

# A PLACE TO CALL HOME

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

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### Acknowledgments

This report was written by the education and youth development 'think and action tank' LKMco. We believe society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience [lkmco.org.uk](http://lkmco.org.uk) | [@LKMco](https://twitter.com/LKMco) | [info@lkmco.org](mailto:info@lkmco.org)

This report was commissioned by Sage Foundation. Sage Foundation is committed to taking action to build sustainable social, economic and entrepreneurial opportunities in Sage's local communities around the world. For Sage, this is the right way to do business. We invest our time, money, expertise and technology in non-profit partners that are helping people reach their true potential. We are focused on helping: Young People, Women and Military Veterans. [sage.com/foundation](http://sage.com/foundation) | [@sagefoundation](https://twitter.com/sagefoundation)

Thanks to Grenfell Housing Association and Your Homes Newcastle we were able to work with 10 young people to develop this report. Aged between 17 to 23 they were trained in photography and interview skills, so that they could be in the driving seat in telling their unique, deeply personal and often traumatic stories. It is our privilege to introduce these remarkable young people through the photography in this report.

Enough is  
enough: **no**  
**young person**  
**should be**  
**without a**  
**secure future**

## Foreword from Stephen Kelly, CEO Sage



## “...you don't have a place really to just rest your head and be at peace.”

It is not unreasonable to want that, is it?

How does a young person end up without a place to be at peace? What twists and turns in a life not yet lived, can lead a young man or woman – full of the same ambitions, hopes and dreams as their peers – to end up without a place to call home?

The reasons, as this report shows, are as complex as they are varied. The reality of youth homelessness goes far beyond our basic understanding of sleeping on a street corner – indeed, it is a reality that is often hard to see at all.

Sage – and myself in particular – were keen to embark on this work with LKMco because we are passionate about the potential of all young people, and our philanthropic commitment through Sage Foundation, is to work towards a world where no young person is held back from reaching that potential.

It is my belief that businesses have a central role to play in the eradication of youth homelessness. We must use our resources to support and collaborate with; local authorities, policymakers, charity partners and educators in our communities, to strengthen, advocate for and build services that tackle youth homelessness and its root causes.

Before we got stuck into making a change, we saw the importance of commissioning independent research into youth homelessness in the UK, to better understand the scale of the challenge, what inspiring work is already happening and understand where we can best offer our help. We decided to focus on London and Newcastle – the latter is Sage's birthplace. Sage was founded in Newcastle in 1981, and we are particularly passionate about fostering healthy communities in the North East.

The national story we found is startling. 16-24 year olds who are accepted as statutorily homeless, make up just **12% (16,000)** of the total number of young people that approach their local authority for support; nearly double that number will be turned away (**22%, 30,000**). These figures also fail to account for the 'hidden homeless'; those who are living on the streets or just getting by on couch surfing with no guarantee of where they will sleep each night. On any one night, up to **255,000** young people are estimated to experience hidden homelessness. They are all at risk, they all need help. Yet, they remain invisible and are unlikely to be monitored or offered appropriate support.

That is why in this report, more than anything, we wanted to listen to and share some of these young people's stories first-hand, rather than making assumptions about what their lives are like and what kind of help they want or need. Their voices deserve to be heard. So, I want to sincerely thank our 10-strong youth panel, Yasmin, Jerome, Felix, Ollie, Jess, Evan, Leila, Emily, Andrzej and Josh for being so open and honest with us. They have both moved and inspired me to do more as a leader.

We also wanted to look at a major influence on the lives of all young people; education. Often the educational experiences of young people who become homeless are sidelined. We thought it was critical to look at this because homelessness has such a lasting and detrimental impact on young people staying in and achieving in education, even when they want to work hard and take a step towards a better future. We must do more to keep homeless young people in education and support them to achieve well. This means being watchful for the warning signs and ensuring the right support is in place well before things reach crisis point. It also means that when things do go wrong, the full weight of our community, including businesses, schools and youth services should be thrown behind young people to ensure they can still access an education that is a haven from the chaos in the rest of their lives.

We all need to pay attention, because youth homelessness is a critical issue for our society – it has long-term consequences for individuals, communities and families. Ending youth homelessness and ensuring that young people have the support they need is not only possible, but it is also our duty as a fair and modern society. Tackling this now changes what our future looks like.

