

Young people's housing transitions

Findings
Informing change

November 2008

In a series of UK-wide discussions and events, young people and practitioners working with young people gave their views on issues surrounding the transition to independent living. The discussions covered difficulties that young people faced and examples of good practice.

Key points

- Participants in the discussions saw the transition to independent living as a process rather than a one-off event. Practitioners felt it was essential to allow young people to 'fail' or change direction during this process.
- A flexible support network was seen as vital in enabling young people to make the transition to independent living.
- Discussions highlighted the lack of an appropriate range of affordable housing options for young people in all housing tenures.
- Although many young people voiced a strong aspiration for home ownership, for others a social housing tenancy was a key aspiration in itself. Practitioners raised a need to re-think the home ownership 'ideal'.
- Young people wanted more flexibility in the housing system. Some practitioners wanted to see more 'portable' products that would allow young people to move around more easily, and questioned the inflexibility of the standard social housing tenancy. The private rented sector was considered too expensive.
- Despite mixed views on shared living, practitioners suggested this arrangement may have to become more common in future, particularly in the social rented sector.
- Education in schools and internet information sites were identified as important ways to prepare young people for independent living.
- Young people often felt negatively stereotyped by society, which can adversely affect the housing opportunities offered to them.

The research

By ECOTEC Research & Consulting

Background

Young people across the UK face increasing difficulty in finding suitable independent housing as the problems of affordability and accessibility restrict the options available to them. Until 2008 house prices had been rising consistently across the UK with some areas (e.g. Northern Ireland) experiencing dramatic increases in the last few years. This has made home ownership unattainable for most young people, even on a shared-ownership basis. Allocation policies for social housing may not work in favour of young people unless they are considered to be in a priority grouping. Whilst the private rented sector offers the possibility of independent living, it is perceived by some as a temporary measure where rents are too high and there is a lack of security.

Transition to independent living

The transition to independent living was seen by participants in the study events as a process over time – not a one-off event. When young people leave home early that process is compressed and problems can arise. Many participants had moved between different housing situations, including social housing, parental homes, private renting, hostels and staying with friends. Young people need time to adapt to independent living, so availability and continuity of support is important.

Many practitioners felt it was essential to allow young people to 'fail' or change direction without being judged negatively. It is normal in adult life to go backwards and forwards towards a goal, rather than always in a straight line.

Support networks for transition

Many examples of informal and formal support networks were mentioned by participants in the study, including buddying, mentors, 'aunties' (older students supporting younger ones) in student accommodation, lodging schemes, family, peer support and support workers. The existence of a support network was considered vital in aiding transition to independent living:

'It is about having someone there, that they can trust and if things don't work out they can go to.'
(Practitioner, Edinburgh)

Some participants felt all young people should have access to support workers, including those moving out of the family home. This raises the question whether there should be an extension of the government-funded Connexions Direct service for 13- to 19-year-olds to include young people over 19 and provide support to them when needed.

Lack of appropriate housing options for young people

Practitioners and young people felt there is a lack of appropriate options for young people in different circumstances at different stages of their lives. The experiences of many young people showed that making the transition to suitable long-term housing is not a linear process and could involve several different types of housing. Some young people viewed home ownership as their ultimate goal but saw private renting and social renting as 'stepping stones' on the way. Some practitioners viewed flexibility across the board in the housing system as an important issue.

There was a call for quality youth housing provision with more specialist youth-oriented housing projects. Participants suggested the provision of schemes that work together to help young people progress through supported and semi-supported housing to independent living.

Participants felt there is a shortage of accommodation to move on to and a lack of housing provision for some specific groups of young people, including young offenders (particularly prolific offenders), teenage parents, people leaving care, drug offenders, people with learning difficulties and single young men.

Home ownership and a flexible housing system

The majority of young people participating in the events across the UK viewed home ownership as their ultimate goal, although a range of external factors made that seem unattainable, as the gap between their income and house prices was too great. This frustration particularly applied to those who had been through the 'hoops' of tertiary education, qualifications, and obtaining employment. Shared-ownership schemes offered a possibility but eligibility criteria prevented many from applying, and schemes were often oversubscribed.

Some felt a council or housing association tenancy was a more realistic option as an end goal.

Practitioners raised the question that if home ownership is no longer a realistic option, maybe society needs to rethink its perception of home ownership as the 'norm' in the UK. Alternative suggestions put forward included more flexibility between types of occupancy/ownership with the possibility of two-way movement between them. For example, the flexibility to climb the housing ladder across different types of housing would allow people to cope with changes in income and family circumstances.

Flexibility within social housing provision

Practitioners and young people across the UK felt young people are not given enough consideration in social housing allocation. Suggestions for improvement included the introduction of a category for young people in the points system and greater local consistency through a single unified waiting list for social housing. Homelessness is often seen as the only route into social housing, although this assumption was challenged by practitioners in the study.

