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Young People &
Homelessness in Wales

-
Guidelines for the
Youth Service.

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INTRODUCTION.

This paper is intended for people who work in the youth service in Wales. It is intended to provide an overview of the extent of youth homelessness in Wales; give an insight to the experience of homeless young people and importantly give some ideas of how the youth service can become involved in the development of provision and services.

The paper does not discuss recent changes in housing benefit or how they affect young people. However, this is an issue that needs to be considered, especially by those workers involved or who would wish to be involved in accommodation initiatives.

The paper builds heavily on the recommendations of the Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans 1996). The Inquiry, commissioned by ten leading charities, was established in mid 1995 to take a fresh look at the issue of youth homelessness and make recommendations for preventative and remedial action. The Inquiry drew upon evidence from many projects and organisations throughout Britain and as such reflects the current situation and offers contemporary solutions to the issues involved. It is essential reading for all youth workers and managers and this paper has drawn heavily upon material from the Inquiry to introduce topics and illustrate ideas.

DEFINING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS.

The Inquiry defines youth homelessness as:

A single person, without dependants, between the ages of 16 and 25 years who is in one of the following housing situations.

1. Without any accommodation – e.g. sleeping rough or with no accommodation to go to.
2. In temporary accommodation such as a hostel, bed and breakfast hotel, squat;
3. Staying temporarily with friends or relatives, who are unable or unwilling to accommodate them in the longer term.

However, to this I would add single people aged 16 to 25 who may have dependent children and who may also find themselves in one of the above situations.

Young homeless people come from a variety of backgrounds. Just like the rest of the population young homeless people have diverse backgrounds, circumstances and hopes. This was confirmed by evidence given to the Inquiry, however, certain groups such as young women, care leavers and young people from ethnic communities were more vulnerable to homelessness.

THE EXTENT AND NATURE OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN WALES

Homelessness is a significant issue for young people in Wales, either as a result of experiencing homelessness or due to the prospect of homelessness.

The Big Issue Cymru (100th Edition May 11 - 17 1998) reported that a Shelter survey found four out of five young people are more worried about becoming homeless than being unemployed. The Daily Post of Monday 6 April 1998 carried an article reporting a survey undertaken by Collins Educational. The survey, which was aimed at teenagers studying for exams, found that 71% of respondents were worried about the prospect of homelessness. Clearly homelessness is of concern to young people.

The following statistics and scenarios paint a picture of the extent and nature of youth homelessness in Wales.

The Inquiry into the Prevention of Youth Homelessness (Evans 1996) quoted a range of figures that illuminate the incidence of homelessness amongst 16 to 25 year olds.

1. Welsh Office statistics demonstrate that in 1994/95 4,147 young people aged 16 to 25 presented themselves as homeless to local authorities in Wales. This represented 23% of all homeless applicants.

2. A multi-agency survey undertaken in Cardiff over a six month period in 1993/94 found 324 young people between the ages of 16 and 21 who were either homeless or in serious housing need. This represented almost a quarter of all applicants accepted as statutorily homeless by Cardiff City Council in the same period. Disturbingly 56% of these young people were aged 16 and 17.

The Big Issue Cymru (100th Edition May 11 - 17 1998) reported that following the removal of benefits for 16 to 17 year olds in 1988, nightshelter users aged between 16 and 17 increased from 10 to 50%.

3. Swansea Cyrenians reported that almost half of the 99 homeless people contacted by their outreach service in the outlying areas of Swansea during 1995 were under 25.

4. Furthermore the Inquiry concluded that youth homelessness is a growing problem and that the greatest increase in youth homelessness is amongst the very young.

For example, a youth centre in South Wales reported that in 1995 almost 30% of their clients were homeless compared to 17% in 1990 and Swansea Cyrenians experienced a 40% increase in the number of inquiries from young people under the age of 25 during 1995.

5. The Inquiry report provides a range of examples from other areas of Britain which support these experiences and point to a rise in homelessness amongst 16 and 17 year olds. Moreover, many young people experience multiple problems. Many have left home early following abuse or neglect; have been in the care of a local authority and many end up sleeping rough or living in bed and breakfast accommodation or squats.

