

Youth homelessness in Blackpool – prevention and provision, an overview

Blackpool's Housing Options Service responds to a large number of homeless presentations by young people every year. During 1 April 2009 to 1 March 2010, 791 presentations¹ by people aged 16–24 who were homeless, or potentially homeless, were made to Blackpool Housing Options (source: Blackpool Housing Options). This represents nearly a third of all homelessness presentations.²

Blackpool children, adult and family services were keen to identify the life journeys of these young people to aid early identification of those at risk of homelessness and to provide services in order to prevent other young people facing homelessness

and housing issues. Therefore, the aims of this project were to:

- 1) test the hypothesis that young people most at risk of homelessness have been involved with statutory services at some stage during childhood
- 2) propose methods for identifying young people at risk of homelessness
- 3) reflect on the successful practice and provision already in place and identify gaps in services
- 4) make recommendations on services/provision to be implemented/developed to fill these gaps.



¹ 579 individuals were homeless or potentially homeless. Some individuals made more than one homeless presentation during the period.

² There were 2,763 homeless or potentially homeless presentations by people of all ages in the same period.

Shelter

Ten young people aged 16–25 who were or had been homeless were interviewed to find out about their situation and experience. A snapshot data request was also sent to all Blackpool supported accommodation providers asking for information on the number of young people aged 16 and 17, and 18–25 accommodated on 31 March 2010 who were engaged with services on entry to accommodation.

A number of services and department representatives were also interviewed to identify the support available for young people in Blackpool and the key issues that needed to be addressed.

1) Test the hypothesis that young people most at risk of homelessness have been involved with statutory services at some stage during childhood

From the interviews and snapshot data, it is fair to conclude that the majority of young people who become homeless have been involved with services prior to being accommodated.³ These services are predominantly social care or offending related, although not all met the eligibility criteria for leaving care services. There is also a prevalence of substance use and mental ill-health among homeless young people, but 16- and 17-year-olds tend not to access specialist services for these issues until after they are accommodated.

2) Propose methods for identifying young people at risk of homelessness

The two key factors in the lives of young people who become homeless (from interviews with young people and service providers) are persistent school absence (and lack of qualifications) and parental relationship breakdown/new parental partners.

Services reported that persistent absence from school was the overarching factor in young people's vulnerability to offending, becoming a victim of offending, sexual exploitation, alcohol use and poor mental health.

It would appear that persistent absence from school is not an exclusive risk factor for homelessness, but is a risk factor for a range of other problems that contribute to the risk of homelessness. In order to identify young people at risk of homelessness at an early stage, identification of young people who are persistently absent from education seems to be the easiest and most cost effective indicator of subsequent problems and need.

Young people most at risk	Appropriate lead agency
Young people persistently absent from school	Pupil welfare and schools/other education settings
Young people excluded from school	Education Diversity
Young people missing from home on more than one occasion	Lancashire police and pupil welfare
Young people in care	Children's social care
Young people in custody or working with the youth offending team (YOT)	YOT
Siblings of young people engaged with the youth mediation service	Blackpool young people's services
Young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET)	Blackpool young people's services

³ 69 per cent of young people in Blackpool – from interviews and snapshot data, 44 young people from a total of 64 were engaged with services prior to being accommodated.

3) Reflect on the successful practice and provision already in place and identify gaps in services

Blackpool has a good range of provision for young people and those experiencing homelessness. There are also a number of examples of good practice in Blackpool, including:

- the review and development of accommodation – Blackpool Coastal Housing is currently reviewing its emergency provision and Housing Options are working with Streetlife to establish a young person's crash pad facility. A youth accommodation project co-ordinator has been appointed to look at housing issues faced by young offenders and care leavers and is developing proposals for a supported lodgings scheme
- joint working – Blackpool Homeless Partnership is an active forum which includes members from public and voluntary sector services. There are numerous examples of services working together to improve both communication with, and access to, provision
- a flexible and proactive approach to the housing register – young people entering supported housing projects are helped to sign up to the housing register. When they are ready to move on, they are supported with the bidding process. In Blackpool, young people are able to secure independent social housing relatively quickly
- information sharing and identification of vulnerable people – Blackpool Coastal Housing works well with mental health services by identifying tenants at risk and sharing the information with them. Blackpool Coastal Housing also works well with Social Services Direct receiving frequent referrals via this route. Education Diversity works well with other agencies to implement the summer holiday contact programme to keep in touch with the most vulnerable young people during the long school holiday
- practical support – Helping Hand offers a starter package of basic furniture for people setting up home at a very low cost.

The following recommendations correspond to the gaps that were identified in services.

4) Make recommendations on services/provision to be implemented/developed to fill these gaps

Prevention and early intervention

- there needs to be greater recognition that children who are persistently absent from school are at greater risk of homelessness later on. More needs to be done at an earlier stage to prevent them becoming homeless (and reduce persistent absence)
- better targeting and monitoring of young people aged under 16 most at risk of homelessness:
 - persistent school absence
 - family breakdown/new partner
 - previous family homelessness
- increased and targeted homelessness prevention and education work
- review of information, advice and support for young people in Blackpool to be undertaken in consultation with young people
- widely available information about where to go for advice and help
- better proactive identification of support needs, particularly around mental health and substance misuse, enabling earlier intervention.

Responsive and active intervention

- support for parents and young people to remain at home, wherever practical. Young people enabled to make informed and realistic housing choices
- one central point of presentation (where they feel safe) for 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless, alongside the adoption of a 'no wrong door' policy where young people receive a consistent initial service regardless of where they present
- allocation of a key worker to each young person who presents as homeless: responsible for co-ordinating the intervention and support from the appropriate services
- better use of the common assessment framework (CAF) for young people at risk and young people who present as homeless by the relevant professional with whom they are most engaged
- earlier response and intervention by key services, such as substance misuse and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)
- homeless 16- and 17-year-olds have access to an independent person or information to discuss the implications of being accommodated as a child in need or under homeless legislation
- produce, agree and implement a dual diagnosis protocol for young people aged under 18.

Ongoing support

- review of accommodation and commissioning to meet need
- review activities and informal support available during the day time and evenings for young people who are NEET and not yet ready for education, employment or training
- review of the delivery of key services to ensure they are young person centred in their approach
- investigate the level of need for anger management courses
- accommodation providers provide clear information about, and reasons for, their decisions
- accommodation providers consider accepting young people with drug and/or alcohol problems on the condition that they engage with specialist services
- providers have a risk assessment tool that includes gathering appropriate information on all referrals
- investigate the potential for finding extra guarantors for 16- and 17-year-olds taking social housing tenancies or negotiate the removal of this requirement.

I am extremely grateful to Shelter for supporting us in investigating a concern raised by staff across the authority that many young adults who become homeless have, at some stage in their childhood, already been involved with statutory services. If that concern were correct, it would indicate that we could reduce the risk of homelessness by intervening earlier. This report is a snapshot, some of the statements it contains are individual perceptions and not always accurate, but the underlining trend is clear – and the recommendations the report makes are ones we wholeheartedly endorse.

David Lund, Executive Director, Children, Adult & Family Services.

Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity

Until there's a home for everyone

88 Old Street

London EC1V 9HU

shelter.org.uk/childrenservice

Registered charity in England and Wales (263710) and in Scotland (SC002327)

Shelter