

# **Research into the Accommodation and Support Needs of Homeless 16 - 21 year olds in Northern Ireland**

## **“Young People Telling It Like It Is” - Executive Summary**

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The Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland (CHNI) represents organisations working with homeless people throughout Northern Ireland through provision of training, information, research and collective representation.

The Youth Unit at CHNI supports and advises on all areas of work which impact on the provision of services to young people experiencing homelessness and is committed to promoting the meaningful involvement and participation of homeless young people in the development of policy, provision and practice.

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# **Executive Summary**

## ***Background to the Research***

This report presents the findings of a 16 month research study conducted by the Youth Unit at CHNI into the accommodation and support needs of homeless young people aged 16-21 years.

The study asks young people key questions in relation to the:

- The background and needs profile of young homeless people;
- Accessibility of appropriate accommodation and support provision;
- The different roles played by services in meeting their needs;
- The effectiveness of services in meeting their needs;
- Where service delivery can be improved and how;
- Any gaps in service provision;
- The extent and value of opportunities for service user involvement in planning and delivery of key services.

## ***Methodology***

The study involved a comprehensive review of relevant literature and statistics followed by consultation with young people, frontline staff, practitioners and key stakeholders. 176 young people completed an in depth questionnaire and 37 took part in interviews and focus groups to further explore themes emergent from both the literature review and questionnaire findings. 228 young people were accessing support from young people specific floating support services. Due to difficulties accessing young people living across a wide geographical area, a sample of 15 young people, accessing floating support from 7 services working solely with young people, was interviewed using a detailed questionnaire. Practitioners, normally managers, from a range of projects completed questionnaires identifying areas of good practice and challenges and barriers they faced in delivering a quality service to homeless young people. Young people and front line staff were consulted about recommendations through a series of project visits and a one off consultation event. Finally, the findings and young people's recommendations were presented to and discussed with key stakeholders responsible for the planning and funding of current services. Where young people's circumstances or responses are given as percentages throughout this summary, this represents the responses of 176 young people who completed the supported accommodation questionnaire and is considered to be largely representative of the population of 16-21 year olds living in supported accommodation projects.

## ***Profile Information***

54% of the young people who completed the supported accommodation questionnaire (54% of the population living in supported accommodation at a given time) were female, 16% were single parents and most were aged between 17 and 19 years. 73% of young people were living in cities with 28% living in foyers, 34% in mixed age supported accommodation, 13% in

accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds or young people only and 15% living in family units.

### ***Journey and Early Intervention***

1 in 7 young people moved to their current project from another supported accommodation project and 1 in 11 moved from private rented accommodation. 39% of young people moved to their supported accommodation from home and 38% reported that their move was due to family dispute, a significantly higher proportion than reported any other reason. 78% reported some kind of difficulty with their families. Most young people who discussed the reason for their move in more detail felt that nothing could have been done to prevent the break down and were resistant to the notion of family mediation. The findings suggest that, in most cases, there were little preventative interventions made by outside agencies and that there is a trend towards referral to supported accommodation instead of attempts at resolution. A number of young people in need were not receiving support from social services. Other services, for example floating support, had stepped in to provide the necessary assistance.

One third accessed their supported accommodation through a social worker and 22% self-referred. 77% were happy with the choice of accommodation in which they had been placed. The location and the level of support delivered were the main concerns of those who were unhappy with their choice of accommodation. Young people described their journeys into supported accommodation as times of annoyance, frustration, depression, worry, rejection and loneliness.

### ***Support***

Many young people reported having a range of complex needs. The complexity of the young people's needs appears to have been exacerbated by their age and vulnerability. The findings revealed that in addition to practical needs, young people had marked emotional needs with 43% having experienced mental health difficulties, 38% having a history of self harm, 34% having experienced childhood abuse and 41% feeling that their past had impacted their confidence and self esteem. Up to 36% described their substance use as having been a problem for them and 31% had a history of offending.

