

Youth Homelessness

Report from consultation event hosted by the Welsh Assembly Government and Cymorth Cymru, November 8th 2007

1 Background

The above event was held in order to consider the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee's report *Youth Homelessness – Everybody's business, no-one's responsibility* (NAW, 2007), and in particular to examine the various recommendations contained within it.

Seventy professionals from the homelessness, housing and youth sectors attended the event, including representatives from voluntary sector services, housing associations and local authorities across Wales.

The SJR report's recommendations were grouped according to four key policy areas:

- Preventing youth homelessness
- Models of accommodation and support
- Cross-boundary and cross-sector working
- Legislative issues

After initial presentations on each of these themes, discussion groups examined each in greater detail, with delegates having the opportunity to comment in depth on those areas they considered to be of greatest importance.

There were also two 'generic' recommendations, which all groups were asked to consider

The following presents feedback from these discussion groups.

2 Discussion group feedback

Feedback is presented in relation to specific recommendations of the SRJ report.

2.1 Preventing youth homelessness

2.1.1 Recommendation 6: *The Welsh Assembly Government should develop a pathways approach for children and young people who are identified by Social Services Departments, Youth Offending teams or voluntary sector organisations as being potentially vulnerable as they grow up. These pathways should be designed to try to ensure that the individual child or young person has the best chance possible of leading a fulfilling life in mainstream society.*

Concern that this recommendation may be too unspecific or may duplicate existing statutory obligations. For example, it was felt that the term *pathway* could be confused with the *pathway planning process* set down for children care. Similarly, the use of the word *vulnerable* was considered open to interpretation.

It was felt that for this recommendation to be taken forward, terminology will need to be more clearly defined. However, some questioned whether the recommendation was wholly realistic, and concerns were raised that “setting the bar so high could make services undeliverable”.

The following were suggested as models of good practice with regards to effective cross-sector working:

- Bridgend CBC – Cross-departmental planning is flagging-up 15-year-olds who may need accommodation or other support, and this process is then managed with partner agencies
- RCT - Pilot scheme with Children’s Services to provide mediation services to 14- and 15-year-olds who are identified as being at risk of future homelessness
- Llamau Emphasis Project – assertive outreach scheme, supporting homeless young people who have been identified as particularly marginalised and disengaged from services. Support delivered in close partnership with Social Services departments, accommodation providers, Youth Offending Teams, health services and other key agencies

2.1.2 Recommendation 7: *The Welsh Assembly Government should issue guidance on the conducting of reviews at key points in the life of a young person identifies as vulnerable. These reviews should be multi-agency and should be used to identify potential crisis points in the young person’s life as well as the specific support and help needed by the young person.*

As above, some concerns about terminology and possible duplications of existing statutory obligations. Suggested that guidance should provide working definitions of a number of terms – for example *key points*, which might include non-attendance at school, family breakdown and other identified issues, such as bullying.

Uncertainty about the ‘weight’ of guidance – ie, will it be present *recommended practice*, or statutory requirements?

Agreement that Recommendations 6 and 7 are closely linked, and that for either to be effective both must be clearly defined and understood.

2.1.3 Recommendation 8: *The Welsh Assembly Government should require (rather than encourage) all local authorities in Wales to provide high quality, effective mediation services which are readily available to homeless and potentially homeless young people.*

Delegates agreed that this was a positive approach.

Some concerns regarding the development of schemes, such as the importance of ensuring that services were adequately resourced, free from conflicting performance indicators, and operating according to best practice – for example, working in close partnership with homelessness departments, with effective information sharing and inter-referral protocols.

Llamau has been funded to produce a good practice toolkit for mediation services. This now available and has been sent to all Homelessness Managers in Wales.

2.1.4 Recommendation 9: *The Welsh Assembly Government should monitor and evaluate the success of mediation services provided for homeless young people in Wales on an ongoing basis to ensure that the high level of success is being maintained.*

The group felt this was a positive approach but that it was important that *success* is defined and measured appropriately – that is, acknowledging and taking into account that a range of outcomes may follow positive interventions by mediation services (including periods of homelessness as well as homelessness prevention) according to individual circumstances.

The monitoring of processes related to joint LA-provider goals should be cross-cutting – that is, involving both the LA and the service provider so that the effectiveness of this work is properly measured.

2.1.5 Recommendation 27: *The Welsh Assembly Government should urgently review its policy and guidance for care leavers. It should require local authorities, working in partnership with the voluntary sector, to produce, implement and monitor individual support plans for all young people leaving care.*

Delegates supported the call for a review and agreed with the proposed reform.

