

## Beyond the rhetoric of youth homelessness:

### Telling it as it is

*'Vermin, scum, basically I had so many names called at me for living under a bridge ...I hated it. I just hated life ... I just wanted to get out of society. I was rock bottom anyway'*  
(young person interviewed)

A small scale qualitative research study listening to young people aged 16-24yrs who have experience of homelessness and complex need

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## Summary Findings

### **The Research**

This qualitative research sought to ensure the voices of young people were heard and understood. The research was designed to be carried out *with* homeless young people rather than *on* homeless youth. Five young people between 16-24 years old and known to be homeless or living in temporary accommodation were identified by Barnardo's and invited to form the Research Advisory Group. To establish an effective Advisory Group, time was needed to establish rapport, trust and understanding with an initial group of five homeless young people so they would feel more comfortable and able to advise on all aspects of the field work. Our objective in using this approach was to access comprehensive, high quality data via a facilitated semi structured questionnaire. The findings of which could be explored through focus group work with the Advisory Group.

All twenty interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and then coded using the

research objectives as starting points to identify, highlight and categorise emerging themes – this was done systematically and electronically using NVivo software.

The commitment to listen to the voices, experiences and perceptions of the young homeless people enabled the research to facilitate a systematic analysis of their narrative that enabled the young people to 'Tell it as it is'. What follows is a summary of the findings:

### **Context & Experience**

Most young people in this study had grown up in families where their parents/carers had their own difficulties to cope with. Therefore, many of the young people did not benefit from a secure childhood environment as a foundation to mature and develop. What is also interesting is that some of the young people blamed themselves when their parents or carers '*couldn't cope*' defining

themselves as a 'problem child'. Almost half of the young people had been looked after by the local authority (n=9) on both a long term and short term basis. The Social Exclusion Unit Task Force report 'Realising Young Potential and Supporting Care Leavers into Education, Employment and Training (2009)<sup>1</sup> identifies that care leavers with significant support needs are in greater need of effective co-ordinated intervention, without which they risk increased disadvantage. The report identifies the high risk groups as young people with mental health problems, learning difficulties, emotional and attachment difficulties, substance misuse, young offenders and young parents-such needs were manifested in the respondent group.

### **Perceived Needs**

All the young people interviewed expressed that they wanted a more stable lifestyle. Securing permanent accommodation that met their needs was seen as a priority. However, some young people described being placed in unsuitable accommodation, which was particularly problematic for young parents. Many of the young people had not had an opportunity to develop skills needed to live independently, like meal planning, hygiene and budgeting. The support given by the hostels to develop independent living skills was valued by the young people. The young people all aimed to be engaged in employment or education and training, although being without permanent accommodation presented considerable challenges to achieving this aim. The Social Exclusion Unit report 'Transitions: Young People with Complex Needs'<sup>2</sup> identified that vulnerable young people, including care leavers, lack the social networks and social capital necessary to enable them to make informed choices about their future. Again, the support given by the hostels, including

provision of a training officer, was viewed as helpful by the young people.

### **Barriers to Accessing Services**

There appears to be a lack of accessible information about the services available, with young people describing trying to locate services when they are in a crisis situation. This is supported by the recent Shelter Cymru petition<sup>3</sup> to the Welsh Assembly Government which called for education about leaving home to be made part of the national curriculum. It is evident that the young people face barriers in accessing frontline services, particularly in the statutory sector. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 amended the Children Act 1989 and imposed new duties on the local authority to provide better services to care leavers as part of corporate parenting responsibilities. In seeming conflict to the concept of corporate parenting, the young people describe feeling judged by the staff in the Homeless section of the housing department, which they find especially difficult as they are required to impart personal information about how they became homeless in order to secure emergency accommodation.

Clearly, it is important for staff to demonstrate sensitivity and respect when interviewing vulnerable young people. The definition of priority need leads to difficulties. Young men over the age of 18 tend not to fall into the 'priority need' group which means that they are unlikely to be allocated housing authority or housing association priority. Young homeless people can experience stigma and discrimination from the general public, which has an impact on what is often already low self esteem. This can lead to young people trying to hide their situation, and feeling ostracised from society.

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1 Cabinet Office. (2009) Realising young potential: supporting care leavers into education, employment and training.