The Big Issue Cymru (100th Edition May 11 - 17 1998) claimed that 86% of young homeless people are forced to leave home as a direct result of either violence or family breakdown.

6. Whilst young homeless people come from a diverse range of backgrounds certain groups are more vulnerable than others;

- Care leavers: significantly between a fifth and a half of all homeless young people have been in care. The Big Issue Cymru (100th Edition May 11 - 17 1998) claimed that care leavers constitute between 20 and 50% of the homeless population.

- Young people from black and other ethnic communities are more likely to experience problems which may cause homelessness or are likely to be living in hidden situations (with friends or relatives etc.) and may be less likely to approach advice agencies.

- Young women: a relatively large proportion of young women feature in rough sleeping statistics, particularly 16 and 17 year olds.

- Young lesbians and gay men who may have left home due to conflict over their sexuality.

- Young refugees and asylum seekers who arrive in the country with nowhere to go.

7. The Wales Young Homelessness Group notes that according to the Welsh Office 53% of youth homelessness in Wales occurs in the more populated areas of Newport, Cardiff, Ogwr and Swansea. The Big Issue Cymru (100th Edition may 11 - 17 1998) reported that Swansea and Bridgend have the highest levels of homelessness at over 3.6 per 1000 population.

These figures however, may not represent a true picture. For example youth homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon and other studies point to the incidence of youth homelessness in rural Wales. (Hutson S. and Liddiard M. 1991). Poor access to advice and support agencies may prevent young people in rural Wales from presenting themselves as homeless, or they may seek other solutions by moving to an urban area for example.

Shelter Cymru contends that many young people do not present themselves as homeless to local authorities as they feel they cannot help them. Shelter's own statistics support this view as 22.6% of the 16 to 24 year olds they worked with in 1995/96 either did not contact the local authority or involve them in their case.

HOUSING OPTIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

There is a range of official housing options, which have been developed for young people across Wales. These include:

- Private Sector accommodation
- Local authority accommodation
- Housing association accommodation
- Hostel type accommodation
- Supported lodgings schemes
- Bed and Breakfast

In some of these schemes young people have access to support from dedicated workers who are able to access a range of support services for them. Such support schemes are often facilitated via Social Service departments in partnership with the voluntary sector.

However, there is a role for the youth service in these arrangements to provide personal and social development opportunities for young people after they have been accommodated. This is an important contribution that the youth service can make to the personal development of young people once issues of accommodation have been resolved.

The type of accommodation described above may not be immediately available to young people. They may not qualify as priority for local authority housing; they may need to satisfy housing association criteria or they may not be able to afford rents in the private sector (or be unable to access housing benefit).

With regard to other schemes young people would need to find out where they are and how to access them. This has obvious implications for the scale and scope of information services available to young people.

Hutson and Liddiard also point to a range of other forms of accommodation used by young people. These include:

- Sleeping rough
- Squatting
- Prison and other institutions
- Caravans
- Tied accommodation. For example housing which comes with a job.
- Staying with friends
- Staying with relatives

These alternatives were generally seen as a short-term stop gap provision in lieu of other opportunities for accommodation. However, in the early stages of homelessness, significant numbers of young people stayed with friends or slept rough for less than two weeks. These were emergency measures prior to sorting out other forms of accommodation although these groups of young people were apt to develop a "homeless career" and experience a range of other problems later on in that "career".

It is important, therefore, that interventions are targeted at preventing young people from being homeless over a prolonged period and to ensure that support services can enable them to resolve the issues affecting them. The educational role of the youth service and schools can play an important part in this.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness offers a range of recommendations to resolve issues around youth homelessness, some of which have relevance to the youth service.

Importantly the Inquiry recommends that...

“Housing, social, educational, training, employment and leisure services across both statutory and voluntary sectors need to work together in a unified framework to improve the life chances of young people. In short every area of the country should have a local strategy on youth homelessness. A local strategy not only represents the vehicle for driving preventative and remedial initiatives forward, but can also provide a tremendous spur to action.”