However, the group also felt strongly that there exists a further loophole in the statutory provision and support of vulnerable young people in Wales, and that, in order to address this, the above recommendation should be extended to include all young people aged 16/17 who are defined by the Children Act as Section 17 Child in Need.

It was further felt that a proportion of young people aged eighteen and over (including, for example, some individuals affected by mild learning disabilities) are subject to vulnerabilities generally associated with younger people, yet homelessness legislation does not apply to them unless they meet other criteria, such as the risk of financial or sexual exploitation. Because these young people do not currently have the rights to support and protection that younger people have, in many cases 'fall through the net'. This was felt to be an urgent problem, and one which must be addressed by the Welsh Assembly Government.

2.2 Cross-boundary and cross-sector working

2.2.1 Recommendation 1: *Within the context of the Beecham Review agenda, the Welsh Assembly Government should ensure, through its homelessness strategy and by monitoring the level and extent of service provision, that the extent and quality of service provided to young homeless people is consistent across Wales and that it is available where it is needed.*

It was felt that in some areas of Wales local homelessness forums have recently become more representative of stakeholders, and more effective in responding to local homelessness issues. The group felt that these forums could assist in meeting this recommendation, as each understands what is available within their LA area, together with having a knowledge of where the gaps in provision may be. However, there would need to be a national standard or framework by which local circumstances are measured and compared.

Delegates highlighted the centrality of the health, social care and housing sectors in the provision of support to young homeless people, and stressed the need for these services to be wholly integrated with homelessness services at both a strategy and service deliver level.

It was felt that *local connection* criteria are sometimes used to "pass the buck" and deny services to vulnerable young people. The group felt that this legislation should be reviewed.

2.2.2 Recommendation 2: *The Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities and the voluntary sector should work in partnership to simplify the current complex system of access to and information about the services available to young homeless people.*

The recommendation was supported, and it was acknowledged that communication and mutual understanding across the various sectors is not as developed as it should be.

The group suggested:

- developing a services directory which all agencies can access
- ensuring all information is relevant and up-to-date, facilitating effective sign-posting and onward referral
- clear referral systems into and between projects
- where appropriate, central points of access for a range of services

2.2.3 Recommendation 3: *The Welsh Assembly Government should assess the need for and, where necessary, provide adequate funding for dedicated homelessness services for young people.*

This recommendation was supported, though it was felt that LAs and local homelessness forums are best placed to assess the need for homelessness provision in their areas, and that they must play a central role in these processes.

2.2.4 Recommendation 4: *The Welsh Assembly Government should issue guidance to local authorities on 'joined up' working on all aspects of youth homelessness, both within the local authority and with external partners, to increase the amount of cross-departmental and multi-agency working and improve the service provided to young homeless people.*

Agencies which have developed effective joint working with partners – from across all sectors - should support the Assembly by sharing their experiences and knowledge.

Future assessments of services should include reviews of the effectiveness of joint-working.

2.2.5 Recommendation 13: *The Welsh Assembly Government should review the application of the housing options approach to people under the age of 25 and require local authorities to have a cross-sector approach to dealing with them.*

The call for a review was supported, with some feeling that it should widen to encompass all areas of Housing.

2.2.6 Recommendation 28: *The Welsh Assembly Government should explore ways of providing additional funding for specific homelessness GP services and should encourage more GPs in Wales to use the GP contract to provide enhanced services to homeless young people.*

Approval of this recommendation, though felt that recent developments in the health/homelessness agenda must be sustainable across all GP services, as well as improve wider health provision, such as dentistry and mental health services.

2.2.7 Recommendation 17: *Local authorities should be given support and guidance to establish regional partnerships to deliver effective services for homeless young people.*

Approval for this recommendation, in principle, though noted that not everything can be regionalised.

2.3 Models of accommodation and support

2.3.1 Recommendation 14: *The Welsh Assembly Government should revise their Homelessness Strategy and guidance to local authorities to reflect the evidence that the private rented sector is not always an appropriate housing option for homeless young people. They should work closely with private landlords to ensure that any accommodation used to house homeless young people is appropriate.*

General consensus that the private sector is often the only option for homeless people, though widely felt that there are currently very few landlords that will provide accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds - and those that do tend to provide poor quality accommodation. Feeling that there must be greater regulation of the private rented sector – affecting both landlords and properties – to ensure that homeless people are protected and lettings meet minimum standards.

However, the reality of using private rented accommodation was questioned as the accommodation used for young homeless people must be affordable. This is particularly difficult for young single people because of the Single Room Rent.

Concerns were raised about allocations to private rented accommodation, and the group agreed that there are only a small number of young people for whom private rented accommodation is suitable and affordable. Therefore policies would have to be reviewed, and “local authorities must take the lead in allocations”. Further to this, it was noted that different local authorities work in different ways, and the group questioned how WAG will be able to implement recommendations consistently.