2 Social Exclusion Unit (2005) Transitions. Young People with Complex Needs. London, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister;

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3 Norman, K. (2009) Teens backing call to put leaving home on the curriculum, Western Mail, 3 December 2009 accessed online <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2009/12/03/teens-backing-call-to-put-leaving-home-on-the-curriculum-91466-25309111/> 29th March 2010

### ***Facilitators to receiving help***

There is a range of valued support for homeless young people in Wrexham provided by the voluntary sector, with staff who are perceived by the young people to be committed, supportive and approachable. However, it should be recognised that the provision of some voluntary services, for example the after care services at Barnardos, are in part funded by the local authority, therefore the distinction between statutory and voluntary provision is not clear cut. Young people are appreciative of the services that are provided including practical support to meet basic needs of food, warmth and shelter, and emotional support. Young people also value friendships with other people in similar situations, and obtain support from the relationships they develop. The relationships are particularly important as the young people are often without family support. This factor emerged strongly from the research, and developing mechanisms to enhance these important social support systems is identified as a recommendation for improved policy and practice.

### ***Gaps in service provision***

The number of homeless young people in Wrexham is difficult to establish<sup>4</sup> as there are 'hidden homeless'. For example, young people who do not have permanent accommodation, but are 'sofa surfing' do not appear in official statistics. The recent provision of Ty Nos night shelter in Wrexham is valued by the young people who have stayed there, although some young people are put off going to the night shelter as they feel intimidated by the older, established homeless people who use the facility. For vulnerable homeless young people, dormitory style accommodation while better than sleeping on the streets may feel a threatening situation.

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<sup>4</sup> Hart, E., (2006) Youth Homeless Scoping Paper, Welsh Assembly Government,  
<http://www.cynulliadcymru.org/c47f2ac6b4726e395a40b310f172f081.pdf> accessed 25th March 2010

It appears that there are at times not enough places to meet the demand given the number of homeless people in Wrexham, which includes young people. There are young people in Wrexham who are rough sleeping, sleeping in parks, outside public buildings and in makeshift shelters. Young people have been victims of crime and verbal abuse while street homeless with over half the respondents (n=12) having been a victim of crime. Although the young people spoke positively about the support given by the voluntary sector and within the hostels, finding permanent accommodation proved to be very difficult; waiting lists for local authority and housing association property are long, with young people resorting to using the private sector which does not have the same protection as social housing provision. Furthermore, there is a need for more accessible and practical support when young people do secure their own tenancy.

### ***Young people's suggested improvements***

The young people suggested a range of improvements and were appreciative of being asked for their ideas. The suggestions included more night shelter type provision, and more structural aspects like changing the definition of priority need so it was not so restrictive, particularly in relation to young men over eighteen.

Many of the young people identified having somewhere to spend time during the day as important; the needs identified included having a place for warmth and shelter and being able to obtain advice, although mainly to gain support from other young people who are in a similar situation. It is pertinent to note that by 31st March 2010, the Personal Advisors service will be delivered 'in house' by Social Services, rather than being provided by Barnardos. Although it is understood that the provision of further facilities is being explored, the informality and accessibility of the existing established daily drop in service will come to an end.

The young people valued spending time with others who had been homeless, believing that a greater level of understanding was achieved. Some young people suggested that staff employed to work with homeless young people should have experienced homelessness themselves, perhaps as a consequence of not feeling understood by some front line staff. The young people expressed a desire to offer support and advice to other young people and were keen for mechanisms to allow them to do this.

## Conclusion

The young people in this research had experience of homelessness and a range of complex need including: mental health problems; self harm; family breakdown and conflict; sexual and physical abuse; close family bereavement and loss; alcohol and drug problems; learning difficulties; isolation as well as having been looked after by the Local Authority. While permanent accommodation is the pressing need, these young people will need additional support even when eventually accommodated in stable and appropriate housing. Without this support these young people are at risk of losing stable accommodation and becoming homeless again.

Their vulnerability and basic needs mean that most young people are pre-occupied with securing food, shelter, warmth, hygiene, support and friendship. Given the inability to secure settled permanent accommodation young homeless people tend to lead a transient existence staying at various shelters, hostels, friends' couches, night shelters and sometimes sleeping rough. Young homeless people find the day time difficult as there are relatively few places for them to go.

Once homeless it was easy for young people to become trapped within the revolving door of temporary accommodation. All the young people in this research found it difficult to secure permanent accommodation. In these

circumstances and given the difficult background and limited resources some young people we interviewed had become increasingly isolated, excluded and entrenched in their lifestyle.

