sick (12%), part time (8%), carers (7%) Students or trainees (5%).

Around a third of the households in the age range included dependent children. 193 households were single parent women.

It is noted in other research that around 40% of households presenting as homeless in Wales are headed by a person in the 16-24 age group.

Focussing on younger people who are sleeping rough, or who have itinerant life styles, research suggests associations with drugs and alcohol abuse – a home office report estimates that 73% of young homeless people in England and Wales were found to be current drug users, a majority of whom have left home because of family conflict. Other work shows links with mental health and re-offending cycles.

Shelter Cymru's survey of a number of homeless families who used the service earlier in 2006 shows that young people in homeless families who are still in education are likely to have schools and college work disrupted. Educational under achievement can itself lead to social exclusion and homelessness. Employment and training opportunities are also disrupted by homelessness.

Problems and issues

- Structural, market and benefit issues

Reports and research has shown the difficulties young first time buyers have in being able to afford even the cheapest end of the housing market in Wales. Indeed a recent report estimates that Wales is now the most unaffordable area of the UK outside of South East and Southern England in terms of income to price ratios. The report notes this is a particular problem for young working families trying to establish a family home. The fact that so many are unable to buy in turn places further pressure on the rented sector in Wales.

The Housing Benefit Single Room Rent continues to impact in a discriminatory way on under 25 years olds in the private rented sector. The Archbishops Inquiry in Wales has had evidence of young people living in overcrowded conditions in order to afford rents and even examples of landlords requiring young people to undertake menial work in lieu of rent shortfalls.

Indeed overall shortfalls between housing benefit and rents in private rented accommodation has a particular impact on young people who are more likely to use the sector. Research, as yet unpublished by Shelter Cymru, on the private rented sector in Wales suggests that the majority of housing benefit claimants face shortfalls, with, in some areas, over 80% of claimants facing this problem. In one area 33% of claimants were facing shortfalls of between ?10 and ?20 a week with some over ?40 a week.

The replacement of Housing Benefit, in the private rented sector, with the Local Housing Allowance may create further difficulties for young people seeking accommodation. The new scheme will end direct payments to landlords for most households possibly leading to landlords being more 'selective' in choosing tenants.

Higher levels of unemployment and dropping out of training and education are also a feature of many young homeless peoples lives. This often leads to cycles of poverty, homelessness and unemployment from which it is difficult to escape.

- Service delivery and practice issues

Many local authorities, housing associations and voluntary organisations in Wales have responded positively to young homelessness and engaged in support, accommodation and advice partnerships in order to find lasting solutions. The homelessness prevention agenda in Wales is an important element of tackling young homelessness as well as effective partnership work.

We remain concerned, however, that some preventive work is taking place outside of any effective

monitoring systems at the moment. This means it is hard to judge who is being helped and whether the help is sustainable. In addition, people who are not formally accepted have no recourse to appeals or requests to review decisions. As such we are particularly concerned that young inexperienced people being assisted in this way, may not be aware of all possible options when seeking help.

The delivery of homelessness services by some local authorities at times is variable, in particular when responding to younger homeless people.

Shelter Cymru reports in recent year's, based on mystery shopping exercises of local authority homelessness services, have found that younger homeless applicants may not be getting full assessments of their needs and may indeed on occasions be actually dissuaded from making a full application.

There are examples of corporate failures to respond to need with young homeless people sometimes falling between housing and social services departments despite the existence of protocols which, on paper, have been designed to avoid such situations.

There are also examples of 'gatekeeping' services and accommodation through what Shelter Cymru believes are harsh 'intentional homeless' decisions involving young people. For example, finding young people who have been thrown out by their parents or relatives for not coming home at a certain time, intentionally homeless. The Archbishops Inquiry has heard evidence from a number of young people and youth project workers on the use or threat of intentional homelessness directed at young people. Such an approach does little to resolve the problems young homeless people may be facing and often exacerbates the problem.

Gatekeeping, through the blanket application of certain requirements, or introducing additional 'hurdles' before a homelessness application is considered, appears to be growing. It is clear that the development of mediation schemes for young people in Wales has been a welcome step forward. However, requiring all young people who have left home to engage in mediation services even when it is not appropriate because of family histories or circumstances, is unhelpful. One agency has reported a case of a young man, who could not face his abusive parent in a mediation setting required by the local authority, choosing instead to live on the streets.

We are also aware of at least two instances in Wales where homelessness decisions on 17 years olds were delayed until they become 18. The applicants were then informed they were no longer in priority need.

Some local allocations systems also unfairly, in our view, discriminate against younger people. Some policies require a guarantor before a tenancy is granted, ignoring the Welsh Code of Guidance advice on this matter which recommends the use of Equitable Tenancies for under 18's.

We do not believe this is a systematic attempt to avoid duties, rather a symptom of the pressure on local authorities and an indication of training and development needs and perhaps also a misunderstanding of homelessness prevention work. But it is also clear that the view that young people are a difficult group to re-house, a group, moreover, that needs support as well as

accommodation plays a part.