Once allocated a social tenancy, there is no provision for young people to move around. If they don't want to stay in the same location, they can end up losing their tenancy. By their very nature, young people are 'mobile', going through a time of changes and transitions. Some practitioners questioned the appropriateness of a standard social housing tenancy for life, with a view to considering ways of providing more 'portable' products.

There could be more flexibility in the social housing system. For example, one new initiative between a homeless organisation in England and a housing association allows tenants to surrender part of their rent each month as a saving towards a deposit for home ownership.

The role of the private rented sector

Participants recognised there has been an increase in the role of the private rented sector for young people, particularly for those in their mid-twenties. They said that many young people were in private rented accommodation as a substitute for owner-occupation due to the constraints they faced.

The appeal and accessibility of the private rented sector is limited by high rents, lack of security and the poor physical condition of some properties. Practitioners felt that greater value needed to be placed on the private

rented sector by government and local authorities to increase its appeal, but this would have implications for housing benefit and housing renewal policy.

Participants felt landlords often view young people as high-risk tenants. An example of a new initiative that aims to remove these preconceptions is a housing association in Wales that rents from private landlords and then sublets to young people. The scheme links into support services, gives six months' notice to tenants if they have to leave and helps them find new accommodation. Rents are within housing benefit levels. The single room rent level for under-25s for housing benefit was questioned by many young people and practitioners, noting that utility costs were no lower for young people.

Both practitioners and young people felt high rents in a low-wage economy can act as a disincentive to young people to move out of benefit dependency, as wages would not match benefit levels. One practitioner would like to see the introduction of rents relating to the percentage of a person's salary.

Shared living arrangements

Some young people and some practitioners felt shared living could play a positive role in helping young people learn to live independently, with peer support, whereas others felt young people needed their own space.

In owner-occupation, practitioners noted that shared buying between friends and also between strangers was becoming more common, but felt they had insufficient information to judge how successful this arrangement is.

The events highlighted that there is no established culture of sharing living accommodation in the social rented sector, whereas it is standard practice for students. Some practitioners felt the 'gold standard' of solo living – which has been a big part of the social rented sector for a long time – may have to shift. One practitioner felt this was a key area where further research was needed to prompt more creative solutions. Several young people did not like the idea of sharing and would only consider sharing with people they had known for a long time.

Practitioners provided examples of new initiatives across the UK with shared living arrangements. One organisation felt there was a gap between 24-hour supported accommodation and independent living. They had developed an intermediary shared living arrangement where young people could benefit from peer support as well as floating support. Another initiative aimed to help young people link up with potential suitable sharers, and included discussion in advance of the kind of things that might go wrong and how to deal with them.

Preparation for independent living

Many young people in the study were unaware of the services and housing opportunities available to them, and felt ill-prepared for independent living. A recurrent theme was the important role education in schools could play in preparing young people for the realities of finding and living in independent accommodation. The role of peer educators was given as a good practice example.

Independent living skills need to be developed prior to moving into accommodation. They go beyond budgeting and cooking skills, to dealing with peer pressure, getting on with neighbours, communication skills and keeping the house clean.

Some young people felt the internet was an under-developed resource in the housing sector and were not aware of specific sites focusing on young people's housing issues and needs. It was suggested online services could provide general information on housing options and direct people to local specialist services for in-depth support or advice. Some young people said they would like to see real-life stories and watch videos on 'YouTube'.

In terms of seeking advice, some young people said they didn't know what to ask for and would like information on how to prepare for moving into their own home. One organisation working with young people has prepared a booklet for parents to help them talk to young people about what is involved in leaving home.

Society's attitude to young people

Some practitioners felt young people are not valued sufficiently by society. Young people often felt misrepresented and negatively stereotyped, which can minimise the opportunities provided to them. They wanted to be listened to and involved in decision-making processes and wanted services to be tailored to individual needs. It was felt that organisations that deal

with young people should be more adept at working with them – for example, staff should be trained in working with this age group.

Conclusion

The main housing transition issues that emerged from the discussions with young people and practitioners working with young people were the current shortage of suitable, affordable, independent housing options for young people; the need for support and information to help them progress through different types of accommodation towards their final housing goal; and problems caused by negative social stereotyping of young people, which reduced the opportunities available to them.

Priorities for the future were for government and society to place greater value and emphasis on young people; for more quality youth housing provision; and for more flexibility with provision of 'portable' products that would enable young people to move around more easily. Improved education, support and information on youth housing were also considered important.

About the project

ECOTEC Research & Consulting carried out initial telephone interviews with a range of general and specialist practitioners working with young people across the UK, including housing providers, advice services, support providers, employment and young people's services. These helped shape, inform and recruit participants to a half-day event held in each of the four UK administrations where workshops took place, enabling separate and joint conversations between young people and practitioners. The events took place in Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff and Birmingham in April 2008. The study was also informed by young people's views on the blog page www.youngpeoplemovingon.org.uk.

For further information

The full report, **Young people's housing transitions** by ECOTEC Research & Consulting, is to be published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation during winter 2008/09 and will be available to download for free at www.jrf.org.uk

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Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk