

# Practitioner article

## Youth homelessness prevention services provided by Stirling Council and partner organisations

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# Shelter

## Youth homelessness prevention services provided by Stirling Council and partner organisations

**Sharon Hossack outlines the measures taken by Stirling Council and its partners to prevent homelessness amongst young people. A holistic approach is taken to ensure that the best possible range of services is provided and that young people, particularly those leaving care, are not faced with having to take the homeless route into accommodation. Further help is then provided to help them to sustain tenancies once they have them.**

### Introduction

Stirling Council's homelessness strategy states that the underpinning principle of homelessness policy is that of prevention ([http://www.stirling.gov.uk/homeless\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.stirling.gov.uk/homeless_strategy.pdf)). We recognise that whilst prevention activities are crucial in all cases where homelessness is likely, we have focussed on developing a range of services focussed in particular on vulnerable young people.

We work in partnership with other council services as well as a range of other agencies. Amongst others, we work closely with:

- Children's Services
- Criminal Justice Services
- Throughcare and Aftercare
- Youth Services
- Loretto Care
- Compass for Life Partnership

Stirling was experiencing a steady increase in the incidence of homelessness amongst young people. We identified that we needed to take a more person centred approach to the way we dealt with young people at risk of becoming homeless. Our approach is two-fold: to prevent where possible young people coming into the system and prevent repeat homelessness for those that do.

As a result we have, with our partner agencies, gone on to develop a range of initiatives to prevent and alleviate homelessness amongst young people:

### Dedicated caseworkers

We opted to have dedicated caseworkers to carry out initial assessment interviews. At this stage the caseworker gathers as much information as possible to assess whether it is

safe for the young person to return home. Where there is no risk to the individual, the caseworker will actively promote the services of Mediation Officers. Our aim is to promote that home is best and to try and avoid the young person entering the homeless route.

## **Mediation service**

Since 2005, the Council has employed two Mediators who specialise in homelessness mediation. One of the officers is based at Springkerse House, the council's main reception for homeless clients, and one is based at the Council's supported housing project at The Bridge. Referrals for mediation for young people come mainly from the caseworkers or other professionals but they can be self-referrals or from any source where it is identified that a young person is at risk of losing their accommodation.

## **Advice service for young people**

In 2003, the Council set up a housing and advice service for young people between the ages of 16 and 25 at The Bridge, Stirling. This facility delivers: information on a range of topics; signposting to other services; advocacy work as well as attending homeless assessment interviews with clients. In 2006, through competitive tendering, the Council awarded the contract for running this facility to Loretto Care. The Advice Service is staffed by a Team Leader and an Information and Advice Worker who are qualified to Homepoint Type 2 standard. The Council also launched 'Infotxt' in 2005, a mobile phone service for requesting housing advice.

The Advice and Information Team provides quarterly monitoring reports to the Council on the types of work undertaken. In the most recent report in January 2007 housing advice accounted for over 50 per cent of all advice given.

The project has also produced a DVD on homelessness that has been shown to fourth year pupils in schools throughout the area.

## **Supported housing for young people**

As well as the Advice Centre, The Bridge provides residential supported accommodation for 10 young people between the ages of 16 and 25 and an outreach service for up to 12 young people in the community. The project can also accept emergency placements for up to two clients. The accommodation is self-contained and fully furnished. The Project provides support to vulnerable young people and helps develop the skills required to live independently. The Bridge also assists young people to access education, training and employment.

The Project works with:

- Churches Start Up (to provide starter packs and food packs for clients)
- Fab- Pad Programme (to develop young people's skills in decorating and home maintenance)
- Falkirk Furniture Project (to provide recycled furniture for new tenancies)
- Throughcare and Aftercare
- Stirling Youth Partnership
- Compass for Life Partnership
- schools
- DWP and Job Centre Plus
- Careers Service
- Stirling Homelessness Partnership

Both the residential project and the outreach service aim to provide young people with the skills to live independently and to reduce the likelihood of repeat homelessness.

## **Supported Lodgings**

This is a range of accommodation and support options for 16 to 21 year olds who have been living in residential care, childrens homes, foster homes or some other resource organised by Children's services. It can also benefit young people living in the community identified at risk of losing their accommodation and becoming homeless.

Supported lodgings can vary from living in a room in a home, with access to support, to being part of a supportive caring family or household. A range of lodgings can provide a wide variety of placements to meet the different and individual needs of young people.

Any person or family wishing to provide supported lodgings goes through a rigorous assessment process, including a series of checks and references to ensure that the lodgings are safe for young people. Homeless person's caseworkers or workers from Children's Services will normally make referrals for supported lodgings. The Youth Housing Liaison Group considers all referrals. This group is made up of representatives from Housing Services, Children's Services, Youth Services and Youth Justice. The Supported Lodgings scheme is overseen by Stirling Councils Youth Housing and Aftercare Strategy Group.

## **Stirling Compass for Life Partnership**

This is a partnership initiative led by the Council's Youth Services. It is funded by the Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley, Council partners and the European Social Fund. The initiative provides a range of specialist support that can be adapted to suit the changing needs and life situations of young people.

In 2001, a Compass Homelessness Support Worker was appointed to provide one-to-one support to young people either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. There are now two Support Workers in place who deal with a range of issues that may be related to their housing situations, these include:

- unemployment and lack of opportunities
- relationship problems with family members
- financial difficulties
- substance misuse
- physical and mental health issues

The Support Workers also deliver sessions on homelessness and the difficulties of running and sustaining a tenancy to young people who attend a Compass Base through the Get Ready for Work or New Deal programmes.

The services provided by the Housing Support Workers include:

- helping young people to prepare for their own tenancies
- advocate on the young persons behalf
- help with applying for benefits and assistance with form filling
- assist with budgeting
- build confidence in young people

The Council can also provide financial assistance to any young person between the ages of 16 and 25 that lives, works or is educated in the Stirling area. The Youth Development Grant is available to improve personal circumstances, employment opportunities or support their move into a new tenancy. Each application is considered on an individual basis and priority is given to those moving into a first tenancy, where there is limited or no family support or limited or no financial support available.

## **Joint working protocols**

Through partnership working the Housing Service has recognised that young people face many issues when presenting as homeless and at the start of a tenancy, as a result protocols have been developed to ease these processes.

The Housing Service along with Children's Services, Throughcare and Aftercare recognised that they each had a corporate parenting role in relation to young people leaving the care of the authority. Previously young people leaving care faced the prospect of accessing housing though presenting as homeless. The Council recognised that young people were instantly being labelled with the stigma of homelessness.

In 2004 The *Protocol on Looked After Children and Housing* was developed so that young people leaving local authority care were no longer categorised as homeless in order to gain priority status for housing. Instead, Children's Services in partnership with others provide a detailed assessment of the young persons housing needs both in the short and long term. Suitable interim accommodation is identified and tailored to the young person's needs where they are not immediately ready to take on a tenancy on leaving care. Where it is assessed that a young person is ready to take on a tenancy the young person will be matched to the most suitable property available, or the first that becomes available that meets the individual's needs.

Housing Support Plans are agreed and in place before the young person moves from care to ensure that the tenancy is sustained. The Youth Housing Liaison Group oversees the *Protocol*.

To provide an enhanced service to young people that fall into rent arrears, the local housing teams notify the Team Leader of Loretto Care of young tenants between 16 and 25 that are in arrears of more than £200. The Youth Housing Support Workers then attempt to engage with these tenants. It is worth noting that housing staff will have attempted contact as part of the Councils arrears procedures and this is an additional service aimed at reducing homelessness.

## **The service context**

As can be seen from the range of services and protocols in place there is a huge commitment to partnership working to address the problems and issues that young people face in relation to housing. There are groups that meet monthly to address operational issues, for example Loretto Care staff, the Homelessness Team and the Youth Housing Liaison Group and there are strategic groups that meet to develop services including the Homelessness Partnership, Stirling Youth Partnership and Compass Management Team.

## **Conclusion**

The services have evolved through joint working between a range of agencies who work with young people and this has resulted in a greater understanding of the problems they experience and the issues related to maintaining tenancies. The Council are taking a holistic approach to the prevention of homelessness amongst young people.

It is hoped that there will be better outcomes for young people and a better quality service for those experiencing homelessness. The Council hopes that mediation within families will see fewer young people having to access housing through the homeless route. We wish to see fewer failed tenancies by ensuring that young people have the necessary skills and support to maintain tenancies. The effect of this should be fewer repeat

homelessness applications from young people, however, there is no hard evidence to demonstrate this will be the case.

The Housing Support Workers help young people with their tenancy obligations to avoid estate management problems and reduce the risk of losing tenancies through rent arrears. As well as the positive impact for young people there are benefits to the wider community and the Council in this approach. The Council should see savings in administrative costs associated with pursuing rent arrears; evictions and re-housing of young people placed in tenancies that they couldn't sustain. Meanwhile the broader community will have the opportunity to welcome young tenants as neighbours with the confidence that support is on hand to make a success of the tenancy.

Although the measure of success of these services is not yet quantifiable, it is clear to all those involved that services preventing youth homelessness have improved. To maintain and improve the level of services there needs to be a long term commitment to resource the prevention activities.

The Homelessness Partnership is looking forward to receiving the results of the recent Tenant Led Inspection on homelessness services. This report together with the recommendations from the Regulation and Inspection Report will help the Council develop services aimed at reducing homelessness. The Council may also wish to consider funding independent research to measure the outcomes for young people and to capture the service user views.

## References and further information

- *Youth Development Grant* leaflet, May 2005
- *Stirling Compass For Life Partnership*, Homelessness Support, January 2007

If you would like any further information about the youth homelessness prevention at Stirling Council please send an email to [practicescotland@shelter.org.uk](mailto:practicescotland@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.