Clearly Shelter Cymru challenges these sorts of decisions and practices, but there will be many people who do not access advice services. The Assembly has already acknowledged these problems by supporting joint projects between Shelter Cymru and local authorities to develop good practice toolkits that can address these types of practices and decisions.

Current services and good practice

It has not been possible in the time available to collate a wide range of good practice examples. It is clear that there is a considerable amount of very good work undertaken or supported by voluntary organisations, housing associations and local authorities.

It would be inappropriate to single out particular groups that Shelter Cymru has worked with or are aware of through referrals or as applicants to the Val Feld award as undoubtedly there are many that will be left out. What is clear is that there are a number of key elements that can be found in most effective services that work directly with homeless young people. These can be characterised as:

- Services that respond in a holistic way to peoples needs – not simply responding on the basis of the accommodation need
- Services that empower young people, providing opportunities and choice and personal responsibility.
- Services that encourage engagement with its management/service delivery allowing young people to ‘give something back’ to the organisation and the community.

We are aware of organisations that in addition to accommodation provide health and well being and dietary advice, confidence and motivational skills building, cultural and artistic opportunities, accredited courses, community engagement as well as essential life skills support and where necessary counselling and assistance over substance misuse.

Shelter Cymru operates an Education Service, funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, which supports the Secondary school ‘Housemate’ resource in Wales. The aim of this service is to equip teachers with materials and resources to both raise awareness of homelessness and housing problems and to provide ‘early housing advice’ to young people about housing options and risks.

We also operate a unique Peer Learning project, initially funded by the Welsh Assembly Government, which works closely with groups of young homeless people. The project aims to improve the self-confidence of young homeless people, assist them in acquiring qualifications and training but also provides them with the training and opportunities to make presentations to other young people about their experiences and importantly how to avoid them. This is the key element of Peer Learning that young people can teach and guide other young people and in turn build their own self-respect.

The Welsh Assembly Government, through its homelessness prevention good practice grants has also recently funded Shelter Cymru to develop a Housing Help Mate pack, designed to promote a better

understanding of homelessness and housing issues among youth workers. This pack will assist youth workers in advising and supporting young people facing housing problems.

Conclusions and proposals

The Welsh Assembly Government has taken significant steps forward in combating homelessness in Wales. Extending the homelessness safety net in 2001 to additional priority groups including 16/17 years olds and former prisoners has assisted thousands of vulnerable homeless young people.

The new legislation seeking to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless people, including young homeless households, will signal another significant step forward.

More recently the introduction of Homelessness Good Practice grants and the new national health and homelessness secondment are important developments that will have a positive impact on young homelessness.

There are other developments and issues that we believe the Assembly should consider.

- Education and training

There is often a strong relationship between educational under achievement, lack of skills and young homelessness. We propose that a homelessness and employability network and strategy could be developed that could draw together homelessness services, education, training, careers and employment organisations in order to assist young homeless people into training and employment options. To support this the Assembly might also consider enhancing the local authority duty to assess the needs of homeless applicants to include training and education.

- Intentional homelessness

The use of 'intentional homelessness' decisions against young people effectively means that they have been abandoned. We propose that the Assembly may wish to consider, through legislation, amending intentional homelessness in Wales making it a power, not a duty, and importantly increasing the support and assistance duties to resettle people into suitable accommodation and avoid repeat homelessness.

- Monitoring prevention

It is important that as soon as possible a uniformed means of monitoring homelessness prevention work, in particular whether that work is achieving sustainable and suitable outcomes, is introduced in Wales.

- Health and Homelessness

We would also propose that, in order to build on the new Health and Homelessness co-ordinating

post the Assembly consider introducing a new public health fund that will focus on housing, homelessness and health initiatives.

- Low Cost Home Ownership

It is clear that many young people simply need a start in life, not intensive support or specific services, simply an affordable home. Many young people in Wales work but cannot afford to buy their first home. We would urge the Assembly to support more low cost home ownership initiatives and to encourage the development of Community Land Trusts in Wales, which can help in reducing house costs.

- Housing Benefit

We also ask that the Welsh Assembly Government explore with the Rent Officer Service possible actions that can be taken to ensure housing benefit levels are more reflective of local rent levels. We recognise that the Welsh Assembly Government have opposed the Single Room Rent and would ask whether possible amendments to the regulation might be introduced as a part of any future enhanced powers.

- Investment

Many young homeless people are provided the support and assistance vital for rehabilitation or independent living through services funded by Supporting People grants. It is essential that this resource is protected and increased in the coming years to ensure that strategies to combat homelessness are ultimately successful.

We also continue to call for additional resources to provide more secure social housing to ensure that young people are provided with decent homes and opportunities to re-build their lives in a safe and healthy environment.

Investment in housing and support for young people is an investment in health, in skills and education, in good citizenship, indeed an investment in the future of Wales.

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