What I hope strikes you most on reading this is that despite the tragedies and setbacks that people like Jerome and Leila have been through in their lives, they have maintained a strong sense of hope, of ambition, of excitement about the future. That excitement shouldn't be a privilege, but a right – afforded to every young person, with their whole lives ahead of them. It is up to those of us with resources and power to listen to these hopeful voices, and to do what we can to make sure aspiration isn't wasted.

This report is just the beginning for Sage. This is a call for collaboration, as much as action. In 2018, we will look to work with business, charity, education, community and government leaders to build on the recommendations from this report. We'll continue working with and consulting young people. We'll start in Sage's hometown of Newcastle. And, we'll be looking for innovative and practical support that will stop at risk young people ever experiencing homelessness.

I am indebted to the fantastic young people and both teams at LKMco and Sage Foundation – alongside all our expert collaborators and partners, who do so much and have helped in the journey so far.

**Stephen Kelly, CEO, Sage**

## Painting the picture of a national problem

### It is a mistake to simply equate homelessness with 'rough sleeping'. Being homeless is not always the same as being on the street and there are a number of forms of homelessness. UK researchers tend to focus on three forms of homelessness:

- **Statutory homelessness:** These young people ask for and qualify for homelessness support from their local authority.
- **Non-statutory homelessness:** These young people have reported to their local authority as homeless but do not qualify for help because they do not meet strict definitions, are not a priority or are judged to be 'intentionally homeless'. Only 12% (16,000) of those that ask their local authority for assistance will be classed and counted as statutorily homeless; nearly double that number will be turned away (22%, 30,000). (Youth Homelessness Database, 2015-16). This picture also varies around the country with fewer than 5% of young people presenting as homeless accepted as statutorily homeless in the North East compared to around a quarter in the capital (Youth Homelessness Databank, 2015-16).
- **Hidden homelessness:** These young people have not approached their local authority for support and therefore do not fit into either of the above categories. Young people who do not ask for help but, who for example, sleep rough or move between friends' houses 'sofa-surfing' are often unrecorded. Recent studies estimate a potential 255,00 young people experience hidden homelessness every night (Clarke et al, 2015). Almost all of young people we worked with had sofa surfed before entering supported housing. Given that there are currently no official statistics on the number of homeless people sofa surfing (DCLG, 2016), it is unlikely that these young people will be monitored by local authorities or offered appropriate support (Reeve and Batty, 2011).

"You don't have anyone that cares about you, friend or family, and it's not like you have to be sleeping on the streets, but you don't have a place to really just rest your head and be at peace. If you're living in a place where there's violence and there's things that you don't condone or you shouldn't even endure as a human, then you're homeless..." Yasmin, London

In our research we define 'youth homelessness' as affecting young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who experience any form of homelessness. However, it is important to note that this age bracket is, to some extent, arbitrary.

"It's not just about the age, it's about the tools that they have to be able to develop into adults." Kiri Grant, Cardboard citizens

7% (288) of rough sleepers counted by local authorities in Autumn 2016 were under 25 years old (DCLG, 2016) but national figures only present the tip of the iceberg because they often only include statutory homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al, 2017).

