

Youth Issues in Homelessness Strategies

Outline

Between January and March 2004, the Scottish Council for Single Homeless (SCSH) carried out a detailed survey of how Homelessness Strategies are addressing youth homelessness. While a number of authorities have developed comprehensive youth strategies, across Scotland as a whole homelessness strategies are failing to address explicitly **(1)** the extent and nature of youth homelessness; and **(2)** a clear strategy for preventing and alleviating youth homelessness.

The findings of the survey are summarised below. SCSH recognises that there are a range of explanations for these findings and that what is reported in a strategy does not always reflect service provision on the ground. However, it is important that strategies reflect provision and that provision is of a high standard. To this end SCSH recommends local authorities consider undertaking a 'youth-proofing' exercise on their Homelessness Strategies and, where appropriate, this exercise yield a **youth homelessness annexe** to supplement the existing homelessness strategy

Explaining the Findings

SCSH recognise that there are two distinct explanations for the generally poor coverage of youth homelessness issues that our survey has uncovered:

(1) Provision (and planned provision) towards the alleviation and prevention of youth homelessness may be present, but not clearly reported in the strategy. In particular, there are many occasions where youth and adult services, or threads within services, are not adequately distinguished. In addition, data on the extent and nature of youth homelessness may be informing policy, even though it is not explicitly brought out in the strategy.

(2) Provision (and planned provision) have been fully reported in the strategy showing a serious failure to address adequately the issue of youth homelessness.

Where the second explanation holds good, there is a serious need for the local authority to address their approach to youth homelessness. Where the first holds good, SCSH believes it is important to address the mismatch by explicitly describing the activities in the strategy. While a mismatch between on the ground activity and the strategy persists, there is no effective means of monitoring and evaluating progress towards better provision.

Opportunity for Action

SCSH recommends that local authorities undertake a '**youth-proofing**' exercise on their Homelessness Strategies. Such an exercise would systematically check coverage of key youth issues and ensure that **(1)** good provision is reported and **(2)** the absence of good provision is identified along with steps to be taken to remedy the shortfall. SCSH recommends that, where appropriate, the 'youth-proofing' exercise yields an **youth homelessness annexe** to supplement the existing homelessness strategy.¹

¹ SCSH has developed a detailed checklist of youth issues that should be addressed by Homelessness Strategies. The checklist addresses a range of themes including: measuring of youth homelessness; effectiveness of partnership working; prevention; alleviation; resolution; and evaluation. This checklist can be used to 'youth-proof' strategies and give local authorities a clear idea of what steps can be taken to (1) improve the match between their strategies and work on the ground; and (2) improve the work they are doing to address youth homelessness. Contact SCSH for more information about obtaining the checklist and the support that SCSH can offer in undertaking a youth-proofing exercise.

1. Introduction

Between January and March 2004 a detailed review of the homelessness strategies of all the Local Authorities and the feedback letters from the Scottish Executive was undertaken. It is recognised that a number of the strategies were in draft format as they were in the process of being reviewed and updated in accordance with Scottish Executive recommendations. Also, several action plans were unavailable when the work was being carried out so this research is based only on the information that was available. Nonetheless, this work represents a valuable snapshot of the way in which youth homelessness is being addressed with the strategies. A number of concerning trends emerge.