Some of the vulnerable young people we interviewed may not reach their potential as adults unless policy and practice changes occur to provide the full range of services they need. There is clearly a need to invest resources in this most vulnerable group in order to try and prevent long term patterns of harmful behaviour. However, in a period of recession with the expectation of major cut-backs in public expenditure, given the competing demand from other groups, young homeless people with complex need may struggle to attract adequate funding for the services they need.

## Recommendations

1. Information about leaving home and homelessness should be more available to young people generally. The evidence from this report supports the Shelter Cymru petition<sup>5</sup> to WAG calling on education about leaving home to be made part of the national curriculum. The young people who took part in the research described having difficulty identifying the services that were available on becoming homeless, and were often in crisis when they were looking for help. Education about the nature, risk and impact of homelessness combined with where and how to get help, will not only help improve knowledge across young people's social networks but it may also help to reduce the level of discrimination towards young people who are homeless.

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<sup>5</sup> Norman, K. (2009) *Teens backing call to put leaving home on the curriculum*, Western Mail, 3 December 2009 accessed online <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2009/12/03/teens-backing-call-to-put-leaving-home-on-the-curriculum-91466-25309111/> 29th March 2010

2. Given the nature and extent of youth homelessness observed in this research it suggest:
  - a. There is a need for a more accurate assessment of the actual number of young homeless people. Official figures seem to seriously under estimate the size of the problem.
  - b. The criteria for determining who can and can't be considered 'priority need' needs reviewing so that vulnerable young homeless people are not excluded.
  - c. The current interpretation and impact of the housing and after-care legislation also needs reviewing.
3. The gap between policies that are in place and how the young people experience services needs closing. Greater service user involvement and dialogue may help this process.
4. The Housing Act 1996 s191(1) states: 'A person becomes homeless intentionally if he deliberately does or fails to do anything in consequence of which he ceases to occupy accommodation which is available for his occupation and which it would have been reasonable for him to continue to occupy.' Becoming homeless at a young age is traumatic and often the result of a difficult set of circumstances. The experiences of young people in this research suggest the criteria and process for determining whether or not a young person can be regarded as 'intentionally homeless' need to be managed in a more sensitive and sympathetic manner.
5. Staff engaged in front line services, particularly those in the statutory sector, need to develop greater understanding and sensitivity towards this vulnerable group. Employing people who have experience of being homeless in supportive front line roles may help improve the situation.
6. A more effective Inter-Agency Youth Homelessness Forum, with good representation from young homeless people (who should be paid for their attendance and contribution) could help identify, inform, monitor, advise and review on a wide range of housing issues, including those listed above. An Inter-Agency Youth Homelessness Forum could also help improve communication and understanding between statutory agencies, voluntary agencies and young homeless people.
7. While young people value the help they do receive there is a need for some services to be more suited to the diverse range of needs of homeless young people, in particular, ensuring that as far as possible that young people are not required to share bedrooms, and that those responsible for children are provided with suitable accommodation in terms of location, facilities and sharing with other tenants.
8. To improve access and engagement with services people who have experience of being homeless could be employed across various agencies to provide a wide range of support and guidance services to help homeless youth.
9. In order to make contact with an often hidden population of young people who are homeless an outreach buddying or befriending services could be considered. People who have experience of being homeless could be employed as buddies providing information, advice and support.
10. Stigma is an issue that could be tackled in local communities by public awareness events and campaigns, possibly led by the Inter-Agency Youth Homelessness Forum. Some good work has already commenced in this area.

11. To enhance and develop the social support systems that the young people in this research have highlighted as so valued, a dedicated inter-agency seven day a week one-stop-shop day centre drop-in with practical support services to meet basic needs such as warmth, shelter, showers, laundrette and basic refreshments combined with welfare rights, social skills training and counselling would help vulnerable young people to become better equipped and supported to exit the revolving door of homelessness.

12. There is a need for further research to explore policies and practices that will enable homeless young people to progress from homelessness to

permanent accommodation. Unless the present situation improves there is a real risk that some young homeless people will become trapped and entrenched within a transient and damaging lifestyle. This will be costly to them as well as to wider society.

'I ended up getting arrested...which usually happens and that's why I'm in and out of jail...

...it didn't bother me if I got arrested...because at least in jail you've got a routine, you've always got a bed, you've always got food...

...it's just easy to get used to ... it's better than being out on the streets...last time I got out of jail was like three weeks ago, I didn't want to leave...

...I just loved having the routine and having people there who cared about me and who tried to help me.'

*(Young person interviewed)*