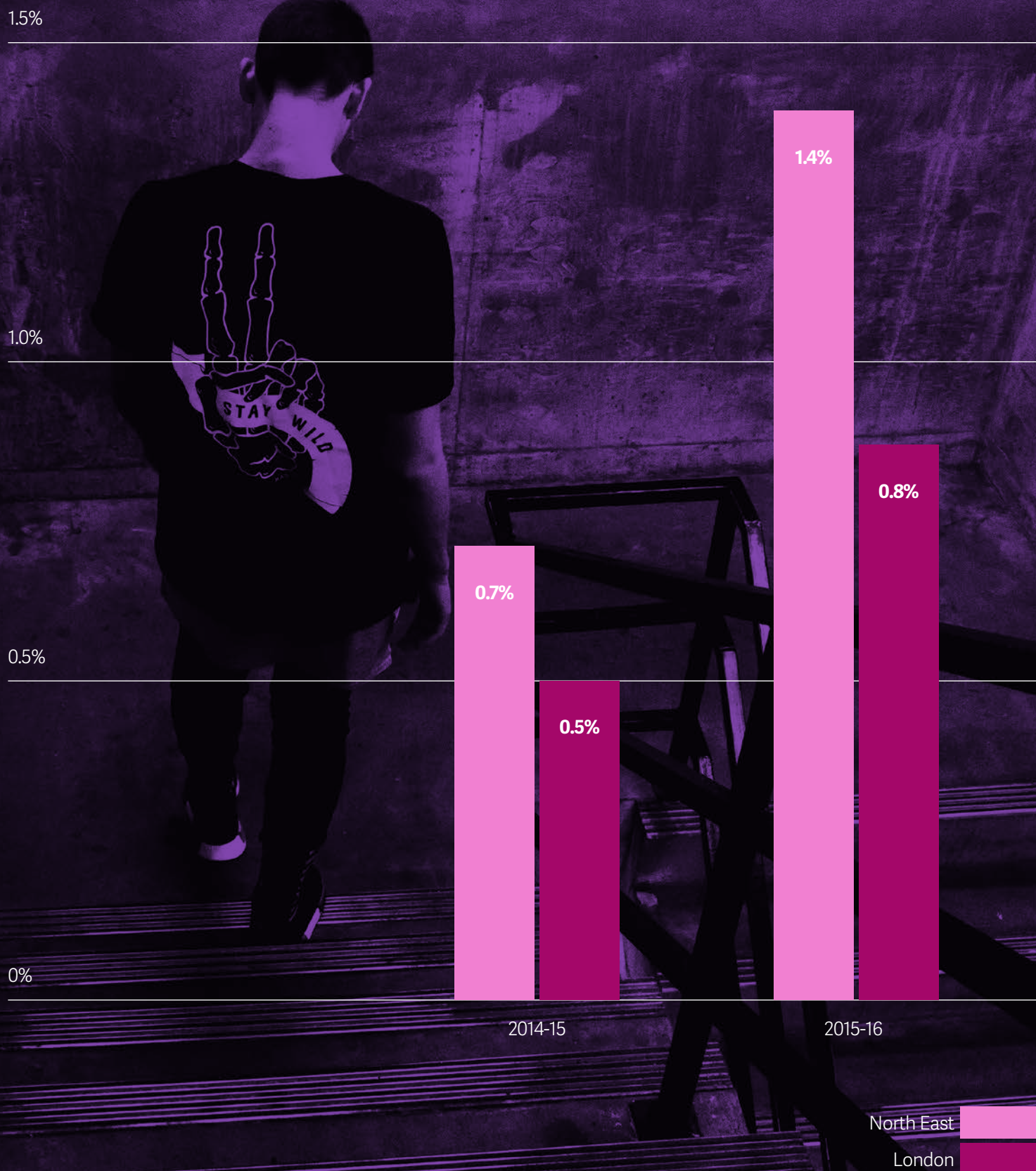
Recent estimates show a disturbing increase in the proportion of young people presenting as homeless in London and the North East, with the proportion of young people presenting to their local authority as homeless doubling in the North East between 2014-15 and 2015-16 (from 0.7% to 1.4%).

Certain young people are far more vulnerable to homelessness than others. They are more likely to become homeless if they are care leavers or have been in youth custody (Homeless Link, 2015) and if they identify as LGBT<sup>1</sup> (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2015; Cull et al, 2006; Office of National Statistics, 2015). In the past young homeless people were disproportionately male but the gender gap has narrowed in recent years (Homeless Link, 2015). There is also some evidence to suggest that Black and Minority ethnic groups are also at greater risk (DCLG, 2016)

<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender

## % of 16-24 population presenting to the local authority as homeless

Youth Homelessness Databank, 2014-15, 2015-16.



## What are the main causes of youth homelessness?

**No single factor causes homelessness. Instead, various factors interact over an extended period, eventually resulting in homelessness. This is why building up trust and hearing from young people themselves as they unpicked their journeys was so important.**

**Risk factors often kick in well before young people reach crisis point. This means that far too many opportunities to act early are missed. In our interviews with experts and young people, three key common causes emerged time and again:**

### Parents no longer being willing or able to accommodate young people:

Relationship breakdown is often the trigger for young people becoming homeless, but this does not happen without warning signs. A rapid and skilled response to these challenges could help reduce the risk that events culminate in homelessness.