Delegates’ greatest concern was that the recommendation does not mention support. Clearly, all young people in private rented accommodation need to be provided with support, and there was concern as to whether there was funding to support young people in private rented accommodation.

2.3.2 Recommendation 19: *The Welsh Assembly Government should support and encourage all local authorities in Wales to phase out the practise of using bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless people under the age of 25 for more than 2 to 6 weeks.*

All group members initially agreed with the recommendation – however, there were doubts about whether this was practical; the general consensus was that although it is desirable to phase out the use of bed and breakfast, it may not always be possible. A

major concern of the group was the lack of alternatives to bed and breakfast accommodation: "I would rather have bed and breakfast as a resource than have no resource at all", one member commented. However, they also noted that bed and breakfast is expensive, and that there should be more temporary housing options available.

Some felt that for some young people bed and breakfast is a reasonable option, particularly where the alternative would be to send them further from their home area - this being particularly relevant in rural areas. Furthermore, whilst some bed and breakfasts are of poor quality, there are also some which are of a good standard - and at least in bed and breakfast there is always someone there to check up on them. However, for some young people bed and breakfast certainly is not appropriate: they are often exposed to inappropriate people in accommodation of this kind, and they are unable to develop skills there.

It was agreed that a short time in bed and breakfast is better than being roofless, and that 2-6 weeks is a reasonable time to ask someone to stay in a B&B, so long as it is of suitable quality. It was commented that bed and breakfasts and temporary accommodation could be used more appropriately by looking again at allocations policies - in some cases, young people that are ready to move on are not offered accommodation, while those that are not ready are offered it. Move-on panels make sense here

There were several questions about the terms *support* and *encourage*. Group members asked what these words may mean in the context of this recommendation.

The overall conclusion was that this recommendation is positive, but that developing alternatives to replace the use of bed and breakfast will be a challenge in some areas.

2.3.3 Recommendation 20: *The Welsh Assembly Government should carry out research into the number and availability of bed spaces for homeless young people in Wales, and consider ways of funding the creation of additional bed spaces.*

Need to consider the findings and recommendations of existing research, particularly the recent Welsh Assembly Government-funded report *A study of models of accommodation and support for young single homeless people* (Housing+ Cymru, 2007).

Recommendation 20 not widely supported. Feeling that there is clearly an urgent need to create additional bed spaces, as well as develop consistency across local authorities in how housing is provided to under-18s (eg, some LAs will provide tenancies, whilst others will not), but that there is no time to wait for further research to be carried out - "We need to do something now". For example, it was suggested that current empty homes programmes are expanded.

2.3.4 Recommendation 21: *That the Welsh Assembly Government, in partnership with local authorities and the voluntary sector, examines the number of places available exclusively for the use of homeless young*

people and produces a strategy for increasing these places as and where needed.

It was suggested that this recommendation could be carried out in a very short time, utilising the Models of Support study noted above, and “a week of phoning around”. A great deal of information is already available, but we need to act on it.

2.4 Legislative Issues

2.4.1 Recommendation 11: *Local Authorities in Wales should explore using innovative solutions for dealing with homeless young people under the age of 18; for example, the Swansea model which uses the Children’s Act rather than homelessness legislation.*

The model used in Swansea, and similar models in some other authority areas, was reported as successful. In order to support LAs in taking this recommendation forward, WAG should produce and disseminate guidance on the effective use of the Children’s Act in supporting young homeless people. There are discrepancies in the way some Local Authorities in Wales carry out Section 17 assessments on 16- and 17-year-olds, and robust guidance needs to come from the WAG on this issue.

2.4.2 Recommendation 12: *Local Authorities in Wales should review the application of homelessness legislation to homeless young people aged under-25 and seek to involve as many local authority departments and outside agencies as is appropriate in their care.*

The group was unclear about the meaning of this recommendation, unless it concerns the application of the Single Room Rent and Discretionary Housing Benefit. Any measures which might ease the impact of the SSR are to be welcomed.

2.4.4 Recommendation 15: *The Welsh Assembly Government should examine the principles by which young people are declared intentionally homeless and issue guidance to local authorities to ensure that unfairness and inequalities do not occur.*

Recommendation supported, with the expectation that the work will involve consultation with service users and non-statutory sector agencies. Also suggested that a survey of local authorities is carried out, so that current disparities may be mapped.

2.4.5 Recommendation 16: *The Welsh Assembly Government should explore with its colleagues in Westminster gaining the powers to change legislation in Wales as regards intentionality to enable Welsh local authorities to have the same requirement as those in Scotland in relation to people aged under 25 (i.e. not to have to test for intentional homelessness).*

Supported. This should be widely consulted upon and any change in legislation must come with appropriate funding and resources.