The findings highlight the centrality of support in temporary accommodation, presenting challenges to projects that are funded to provide support at a low or medium level. Often young people's difficulties are found to be exhibited as challenging behaviour which requires specific management strategies. At the other end of the spectrum, there were examples young people with relatively low needs being over supported and developing dependency.

Key working was found to be the primary model for support delivery within supported accommodation projects, with 91% of young people having a key worker. A number of young people were found to not be receiving any support but those supported by a key worker were generally positive about it and were overwhelmingly positive about their key workers' attributes. In general, the

findings suggest that young people's immediate and practical needs are largely being met but there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether the same is true for their longer term or specialist needs. The findings suggest that this may be attributed to a number of factors. Often young people appeared unable to recognise or wish to acknowledge their needs and may often be unwilling to engage. The needs of some young people were clearly outside the service scope and staff capacity of their service, with higher levels of training, skills and expertise clearly required in order to adequately meet needs.

Staff, in generic provision in particular, were not adequately resourced to deal with complexity of needs with which young people are presenting. Significant challenges were faced in seeking to refer young people to external agencies for more in depth or targeted specialist support and many young people were falling through the net, particularly those transitioning from child to adult services and those without social services support.

### ***Quality of Service***

Most young people were satisfied with the physical standards of their accommodation, although there were incidences of some young people accessing poor quality or services with limited facilities. Young people gave high priority to safety and privacy and felt particularly that sharing bedrooms was inappropriate. The majority of projects consulted with their young people regarding service management and delivery on some level, with the most popular forum being residents' meetings (77%).

Most young people who discussed participation further felt that residents' meetings were a token gesture and that their views were not listened to or requested changes made. A number of projects were found to have created opportunities for young people to participate through resident representatives, young people's councils which represented young people on management boards or inclusion on staff interview panels, with varying degrees of success reported. The overarching emergent theme was that young people wished to feel respected and listened to by their project staff.

### ***Moving to Independence***

46% of young people reported having had three or more moves during the previous two year period, including some who had moved between supported accommodation projects. 52% wanted to move on from supported accommodation as soon as possible or within a six month period and 41% of young people felt that they would not require any support once they had moved on from supported accommodation. It may be that young people are unrealistic about the support they require given the complexity of needs profile revealed in the findings.

Given the complexity of needs of young people, it can be concluded that either their needs have not been adequately addressed whilst they are living in supported accommodation or that they are not being adequately prepared for, or supported during, periods of independent living. The support that young people reported receiving in preparation for moving on was largely practical,

with those who referenced emotional supported focussing on increases to their self esteem and confidence. The majority of young people wished to move to an NIHE property. Those who felt they would need support felt that floating support and resettlement, access to 24/7 advice and support, opportunities to maintain links and revisit supported accommodation projects and support from their families would be most helpful.

### ***Work, Education and Training***

A number of young people felt that young people should commence work, education or training before moving into independent accommodation. 51% of young people were found to not be involved in any kind of work, education or training. Impacting factors for non-involvement reported by young people included the financial implications due to loss of Housing Benefit. Employer perceptions of those living in supported accommodation had an impact as did the lack of flexibility of some projects with, for example, set meal, laundry and curfew times. Many of the young people living in supported accommodation have a history of non-involvement and can lack the confidence needed to commence. Finally, a culture of non-involvement within some supported accommodation projects presents a significant challenge to providers seeking to motivate young people to engage with work, education or training.

In examining the relationship between accommodation types and work, education and training, it was found that proportionally less young people living in mixed aged supported accommodation were involved. Despite this, those who were reported the highest percentages of encouragement and support, for example with routines and accessing financial support or grants, in comparison with young people living in other types of accommodation. The highest numbers of young people reporting access to resources and facilities were living in foyers, however, those foyer residents who were already involved with work, education or training reported receiving the least support and active encouragement to be involved. 22% of young people not already engaged with work, education or training felt that they needed support to start and 39% reported that nothing had been said to them by the support staff about their lack of involvement.

### ***Alternative Provision***

The emphasis of the floating support provided varied between projects from housing and resettlement only, to ongoing emotional support and family mediation. It was often received in conjunction with other services, which created a risk of young people being over supported. Engagement with floating support often lasted for more than two years and the longer term impact of the support received remained unknown. Overall young people reported very positive about the impact of receiving floating support and the relationship with their floating support worker.