Substance misuse, poor behaviour, abuse, break-down of support networks and poor mental health can all contribute to the risk of relationship breakdown (Homeless Link, 2015; Watts, 2015). Discrimination against LGBT young people also plays a key role with 77% of young LGBT homeless people feeling that their sexuality or gender identity was the cause of their rejection from home (Albert Kennedy Trust, 2015). Bereavement too is a common antecedent. 3% - 5% of young people experience the loss of a parent or sibling before they are 16 years old (Akerman and Statham, 2014) and roughly half of the young people we worked with explained that the death of a close friend or family member had negatively impacted on their relationships with their parents and care givers, as well as their own mental well-being.

*"When I was in year 9 I ended up getting kicked out of school and that was because I lost a little cousin, he died...and I started going downhill. I used to be good in school until I lost my little cousin and then I just didn't want to be in a classroom with loads of people anymore and do what the teachers said to do ...[I felt] angry, upset, heartbroken."* Emily, Newcastle

### Poverty:

Poverty frequently leads to untenably overcrowded or unsuitable housing and this contributes to family breakdown. Changes to the welfare system and rising rents have therefore profoundly exacerbated youth homelessness and this poses serious questions for how our society ensures young people grow up in the right conditions for them to flourish. Meanwhile, the wider economic context and the shortcomings of social policy can result in a lack of support services and high youth unemployment rates. This increases the likelihood that young people will become homeless.

Rental costs in the UK have risen by 14.5% since January 2011 (ONS, 2017) and are expected to rise by a further 25% in the next five years (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, 2017). As a result, many young people who leave home frequently find themselves in material poverty due to their inability enter the private rental sector (Fitzpatrick et al, 2017; Tinson et al, 2016).

Since April 2017, people aged between 18-21 who claim Universal Credit have not been automatically entitled to housing benefit (Wilson et al, 2017). Furthermore, whilst those in part time education can claim housing benefit they also tend to need other benefits such as jobseekers support or universal credit to support themselves beyond

paying rent. However, dysfunctionality in the system means that some have to drop out of education to maintain their benefits due to a requirement that "you will be expected to be willing to give up the course if suitable full-time work becomes available". Young people aged 21 and over are particularly badly affected by this stipulation.

*"The job centre constantly on my case to look for work, I'm in full time education, I've shown them the thing to say I'm in college, but they said they were gona sanction us, you've got to look for work because you're on universal credit and you're 18...I had to look for work while I was still doing college, I had four days left of college...I got a job but because of that I then couldn't finish my first year, I failed that...so I can't do my second."* Andrzej, Newcastle

### Leaving care:

Young people in care - whether they are fostered or in homes, are some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. Yet despite their care being entrusted to the state, many are left vulnerable by a lack of transitional arrangements and options for moving on, coupled with a lack of support and insufficient skills for independent living. As a result, the system is letting these young people down and failing to ensure they have a fair chance of success.

