Local Government and Communities Committee

Homelessness

Submission from YouthLink Scotland

About YouthLink Scotland

YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We are a membership organisation, representing over 100 regional and national youth organisations from both the voluntary and statutory sectors. Our vision is of a nation which values its young people and their contribution to society, where young people are supported to achieve their potential.

Scotland’s youth work sector is as rich and diverse as the nation itself. Our sector has a workforce in excess of 80,000 – including over 70,000 adult volunteers. We reach in excess of 380,000 young people in youth work opportunities each week. As the national agency for youth work, and in our role as an intermediary we have endeavoured to respond to this response in the best interests of the youth work sector, however the views contained within this response may not be held by each of our individual members.

Comments

This response focuses on the impact of youth work on preventing youth homelessness and its role in supporting young people who experience or are at risk of homelessness.

Youth work has a long track record of effective prevention and intervention work with young people, supporting them to be more resilient, optimistic for the future, consider risk, make reasoned decisions and take control. This approach is used by many specialist youth homelessness services in Scotland.

Using a youth work approach to prevent youth homelessness and support young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness provides holistic support for young people’s needs. It ensures that young people have adequate emotional support in a safe and secure environment as well as ensuring they receive practical support. Specialist youth work services also provide a space for those experiencing homelessness to be young people first and foremost. This is a crucial aspect of using a youth work approach and one that is unique to specialist youth services.
Prevention

Prevention is key to reducing youth homelessness. Members told us preventative work should take place from an early age and should focus on practical and emotional elements to ensure young people can make informed choices and are better prepared for living away from home or care.

A further example of prevention work is visiting support. With this example, young people at risk of homelessness in their own tenancies are supported by visiting staff. Much of the funding for youth homelessness services is grant funded and thus not sustainable or consistent. It is clear that this sector requires the security of longer term funding to be able to provide valuable, life-saving services.

Youth workers in universal services may also be in a position to hear from young people who are ‘sofa surfing’ when family relationships have broken down; and to signpost and support the young person to appropriate services, develop skills in young people to return home with confidence and resilience, and to achieve a positive outcome for the young person.

Reasons behind homelessness

Members said they most often worked with the most vulnerable young people in society, for example those who have experienced family violence and/or instability, young people leaving the care system, LGBT young people, and young people from other parts of the world.

Research by the Albert Kennedy Trust found that LGBT young people are “at a significantly higher risk of exposure to a range of experiences that are associated with becoming homeless, most notably parental rejection, familial physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and familial violence.”¹ Additionally, the report highlighted that homeless LGBT young people are more likely than non-LGBT peers to experience challenging situations such as violence and substance abuse.

LGBT Youth Scotland have formed a LGBT Housing and Homelessness Youth Commission, a group of young people aged 16-25 aiming to understand LGBT young people’s experiences and take action to influence positive change. Their research is forthcoming.

We also heard from members that there has been a noticeable increase in young people with mental health needs using youth homelessness services. It is clear that resources for supporting young people with mental ill health to prevent homelessness needs to increase. The Rock Trust has its own mental health support worker. The support provided by this staff member is hugely in demand and the position is grant funded leaving it without long term security.

Recent changes to social security limiting child benefit and child tax credits to the first two children in a household will mean that young parents are particularly

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¹ The Albert Kennedy Trust, LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response, and outcome.
vulnerable to homelessness. The services we consulted with saw this as a considerable risk.

Temporary accommodation

The specialist services provided for young people include supported accommodation in which young people can stay for a longer period. It provides a safe environment for young people to take risks and learn about maintaining tenancies. Work with the young people also covers their rights and responsibilities, being a good neighbour and practical elements of maintaining a tenancy, for example paying bills. Some of the supported accommodation also have live-in volunteers to support the young people. Members found the approach of linking young people with communities to yield more sustainable results.

Our members reported that pressure on temporary accommodation has increased. They have noted that there are a higher number of young people in B&Bs. They found that there is limited consideration from the local authority given to where young people are placed. An example was given of a vulnerable young person being placed in a B&B environment which was unsuitable for their needs.

Rough sleeping

Our members report that rough sleeping is generally experienced by young people with no recourse to public funds. These young people need support to get into employment and then to access private rented shared accommodation.

External pressures

Members were clear on the detrimental impact that welfare reforms have had on youth homelessness. Young people who have been sanctioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have a heightened risk of homelessness. Youth homelessness providers want an improved relationship with DWP (or equivalent future social security provider in Scotland) to share the difficulties young people face and to shape the way in which social security is administered.

Youth homelessness services told us about the advocacy work they are required to do to support young people through the social security system and beyond. Mitigating the negative consequences of welfare reforms is time consuming and costly. There needs to be a recognition that young people are different and cannot always meet the requirements set for receiving social security.

In many cases, youth homelessness is exacerbated by under- or unemployment. In our members’ experience, many young people are keen and enthusiastic to gain employment but there are limited opportunities for them to do so. The vacancies that are advertised often do not match the skills and experience of the young people.
Specialist youth services

Young people are very different from the rest of the homelessness population. Specialist services for young people are best as staff are experienced in working with young people and have specialist knowledge of the issues facing young people. An additional difference in service provision is the availability. 6VT, a youth café in Edinburgh, opens late three days per week providing a space for young people when they are at their most vulnerable. They believe the opening hours facilitates their success with young people.

Feedback from young people about services provided by the Rock Trust is very positive. Young people can maintain relationships with the youth worker ensuring they trust them and feel safe. It also gives continuity of support over a longer term.

Case study – Rock Trust Nightstop service

The Nightstop service provided by the Rock Trust based in Edinburgh aims to provide young people between the ages of 16 and 25 years with emergency accommodation for up to 2 weeks in the homes of approved volunteers. Nightstop Edinburgh is part of a national network of schemes and is affiliated to Depaul Nightstop UK.

The service is focused on preventing youth homelessness by providing a safe temporary environment for young people. This allows the organisation to build a relationship with the young person and to provide them with the appropriate support to prevent homelessness.

A member of staff is contactable for advice or support, for both young people and hosts. An emergency number is available 24 hours.

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