2. What Is In The Strategies

2.1 General

- Very few of the strategies outline an accurate picture of the **extent and nature of youth homelessness**. Most strategies provide a breakdown of homeless applicants by age group, and only two gave more information and looked at wider issues, such as the particular areas where youth homelessness is most prevalent, the main reasons why young people are becoming homeless and the particular needs that young homeless people may have.
- Only one strategy had incorporated a **youth strategy** into the overall strategy and one other had stated the intention to develop one. Several others made reference to a youth strategy already existing in their local authority areas, but again, only one included the conclusions and action plans of the housing and homelessness aspects of the youth strategy into the homelessness strategy. One strategy provided an explanation as to why they did not have a specific youth homelessness strategy.
- The **particular needs of young people** were not well recognised within the strategies. The area receiving most attention was the previously looked after young people, where eleven strategies made some attempt to evaluate their needs. For the other issues it was found that between three and eight strategies made reference to them as problems for homeless people as a whole, but did not relate them to young people in particular.
- Only five strategies provided evidence of **consultation** with young people in the areas suggested. The types of consultation included one-to-one interviews with young people who had used the service, and focus groups with young people in schools, care leavers and young people living in supported accommodation. Four other strategies mentioned consultation with young people, but it was not about their experience of homelessness, but on practical issues within accommodation units, such as décor.
- Only four of the strategies provided evidence of an **audit of existing services** available to young people. Most of the other strategies, at some point or another refer to particular services for young people to back up something else being said in the strategy, but this does not constitute an audit of all services that are available.
- Elected members, finance and community education were the agencies/departments least involved in the strategies, and in a lot of cases were not involved at all. The police, careers and employment agencies and housing associations, when involved, tended to have no more than links to the strategy. Housing, social work, education, health and voluntary sector organisations appeared to be the most involved groups, and more often than not were the main partner agencies. The majority of strategies had either five or six partners out of the eleven agencies listed, but one had ten of the eleven as partners, while another five managed between seven and nine.

- Only five strategies referred to the **throughcare and aftercare** policy and talked of the development of accommodation and support services particularly for young people leaving care. Four strategies did make reference to throughcare and aftercare services but did not provide any kind of detail on the services provided.

2.2 Prevention

- Fifteen strategies provided information about **advice services for young people** that are either already in existence or are in the process of being developed. The remaining eighteen tend to recognise the need for the provision of information and advice but do not link it specifically to young people.
- Only six strategies recognise the importance of **advocacy services for young people**, while a further seven do mention them, but not specifically for young people. In terms of peer education, only one strategy advocates the setting up of this kind of service in their area.
- **Housing education** is one of the most widely covered areas in the strategies. Twenty-seven strategies show that housing education is provided at least in schools, if not other appropriate youth settings, in their areas. Not all of the information provided covered whether or not a leaving home education guide is being provided.
- Only one strategy made any mention of work being carried out in **areas of high deprivation**.
- None of the strategies actually make an assessment of the availability of **affordable housing for young people**. Two recognise the general lack of affordable housing and refer to the Local Housing Strategy and one sets as one of its aims to increase the number of affordable houses specifically for young people. It is expected that the issue will be addressed in Local Housing Strategies.

2.3 Alleviation

- Reviewing **housing management policies** and practices to come into line with new homelessness legislation is an issue that was addressed in most strategies. There were only five strategies that did not refer to housing management policy reviews. One issue that did arise, however, was that several strategies referred only to reviews of Local Authority policies and not other RSLs working in the area. It is important that all social housing providers carry out the reviews to underline their partnership in the strategy. In discussing reviews of management policies, no strategy made reference to examining how young people fare under existing systems.
- Ways in which **proactive management** can assist young people were not well addressed in the strategies. The issues most likely to be addressed were: (1) the provision of information, as the strategy dealt with it under the prevention section; (2) ensuring that young people understand their rights, as those with advocacy services for young people were already doing this; (3) consulting with young people. The numbers of strategies addressing these issues was small, but explaining systems for reporting repairs and referring young people to appropriate services were generally not dealt with at all. These issues may be covered in the Supporting People Strategy as it is important to ensure the strategies complement each other.

2.4 Resolution

- Twenty-six of the strategies recognise the need for the **provision of support** for newly housed young people, while fifteen recognise and provide a range of supported accommodation for young people. The strategies were not always clear on these issues

as many had no statement recognising the balance required between floating support and support tied to particular accommodation. However, the kinds of support for young people reported in the strategies shows that an appropriate balance is being provided. There were still about six strategies that didn't provide information on the support services being provided for young people, suggesting they have not identified the range of support needed by young people.