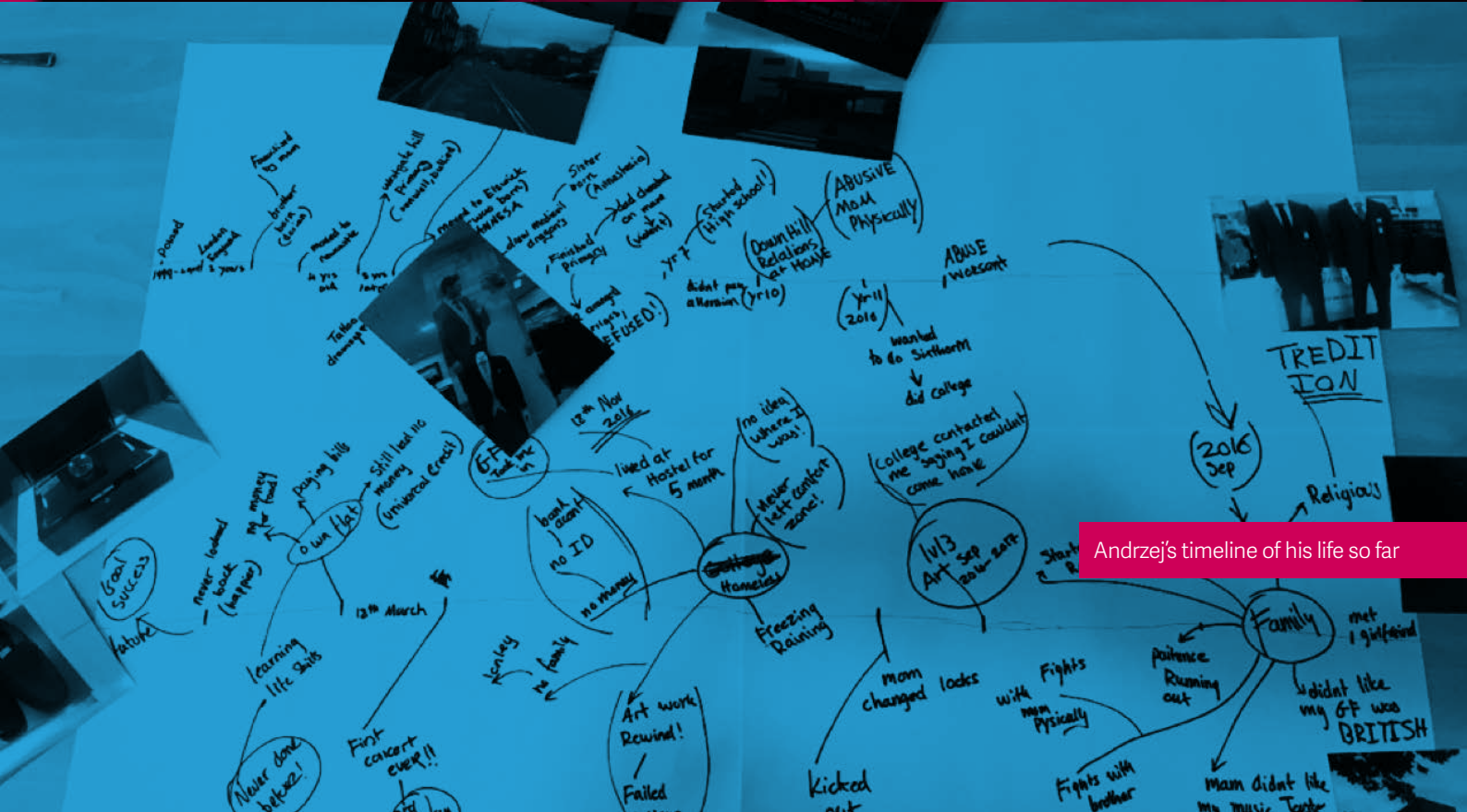
Over 10,000 young people leave care each year (Department for Education, 2015) and one-third of all care leavers experience some form of homelessness 6-24 months after leaving care (Stein, 2010; Wade and Dixon, 2006). Care leavers are therefore at vastly higher risk of becoming homeless (Homeless Link, 2015; Whalen, 2015).

Care leavers are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of policy changes in relation to the benefits system, since their inability to return 'home' leaves them with limited options if they struggle to secure the benefits necessary to pay their rent.

On top of this, care leavers are less likely to attain highly in education. In 2013, only 12% of looked after children attained 5 A\*-C at GCSE including English and Maths, compared to 52% of young people nationally (Department for Education, 2015). As a result 41% of 19-year-old care leavers were classified as Not in Education Employment or Training in 2013/14 compared to 15% of all 19-year-olds (Department for Education, 2015).

*"You've got to have incredible resources as a young person in the care system to make a go of it... Whereas if you have a family home you can go back to and you have family that will keep digging into their pockets albeit it reluctantly sometimes, it's a very different set of circumstances. It gives you that safety blanket to fail and keep trying. Whereas if a care leaver fails and they lose their accommodation as part of it, it's almost like going back to square one again. It's enormous pressure on young people."* Chris Henwood, Foundation Futures





## A challenge for education

**Many of the factors that contribute to young people becoming homeless also make it difficult for them to succeed in education. This is particularly the case where pupils are moving between schools frequently. Meanwhile, homelessness itself forces many young people out of education, even where they are keen to persist.**

**For this reason, keeping homeless young people in education and supporting them to achieve well is one of the most important forms of support that educational institutions can provide.**

“Many of them have been abused whether that’s sexually, physically or mentally. Many of them have been brought here in very chaotic backgrounds without a lot of stability. They also have very poor social skills often, and I think a lot of that comes down to confidence. You know that stereotype of somebody with their cap on not making eye contact, until you’ve built a relationship with somebody then that’s what you’re going to get. It takes time to develop that and I think a lot of the young people that we see have been disengaged from education at a very early stage.” Sharon Brown, Youth Homelessness North East