A small number of young people had been placed in supported lodgings. Those consulted who had experienced living in supported lodgings placements generally responded positively although there was a mixed response to the concept from other young people who had no experience of the model.

## ***Conclusions***

The study found that many young people's wider needs appear to have gone unmet during their journeys through support and accommodation services. This would include a lack preventative and meditative interventions that, had they been available to young people, may have reduced the overall numbers of young people becoming homeless.

At the point of homelessness, not all young people appeared to be able to access the correct statutory assistance with referral to appropriate supported accommodation.

Given the complexity of need found to be present in the population profile, due consideration needs to be given to how well these needs are being recognised at the point of referral. Although, once placed, young people were generally happy with their choice of supported accommodation, the minority dissatisfied with the location or level of support received suggests the need for more holistic assessments at referral. It also suggests the need for a range of supported accommodation services that ensures that support is targeted at appropriate levels to ensure that young people's needs are being best met.

Once placed, the relationship young people have with project staff significantly impacts upon their perception of a service and, in general, staff demonstrated the personal attributes that young people appreciate. In addition to staffing, significant impacting factors for young people living in supported accommodation are the general 'hostel culture', which in many instances is associated with non-involvement in work, education or training, and access to and engagement with appropriately targeted support. There are difficulties assessing the longer term outcomes of young people's time in supported accommodation. The findings do, however, raise questions over whether, in general, services are appropriately meeting young people's wider needs.

Given the frequency of tenancy breakdown once young people have moved on from supported accommodation and the reported multiplicity of moves between projects, there is a need for support received prior to move on to be empowering, not creating dependency on the service. Importance has been placed on the timing of the move but this is generally dependent on the availability of appropriate move on accommodation. Alternative support provisions, notably floating support and supported lodgings, have proved popular with young people and need to be available for, in particular, those with complex needs.

## ***Summary of Recommendations***

### **Young People's Journey and Early Intervention**

Intervene early to prevent or alleviate homelessness through:

1. The adoption of a strategic approach to the prevention of youth homelessness through development of a regionally agreed Prevention Strategy, on a multi agency basis and mandated at the highest level.

2. The provision of advice and information on leaving home and/or housing issues, in schools and other educational settings, for young people and their parents/carers.
3. Access to timely housing options and advice tailored specifically to young people including the development of dedicated Advocacy Services for young people vulnerable due to homelessness.
4. Completion of a Regional Scoping exercise as to the scale and nature of youth homelessness amongst young people aged 16-25 years across Northern Ireland to provide a more informed basis for policy and service planning.
5. Completion and implementation of the Regional Good Practice Framework for Shared Assessment and Support of Homeless Young People aged 16- 21 yrs.
6. Development of integrated approaches to prevent family or relationship breakdown, including mediation and respite provision (for example, Supported Lodgings).
7. Further development of initiatives aimed at reducing levels of repeat homelessness amongst young people, including access to specialist tenancy support and debt advice services.

## **Support**

Ensure the provision of integrated, therapeutic support services that enhance young people's health, wellbeing and self-esteem through effective processes for:

### ***Assessment and Access to Appropriate Services***

1. Statutory agencies and their partners must ensure that wherever possible young people have access to an appropriate range and menu of seamless services and supports by ensuring young peoples swift access to holistic and integrated assessment processes.
2. The accommodation and support needs of young people vulnerable due to homelessness are adequately reflected and addressed in local and regional planning strategies.
3. Future planning and delivery of supported accommodation services are underpinned by a regionally agreed set of Good Practice Standards.
4. Local and regional planning strategies address current gaps in provision, including the development of crisis or respite type accommodation for young people 'out of home', and should consider development of a pilot supported lodgings scheme.

### ***Key working and Action Planning***

1. All young people should have access to support from a individual or key worker.
2. Support provided should be based on robust assessment in which the young person is centrally involved and where their views considered paramount.
3. Support plans should be implemented as early as possible into a young person's stay, with a clear timeline for review agreed by both the young person and relevant support staff.