2.4.6 Recommendation 23: *The Welsh Assembly Government to investigate the use of its new powers after May 2007 to introduce a Welsh short tenancy system, similar to the Scottish system of shorthold tenancies.*

Supported, with the expectation that accommodation providers are consulted and involved in any subsequent work to develop a new form of tenancy.

2.4.7 Recommendation 24: *The Welsh Assembly Government continue to make the strongest representations to the UK government to end the Single Room Rent restriction.*

Agencies would offer any support in assisting with this recommendation.

2.4.8 Recommendation 25: *The Welsh Assembly Government to investigate the use of its new powers from May 2007 to provide additional funding to young people under the age of 25 to supplement the Single Room Rent. This should be seen as an interim measure and the Welsh Assembly Government should continue to strongly urge their colleagues in Westminster to amend primary legislation.*

Group offered support with taking this recommendation forward, and invite WAG to consult for information/evidence to back this.

2.4.9 Recommendation 26: *That the Welsh Assembly Government continues discussions with their colleagues at the Department of Work and Pensions on ways to address the Anomalies in the benefits system which affect homeless young people in Wales.*

Recommendation supported. Other than the key issue of the Single Room Rent, the following areas were suggested for examination:

- Speed at which claims are processed
- Inefficiencies with centralised decision making
- Need for a new benefit providing temporary, emergency funding to young people (decisions on crisis loan currently take nine days)

2.5 Generic recommendations

2.5.1 Recommendation 5: *The Welsh Assembly Government, local authorities and the voluntary sector should involve service users in all aspects of planning and policy making for services for homeless young people.*

Sense that the reasoning behind this recommendation is self-evident, and that services or strategies which do not involve young people are unlikely to ever fully meet their needs. However, it was also felt that without robust performance indicators concerning levels of involvement, the ethos of user involvement could be diluted, or merely paid lip-service to, and that there may be a risk that measures taken could become 'tokenistic'.

Effective service user involvement is not always straight forward, and the following issues were raised:

- some young people may have unrealistic expectations of consultations or other service user involvement activities. 'Terms of reference' must be absolutely clear
- a range of approaches must be undertaken in order to encourage wide participation
- processes must be as flexible and inclusive as they can be, eliciting views which are representative of the client as a whole
- staff must be properly skilled to undertake this work
- young people's involvement in these activities must be valued and rewarded. It must be clearly seen that their views are heard, considered, and, where appropriate, acted upon

There was a sense within the group that a lot of work has been done on these questions locally, but that this needs to be scaled up to a national level – eg, that homelessness and housing-related conferences should cater better to the needs of service users, and encourage their participation.

2.5.2 Recommendation 29: *The Welsh Assembly Government should work with rural local authorities and the voluntary sector to address the problems of homelessness and seek innovative solutions to them.*

It was agreed that, in contrast to more urban authorities, the dispersal of homeless populations across wide geographical areas presents rural authorities with particular difficulties, and that innovative solutions to this must be sought. However, the group was uncertain about how *rural* may be defined in the context of this recommendation, and suggested that this should be clarified – ie, which specific authorities are to be included in this work?

Some ideas which may be explored include:

- the need to be creative in identifying new, suitable temporary accommodation for young people – eg, with appropriate support, can tourist accommodation be used off season?
- The need to develop information banks in rural areas - authorised lodgings, private landlords, etc
- further development of private sector leasing in rural areas
- further development of 'friendly lodging' and night stop schemes
- the development of mobile outreach advice surgeries in rural areas, held in libraries, village halls or other community spaces

3 Conclusions

Delegates at the Cymorth one-day event welcomed the renewed emphasis which the Welsh Assembly Government is currently placing on youth homelessness, and supports the drive towards greater innovation and improved cross-sector, multi-agency responses which underlie many of the JSR recommendations.

Although expressing caution about the realism or likely achievability of some recommendations, as outlined above, there exists broad support for many of the measures proposed and an enthusiasm to actively support them. Cymorth Cymru will continue to work towards the development of new and improved services for young homeless people in Wales, and, through its membership, will support the Welsh Assembly Government in bringing about this shared goal.

However, we would observe that the JSR recommendations do not directly address issues of resources, and that there has been no indication from the Assembly that funding for youth homelessness services are to be bolstered as part of the drive to address current concerns. Indeed, the current Assembly budget includes a freeze on (and real terms cut to) Section 180 funding until 2011, and the future of Supporting People funding levels is uncertain.

If any real difference is to be made in reducing levels of youth homelessness and improving the quality of support available to young homeless people in Wales, appropriate resources will be needed.

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