Pupils from low income backgrounds are more vulnerable to homelessness, and also make less progress in secondary school than their wealthier peers (Shaw et al. 2017). Meanwhile, these pupils’ low attainment means that if they do become homeless, they are less likely to have the qualifications they need to enter the labour market successfully. Similarly, struggles with mental health both increase the risk of homelessness and make it harder for young people to engage successfully with education without appropriate support. There are also well-documented links between Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and poverty (Shaw et al. 2016). Whilst there is limited data on available on SEND and homelessness, in 2004 (under the previous system of SEND classifications) the proportion of homeless pupils given a statement of special education needs was 11%, compared to national average of 3% (Mitchell et al, 2004). Again, the young people who struggle the most in education are also those most at risk of homelessness.

Faced with these challenges, young people can need considerable support from their school or college:

“Many of them have been abused whether that’s sexually, physically or mentally. Many of them have been brought here in very chaotic backgrounds without a lot of stability. They also have very poor social skills often, and I think a lot of that comes down to confidence. You know that stereotype of somebody with their cap on not making eye contact, until you’ve built a relationship with somebody then that’s what you’re going to get. It takes time to develop that and I think a lot of the young people that we see have been disengaged from education at a very early stage.” Sharon Brown, Youth Homelessness North East

“Did my first and second year of A levels, but didn’t finish it because I was just going through a lot at the time and it was hard to concentrate. But I did have the support from the school and they did support me a lot, but obviously I just couldn’t do it, it was getting too much for me to do the second year of A levels.” Leila, Newcastle

Unfortunately, such support is not always available and funding cuts and reduced social services have made it even harder for schools and colleges to provide the support young people need.

“My grandmother died, I lost my job and then I was made homeless. So, it was, kind of, like, there was no-one in college to even go and speak to. When I did go and speak to them, because I had about two to three meetings, it was like, “I hope things get better,” and that’s it, and, “Still attend college.” It’s just like, “How am I meant to attend when I live miles away and have to pay about £5 every day to get here?” So, yes, it was just like real lack of support, definitely.” Jerome, London

“Usually you have a team of people either a safe guarding team or student services or student support services team [but] these are jobs that are increasingly being cut because there’s just not enough money coming into education and of course those are the first ones to go.” Sarah Jones, ex-Deputy Head of FE College

Without adequate support, factors associated with homelessness frequently impact negatively on young people’s behaviour. This often results in them being excluded from mainstream schools, and once young people are excluded from school, many of their educational journeys come to an end.

“When I moved in to [Pupil Referral Unit], I started going with people who would cause trouble on a daily basis and then I didn’t want to get kicked out because that was the last school I would go to, so I changed, but then I ended up getting kicked out for something else. I didn’t go to school then, I went to the library for forty-five minutes a day.” Emily, Newcastle

## Preparing for independent living

**Early action to stop vulnerable and at-risk young people from becoming homeless is key. However, where young people do have to leave the home, appropriate support is crucial if we are to avoid this becoming the end of the road for their education.**

Many of the young people we spoke to explained that their lack of independent living skills, including financial budgeting skills and how to look after themselves, made their transition to homelessness, or living independently in supported accommodation, difficult.

“Money was definitely the biggest issue and moving in, lacking life-skills. Just lacking basic what most people would know... clueless how to use a washing machine...I didn't know how to use a vacuum, I didn't know how to use a cash point. I put my card in and it sucked. I was like, “Oh shit, I've lost my card.” What did I do, it asked for a pin, what's my pin? What's a pin? Was clueless about direct debits, clueless how to pay water. I didn't even know you had to pay for your water.” Andrzej, Newcastle

Others felt that they lacked the emotional and social skills they needed, arguing that education should include teaching young people these skills.

“I think [education should include] basic things about life, life self-esteem, confidence, how not to be anxious. Things like getting a job. Things like how to deal with different people that you meet in life.” Young person, London.

Given curriculum pressures in schools there is rarely sufficient time in school timetables to include such skills fully. It is also questionable how much a school can do to fill the gap in the most chaotic or troubled lives. However, this should not mean such young people are left in the lurch without the safety net they need.