In Wales, local authorities provide a base for the development of a corporate approach, which can draw upon the expertise, and resources of the services described above in order to create a unified framework and a local strategy. However, it is important to note that such an approach would provide a framework for a range of services to young people, as well as a response to youth homelessness. (WYA 1996)

The City and County of Swansea has recently developed a youth homelessness strategy that draws upon the Social Services and Housing departments and also provides for the social and personal development of young people.

The strategy has established a youth homelessness unit staffed by those two departments in partnership with Barnardos and the Health Service to provide a range of advice and accommodation options for young people. Importantly the unit enables young people to receive appropriate advice and support from several agencies but under one roof. (i.e. a one stop shop.)

The strategy also enables other partnerships to develop, and the youth service, housing department, youth housing workers and young people have designed a modular course for young people around leaving home issues.

Given that other local authorities would wish to develop a corporate approach to the issue of youth homelessness (and that the Inquiry report provides a model for developing a local strategy) and introduce a raft of specific provisions, I would like to explore the role which the youth service can play in these developments.

THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH SERVICE

The youth service has a unique contribution to make in supporting young people through housing and homelessness issues. That contribution involves acknowledging the young person as an individual with a range of different needs and working with individuals in a holistic way. By this I mean rather than working with the individual to attend to an obvious problem, for example their homelessness, the youth worker can deal with that issue in the context of the individual's life situation and enable them to develop the personal capacities to begin to tackle a range of other issues which concern or interest them. For example, any education, training or employment issues they may have.

The other unique role that the service can play is that it can offer support to young people at different stages in the areas of housing and homelessness. That is before young people leave home; whilst young people are homeless, and once young people have found accommodation.

Much of the work which the youth service can develop is educational in nature and should seek to enable young people to become more independent and able to take charge of their own lives.

Given the statistics discussed earlier it is important to recognise the need for the youth service to begin to target more of its work at an older age range. Whilst preventative work can go on with

young people of school age, much work remains to be done with young people aged 16+ and therefore the service may need to look at how it delivers its services in order to begin to address issues like youth homelessness.

The initiatives the service can develop include:

- a) Personal development
- b) Advice and Information
- c) Networking with other agencies
- d) Developing accommodation initiatives.
- e) Group Activities - a range of social activities, mainly peer led, to counteract isolation and support the personal development of young people once they have been accommodated.

a) Personal Development

The Inquiry report recommends that local education and housing authorities should liaise to establish an education programme about leaving home, housing options and life/communication skills. The youth service with its emphasis on personal development is ideally suited to deliver this. Indeed many resources have been developed for youth workers, (e.g. by Shelter, Centrepoint etc..) to deliver programmes such as these.

The City and County of Swansea has developed a training programme called Housing Matters, which offers young people the opportunity to explore issues around housing and homelessness. The programme is accredited via the Open College Network and is available to other organisations via the Wales Youth Agency Young Persons Programme.

The youth service could deliver such programmes in a variety of situations. For example:

- In schools
- In youth clubs and projects
- As part of a programme of preparation and support for young people leaving care, or other institutions like hospitals or prison.
- To young people living independently
- For special needs housing projects

b) Advice and Information

The Inquiry report recommends that local statutory and voluntary agencies should jointly develop a local advice and information service for young people, in order to meet local needs and circumstances. This might include a dedicated advice and information centre; information packs and leaflets for young people; outreach advice and support services and advocacy services for young people.

The Youth Homelessness Unit currently being developed in Swansea goes some way towards this. However, it is important to develop a generic service for young people which deals with a range of advice and information services.

Importantly, the Wales Youth Agency is responsible for supporting local authorities and voluntary organisations to develop such initiatives. The Agency works with the National Youth Agency in England, to implement the NYAFAIS information system. This is based on a range of quality standards and provides an indexed system of information for young people. Information shops are encouraged to tailor their services to local circumstances.