4. The style and delivery of key working should reflect the young person's changing needs and circumstances.

### ***Staff Training and Support***

1. All Management and Support staff should possess an appropriate level and range of skills to effectively meet the varied and often complex needs of young people they are working with.
2. All support staff should complete a comprehensive induction and have access to ongoing training and development opportunities, aimed at maximising the range and level of skills across a staff team.
3. Opportunities for cross agency training should be explored by provider agencies, with an emphasis on building networks and sharing practice.

### ***Specialist Needs Groups***

1. Local and regional planning and delivery of support and accommodation services must take account of those young people who may have specialist or individual needs, including but not exclusively those young people who:
  - have complex or multiple needs,
  - are Care Leavers,
  - are involved in offending and/or criminal justice system,
  - are pregnant or are a young parent,
  - are from an Ethnic Minority group,
  - are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender.
2. Given the growing numbers of young people presenting at services with complex or challenging needs, support services must be appropriately resourced to respond to such needs, including access to staff training and support, effective risk management procedures and capacity to access specialist services for young people.
3. Increase access to peripatetic counselling and support services for young people with complex needs living in supported accommodation.

### ***Work, Education and Training***

Improve access to learning, training and employment for young people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness by:

1. Promoting a culture of work and learning within supported accommodation services, through tailored support planning; improved access to advice and information, including building links with local training and employment providers and the provision of practical assistance to young people by suitably trained and experienced support staff.
2. Supported accommodation services must demonstrate sufficient flexibility regarding curfew times and/or access to key facilities for those young people in employment, in particular those engaged in shift work.
3. Greater access to tailored training opportunities for young people with complex or challenging needs.
4. Addressing the financial disincentives for those young people who are homeless to engage in full time work or training on a cross departmental basis by those government agencies responsible.

### ***Provision of a Quality Service***

All young people availing of accommodation and support services should have access to services that are:

1. Appropriately resourced, safe, secure and of a good physical standard.
2. Young person centred in ethos and approach.
3. Committed to promoting and upholding rights and responsibilities of young people in line with policy and best practice.
4. Actively promoting a culture of meaningful service user participation and involvement.

### **Moving to Independence**

#### ***Preparation for Independence***

Ensure young people are appropriately supported in preparing for move to independence through:

1. Creation of a regional Move On Strategy developed as part of wider Youth Homelessness Strategy.
2. Delivery of high quality, effective life skills training and support by appropriately skilled and resourced support staff, aimed at building a young person's confidence and increasing their resilience. The concept of moving on should form an integral part of any young persons support plan and be introduced at earliest appropriate stage in their stay.
3. Practical resources and supports aimed at ensuring smoother transitions to independent living and including, for example, access to Starter Pack schemes and earlier introduction of floating support services, should be widely available to young people in advance of any move.

#### ***Access to Safe, Suitable Move On Accommodation***

Increase the options and opportunities for young people moving to longer term or permanent accommodation by:

1. Providing greater housing choice by increasing young peoples access to decent homes in the private rented and social housing sector.
2. Taking account of affordability issues: successful move on schemes for young people cannot ensure that all the accommodation is affordable, but should find ways to maximise income and overcome the barriers to affordable housing for young people.
3. Increasing the range of stakeholders involved with provision of longer term housing for young people, in particular private sector landlords.

#### ***Tenancy Sustainment and Support***

Upon securing accommodation young people must be adequately supported to maintain tenancies. This should include

1. Opportunities to maintain links with previous accommodation service, where appropriate.
2. Access to appropriately resourced floating support services, available at optimum times including evening and weekend periods. This may also include development of targeted services for those young people with complex needs.

3. Ensuring that all young people who move-on into independent housing have a re-engagement plan, in case of crisis/difficulty. This includes access to crisis intervention services including mediation and advocacy services and time out or respite accommodation for young people in crisis.
4. Wider support available for young people to build local community connections/supports aimed at reducing isolation/loneliness.