## Hopeful futures

**Despite the constant setbacks and trauma that characterised our research participants' lives, all of them held clear aspirations for their futures. They described their plans to work in a variety of careers, become financially independent and have their own home. These young people's will is not lacking, and as our full report shows, we could do better as a society. Not to do so is simply an unacceptable waste of potential.**

“I think I'm going to stick in college and get all the grades I need for childcare and finish my qualifications and then hopefully I'll be at uni, do a degree.” Leila, Newcastle

“Hopefully in a couple of months' time I'll have my own tenancy, my own flat, so then I will need to get a job before that, so I can actually pay for the flat as well, instead of just being on benefits all my life. So I want to actually get a job and then I want to be a head chef just in an Italian restaurant preferably.” Evan, Newcastle





## What can we do?

**Ending youth homelessness is our duty as a humane and modern society and everyone has a role to play.**

### **Businesses and funders should:**

- Funding expansion of local family support services and encourage employees to train as volunteers in new and existing mediation services.
- Campaign to raise awareness of hidden youth homelessness.
- Ensure that wherever possible, initiatives to tackle homelessness target all homeless young people, not just those classified as statutorily homeless.
- Provide funding for new pilots of school-based bereavement services following a review of existing services
- Ensure homeless young people are able to access apprenticeships by systematically reviewing processes for applying to them and targeting organisations that work with these young people.

### **Government and funders should:**

- Provide funding to dramatically increase the availability of high-quality mediation and family counselling services for vulnerable young people and their families.
- Identify the most effective way of supporting young homeless people to gain life-skills by commissioning research to evaluate the impact of existing programmes.

### **Local authorities and social services should:**

- Ensure that all vulnerable young people who are experiencing family conflict have access to family counselling or mediation when a young person is in need.
- It is important to note that family counselling should not take place between young people and family members who have committed abuse, in such cases young people should be prioritised for housing support and given intensive support once rehoused to help them deal with the traumatic after-effects of abuse.
- Offer counselling, parenting classes and/or parent groups to guardians who are struggling with a vulnerable young person's behaviour.
- Ensure all parents and young people can access specialist support where families are struggling to come to terms with a young person's sexuality or gender identity.

### **All local authorities should:**

- Develop or deploy pathway plans (such as the Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Framework from Barnardo's and St Basil's) to assist young care leavers in finding and retaining accommodation.

### **The Department for Work and Pensions should:**

- Adjust regulations to allow all young homeless people to retain housing benefit if they enter full-time Higher or Further Education and choose to remain in supported housing. In such circumstances, young people should receive housing benefit in place of a maintenance loan, but retain eligibility for Special Support Grants.
- Require all Job Centres to designate a 'Young Person Lead', who is trained to work with young people who are receiving welfare support and adjust benefit requirements to enable young people to continue in education.
- Collaborate with the Department for Education to create a database that tracks young homeless people through the system to ensure they are able to access to Further and Higher Education.
- Review procedures for recalculating benefits when young people begin apprenticeships to ensure homeless young people are not vulnerable to debt and a loss of wages.

### **The Department for Education should:**

- Create a new targeted travel bursary for young homeless people living in temporary accommodation. This should be paid to schools and colleges where these young people are enrolled.

### **The Department for Communities and Local Government should:**

- Commission research into:
  - Potential improvements to data on the young homeless population's demographics, for example by including information on ethnicity, care leavers, offending history and gender identity and sexual orientation.
  - How public services - including health, security and education - can collaborate to ensure all hidden homeless young people are identified and tracked.

### **Schools and educational settings should:**

- Provide effective primary prevention by:
  - Ensuring that staff with key responsibilities (such as pastoral and safeguarding leads, heads of year and SENDCOs) have expert training in recognising the warning signs and risk factors for youth homelessness;
  - Helping all bereaved young people access specialist services. These services should form an integral part of schools' mental health policies.
  - Signposting families and young people towards information and guidance – particularly family mediation;
- Provide or broker support for pupils and students who are experiencing homelessness to mitigate potential damage and help them to remain in education. This may include access to support with independent living skills and financial advice.

### **Statutory and non-statutory youth services should:**

- Provide specialist bereavement support for young people. Such support should be administered by experts in response to referrals from educational institutions and social or homeless services.

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