Many youth services in Wales have established Youth Information initiatives using a database available from the Wales Youth Agency and other organisations provide a range of advice, information and support to homeless young people. For example, Port Talbot and Afan Single Homeless Project employs an advice and information worker and the Llanelli Centre Project also provide a range of services for homeless young people.

c) Networking

Given the range of organisations working with homeless young people it is important that the youth service is able to network with organisations to make contact with young people and make them aware of the services they have to offer and attract them to provision. The type of organisations with whom contact should be established include:

- Housing Associations (General and Special needs)
- Supported Lodgings Schemes
- Leaving Care Projects
- Young Single Homeless projects (and single homeless projects)
- Social Service Departments
- Housing Departments
- Hostels
- Private sector providers.
- Foyers

This networking function is important as it would serve to offer a range of opportunities to young people's housing organisations which may be unavailable to them. Due to its location in the local authority structure, the youth service can open doors to other agencies such as Careers, Further Education, Training Providers and Leisure.

d) Developing Accommodation Initiatives

In the absence of available accommodation for young people via providers such as housing associations, social services, foyers etc. it is possible for youth workers to develop local initiatives that offer some respite for young people. These include:

- Friendly people in the neighbourhood. Youth workers can seek support from young people-friendly householders willing to offer short term, emergency accommodation to young people whilst the worker tries to elicit support from other services in finding longer term accommodation for the young person. This involves the worker in recruiting people to such a scheme and carrying out proper vetting procedures.

- Supported lodgings schemes. Some youth services have sought to develop supported lodgings schemes and recruit householders willing to provide long term placements and support to young people. This involves the worker in vetting placement providers, sorting out any benefit issues and agreeing placement contracts with placement providers and young people. These can be successful schemes but require proper resourcing by the youth service which includes the employment of workers with a brief to provide support to both lodgings providers and young people.

Both of the above types of scheme benefit from the support of a management committee that involves the youth service, social services, the housing authority, placement providers and local businesses. The committee can support and monitor the development of the work, put systems in place for supporting young people and placement providers and raise monies. This last task would be better facilitated if the committee gained charity status.

The formation of such a committee also lends credibility to the third avenue for providing accommodation opportunities for young people. That is for the committee to make links with a housing association in order to gain such support for the development of housing association accommodation for young people. The committee can then manage the accommodation on behalf of the housing association.

For example, Port Talbot and Afan Single Homeless Project (PTASH) was established by a YMCA worker in 1987, in conjunction with Social Services, the Church of Wales and other individuals.

The group, which was convened by an industrial chaplain, approached a housing association who acquired funds for two houses. The organisation now has 17 units of accommodation, which includes 12 bedsits and 5 independent flats. It employs a full time support worker and a project manager, an advice and information worker, and an administrative officer.

e) Group Activities

Having found accommodation one of the major issues experienced by young people, living independently is social isolation. The youth service can act to bring together young people who may welcome intervention from an organisation who is interested in them as a young person, and able to offer a range of opportunities.

The youth service is able to bring together individual young people in group situations to meet with each other and plan a range of social and educational activities that they consider may address some of their concerns and interests. The youth service has at its disposal resources of staff, premises, equipment and expertise to facilitate such developments.

For example as part of a local strategy the youth service could provide staffing and premises to a group of young people brought together by a range of housing providers. The youth worker works with the group to enable them to plan and organise a range of social and educational activities. Whether it be an ice skating trip, discussions, or simply somewhere to meet in order to alleviate some of the tensions created by living on your own. Such an initiative could also be linked into the provision of advice, information and other support services.

This is a crucial role for the youth service, who because of its neutrality can provide a safe space for young people to work together to meet their own needs. However, it may be that issues of confidentiality would need to be worked through in establishing such groups, although this should not be a reason for preventing their development.

FINAL COMMENTS

This paper has only touched on the issue of youth homelessness and provided ideas as to how the youth service in Wales can begin to play more of a role in creating provision for young homeless people. The paper has outlined the kind of support which youth workers can provide to facilitate the personal development of young homeless people as well as the preventative role, which can be provided by the kind of education the youth service offers.

Importantly, as part of a strategy at local authority level, the youth service should be proactive in ensuring that it is included in that strategy and that it is an active partner in creating provision and services for young people.

APPENDIX 1: NATIONAL HOUSING ORGANISATIONS

Shelter Cymru
Swansea 01792 469 400

Tai Cymru – housing for Wales
Cardiff 01222 747 979

Centrepoint
London 0171 629 2229

National Homeless Alliance
London 0171 833 2071