- Seven of the strategies definitely looked at the provision of **starter packs** and a further seventeen strategies looked at providing **furniture** to homeless people who are given their own tenancy. Very few of the strategies were looking to provide these services specifically for young people. The research also identified a potential gap in best practice literature on what constitutes an effective **starter pack** – the definition of starter pack was not addressed in any of the strategies.
- Most strategies either do not mention **education, training or employment** opportunities at all or they are general services, not specifically for young people. Only six strategies identify these opportunities particularly to meet the needs of young people. **The 'benefit trap' barrier** is not recognised in any of the strategies.
- The option for improving the **social networks** of young homeless people most widely addressed in the strategies is that of mediation, with twelve strategies making clear commitments to establishing the service, and four others identifying it as a possible option. Three strategies included befriending schemes in the action plan, while two identified the merits of the service. Five strategies looked at other ways, such as improving the leisure activities open to homeless people as a way of strengthening social networks. It does have to be noted, however, that mostly these schemes and services are not aimed specifically at young people. It is often recognised that they could be of particular benefit to young people.
- The housing benefit restrictions make it difficult for young people to make use of a **rent deposit scheme**, and as such only seven strategies stated that young people would be eligible for their scheme. A further seventeen strategies highlighted that they would provide a rent deposit scheme, but they did not address the issue of whether it would be made available to young people. In terms of providing advice and information to young people in the private rented sector, there were no strategies that planned to provide this specifically for young people. Six strategies planned to provide advice and information but this was for everyone in the private rented sector.

2.5 Evaluation

- The issue of having clear aims and objectives in relation to young people and providing **evidence of how progress will be monitored and evaluated** was poorly addressed within the strategies. Only one strategy had done this, and four had identified some aims and objectives, but not provided evidence of monitoring and evaluation.

3. Conclusions

- Youth issues are generally not well addressed in the homelessness strategies, aside from one or two exceptions.
- The most well addressed issues are housing education, housing management reviews, and the provision of support for young people.
- The least well addressed areas are the provision of an accurate picture of youth homelessness, having a specific youth strategy within the overall homelessness strategy and having clear aims and objectives for young people, and the provision of befriending services.

- The moderately well addressed issues include the provision of mediation services, advice and information for young people and providing starter packs or furniture.

General The initial information required about youth homelessness in each local authority area is not well addressed in the strategies. The basic information that is needed in order to target specific areas of youth homelessness is not well represented. This suggests that most local authorities and their partners are not aware of the true extent of youth homelessness in their area. Also, the particular needs of young people do not appear to have been addressed. Services appear to be being developed, therefore, without the proper information.

Prevention The prevention of homelessness is a key priority for the strategies, but in terms of young people it is only being relatively well addressed. The provision of leaving home and housing education is covered in most of the strategies and housing management policy reviews are well represented. There is more scope to look at the other preventative issues highlighted in the good practice guidance and the Homelessness Task Force report.

Alleviation Housing management policies need to ensure they take account of how both systemic and operational factors impact on young people. Only a small number of strategies outlined ways in which proactive management could assist young people in sustaining their tenancies.

Resolution For the most part, all of the resolution issues were moderately well addressed. There were no specific areas that were almost universally addressed or not addressed. On average, about half of the strategies made some attempt to address each of the resolution issues, except for education, training and employment opportunities for young people which was addressed in only about one-fifth of the strategies.

Evaluation Evaluation was very poorly addressed within the strategies.

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If you require any additional information or have any further questions, please contact Matt Elton, Head of Youth Unit, Scottish Council for Single Homeless, Wellgate House, 200 Cowgate, Edinburgh, EH1 1NQ. Tel. 0131 226 4382, email matt@scsh.org.uk, or fax: 0131 225 4382