Ending youth homelessness: Possibilities, challenges and practical solutions

Executive summary

University of York and Heriot-Watt University
80,000 young people experience homelessness a year

Objectives to end youth homelessness:
No young person should sleep rough for more than one night

No young person should have to stay in emergency accommodation for more than three months

Young people should have access to independent accommodation as soon as they are ready to leave supported housing

Young people leaving care or prison should be allocated housing and support before discharge

Young people who cannot stay at home should be given a planned pathway to independence

Executive summary
This Think-Piece, commissioned by Centrepoint and carried out by the Universities of York and Heriot-Watt, examines the concept and task of ending youth homelessness in the UK. It involved a desk-top review of statistics and research, three local authority case studies, a focus group with young people and interviews with experts in youth homelessness in both the statutory and voluntary sector.

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Background
Centrepoint’s vision is to end youth homelessness. In December 2010, the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness concluded that homelessness could and should be ended by national governments. FEANTSA’s campaign to end homelessness in Europe has a specific goal that ‘no young person should become homeless as a result of the transition to independent living’.

In the UK, in 2008, the Department for Communities and Local Government announced an aim to end rough sleeping in England by 2012, with a similar commitment made for London by the Mayor of London. At present, there is no government level aim to end youth homelessness.

What is the scale of the task?
Youth homelessness remains a significant issue across the UK. It can be estimated that at least 78-80,000 young people experienced homelessness in 2008/9 across the UK. This includes both young people who are formally accepted as homeless under the statutory definition as well as non-statutorily homeless young people using supported housing services. It also includes an estimated 3,800 young people who slept rough in 2008/9. This number should be treated as a guesstimate as data is incomplete, and whilst it will include some double-counting, it is likely to be an underestimate as it only includes young people in touch with homelessness services.

“’We need that kind of stretching vision and aspiration that this is no longer good enough. We simply shouldn’t be accepting homelessness at the level or prevalence that we have seen it’”
Homelessness specialist

Adopting an aim to end youth homelessness
Considerable support was expressed, in principle, for adopting an aim to end youth homelessness by professionals working in the sector. It was felt to be morally right to attempt to end youth homelessness in the context of a developed society like the UK, irrespective of the prevailing economic climate. A small number however did not support this aim as they were worried that this would lead to youth homelessness being narrowly defined.

However, commentators were not convinced that such an aim could be realised fully, largely due the underlying causes of youth homelessness rooted in the wider societal context, and the impossibility of eliminating family conflict and relationship breakdown entirely. A certain level of ‘frictional’ homelessness, whereby a relatively small number of young people might find themselves in a homeless situation for a short period of time, must therefore be expected.

A couple of commentators believed it was more helpful to adopt a wider, more positive, aim to ensure that there are adequate housing and support options available to enable all young people to make an effective transition to adulthood without experiencing homelessness.
Defining ‘ending youth homelessness’
There was a broad consensus amongst professionals that any aim to end youth homelessness would need to be broken down into specific, comprehensible and achievable objectives.

It was important that any such aim should clearly state which particular aspects of youth homelessness were being addressed. There was some concern that, if care was not taken, that the aim of ending youth homelessness could focus too narrowly on specific aspects of the problem and could lead to other important dimensions of youth homelessness being ignored.

We would propose the following set of objectives, inspired by parallel attempts to end rough sleeping and by international developments in this field:

- No young person should sleep rough for more than one night once in contact with an appropriate statutory or voluntary sector agency.

- Young people should not have to stay in emergency accommodation for longer than an agreed specified period (for example, three months).

- Young people should not remain in transitional accommodation when it is appropriate for them to move onto more independent accommodation.

- All young people leaving an institutional setting (care, hospital, prison) should have a suitable housing destination, with relevant support, before discharge.

- All young people who cannot remain in the parental home should be offered suitable accommodation and support within a defined pathway plan to independence.

Local authorities, in collaboration with statutory and voluntary sector partners, should plan how these objectives will be reached as part of a youth housing strategy (see below).

“If you recognise that young people do grow up, do need to move on, do have housing issues, and you start to plan for that, from the various backgrounds that they come from, then you are more likely to deal with the issue”
Homelessness specialist
What kind of service network is needed to end youth homelessness?

The research identified a need for local areas to draw up a housing strategy for young people. This would encompass action required to prevent and address youth homelessness, but within a broader remit of ensuring that local housing markets, including both private and social housing provision, are able to respond to the housing needs of young people.

Considerable progress has been made in preventing youth homelessness in recent years, however this agenda could be developed further, and commence at an earlier age. Most specifically, there was a call for more support for parents of teenagers to enable them to house and/or support their children more effectively. This support should include peer and user-led support as well as specialist parenting services.

Welfare benefit arrangements for families with older teenagers still at home should be reviewed. We must be alert to the possibility that recent welfare changes – particularly with respect to the up-rating of non-dependent deductions within Housing Benefit and Housing Benefit caps – may make it even more difficult for some young people to remain living at home in low income households. Extended family kinship arrangements could also be better supported. More generally, young people need access to appropriate housing advice and information at the earliest stage possible.

One of the clearest messages arising from the research was a call for the development of ‘respite’ arrangements, whereby young people could move to safe, high quality accommodation for a short period of time to give them and their families a ‘breather’, and provide a supportive environment for all parties to rebuild their emotional resilience and renegotiate relationships.

However, not all young people will be able to remain in the parental home until they are in a position to support themselves independently. This means that affordable and appropriate housing options need to be available at the local level for some young people to ‘move-out’ without the need for them to become homeless. Parents are also more likely to support their children for an extended period if they are aware that options might become available for young people at some stage.

Part of this should involve a re-examination of the role of the transitional accommodation sector. This sector is particularly important for those in the youngest age groups as they are least likely to be ready to live independently. The sector, working with national and local government, needs to develop a new housing offer for young people that both provides sustainable, quality housing for a specified period and appropriate move-on opportunities. Young people undertaking further education or apprenticeships should also be offered student-style accommodation similar to that available to those going to Universities. Transitional accommodation should be affordable to young people; this is likely to require the design of new funding mechanisms to keep both rent and service charge elements at an affordable level for young people.
There is also a need to develop housing and support pathways that will allow young people to trial independence and move between more and less supportive environments. Ideally, young people should be welcome to return to previous accommodation places they have stayed in. Mechanisms should be developed to offer young people 'second chances' in housing allocations, recognising their age and level of maturity.

Particularly in light of the acute shortage of social rented tenancies in many parts of the country, more work is required so that the private rented sector can provide a good housing offer to young people on low incomes. Specific accreditation schemes and social letting agencies are likely to be part of the response here, as well as tenancy training and support to new tenants. However, it needs to be acknowledged that many young people who were brought up in social housing aspire to live in this type of provision themselves; and that this sector will always be important for the most vulnerable households and families. Whilst expectations may have to be moderated, this is only likely to occur with the development of affordable alternatives.

In an ideal network, there would be no need for a statutory response to homelessness. However, as long as youth homelessness does continue, even if it is at a much reduced level, there is a strong argument for offering young people a bespoke service, targeted on their needs and staffed by those expert in working with this age group, backed up by specialist emergency accommodation. Finally, the ongoing provision of effective support services to assist young people to achieve independence will be essential if homelessness is to be eradicated or minimised. All young people need trusted adults to guide them towards adulthood. Disadvantaged young people at risk of homelessness often miss out on much of this support. Tenancy support is particularly important for young people with no or little experience of living independently. The availability of specialist health and care services, including mental health services, for young people is also key. There may also be considerable value in long term mentoring schemes which could be provided within the third sector. Ideally, trusted adults or mentors should not be tied to any one provision, nor be time limited, but should be able to support young people, as needed, throughout the transition to adulthood.

“Until we have youth housing strategies, as opposed to youth homelessness strategies, we will never actually plan for young people’s transitions and their housing needs”
Homelessness specialist