

Youth Homeless Parliament 2022

History of Youth Homeless Parliament

The Youth Homeless Parliament was established in May 2013 to enable young homeless people to have a voice and to share their experiences with politicians in Westminster. The project is funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (previously called the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government) following a successful first event involving the St Basils National Youth Reference Group and ministers in 2012.

The Youth Homeless Parliament, which is coordinated by St Basils Youth Voice Team, involves a wide range of agencies and young people across England. It enables dialogue directly between ministers, civil servants and young people who have experienced homelessness, contributing to the development of good practice to support homeless young people.

Introduction

2022's Youth Homeless Parliament presents an ideal opportunity to focus on several topics, including the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on young people experiencing homelessness, but also to continue the work from the previous Parliament, deep diving into the experiences of young people.

Youth Homeless Parliament members took part in four discussions, one focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic, and three other conversations looking into lived experiences of specific groups of young people experiencing homelessness. These three topics can be understood as: how early intervention was missed amongst young people from 'troubled families'; the experiences of care leavers; and equality and inclusion amongst homeless young people.

In this report we look at the overview of the conversations and identify shared experiences by young people experiencing homelessness that fall within those categories. Many of the recommendations from the conversations, particularly around empowering young people to be part of decisions, are replicated and we have chosen to bring these recommendations together at the end.

Covid-19

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the last physical meeting of the Youth Homeless Parliament, understanding its impact would not take place until a year later. A full report, entitled 'Young People In', was commissioned by the then Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government - now called the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. This was a substantial report that focused on the impact of the first national lockdown during 2020 on

young people who were homeless and came in as a result of the Government's 'Everyone In' program across the West Midlands. However, with subsequent local lockdowns and a second national lockdown, Youth Homeless Parliament members were asked to think about their worries and concerns of the pandemic and the future.

Commented [GU1]: Do you mean last YHP or this one?

Taking place through digital platforms, Youth Homeless Parliament members spoke about their concerns around getting access to the right information, particularly in an era of 'fake news' and misinformation. Members also spoke about how the pandemic would worsen existing issues for young people experiencing homelessness, with job losses and future job insecurities, increases in bills and food poverty, particularly with stigma around young people accessing food banks. The increase in mental health problems as a result of significant periods of isolation during formative years, particularly for those young people without family or support networks, loss of social skills and increasing difficulty accessing counselling and therapy were also issues that were often mentioned.

'Troubled families'- missed early intervention

Young people who grew up in households identified as 'troubled families' spoke about how there were a catalogue of missed opportunities, even before they became homeless, where early intervention could have made an enormous difference. These young people spoke about how early warning signs of problems were often missed or, if they were noticed, agencies who should've helped did not do so.

Some young people had better experiences but found that, despite the involvement of social services, they were only concerned once the danger was 'immediate', mediation was suggested but never arranged, or interventions did not result in any meaningful or useful resolutions. This left young people living in these 'troubled families' feeling neglected once again; first by their families and second by the authorities, leaving them to feel left behind and discarded by the system.

The impact of poor mental health, worsened by a chaotic home-life, was something that young people in 'troubled families' said was often left unresolved. Outbursts and reactions because of grueling family circumstances were often the focus and the blame placed on the young person, rather than exploring why they were behaving like this in the first place. Young people spoke about a lack of compassion amongst social workers and support staff and a failure to engage with the needs of the individual young person and listen to them and their family.

Care leavers

The conversation amongst Youth Homeless Parliament members who were also care leavers looked at what problems they had faced and how this might be prevented by other young people exiting the care system.

Young care leavers felt there was a lack of communication, where young people are told what to do rather than being empowered and informed of their rights. This was compounded by placements that young people felt were not best suited to them, particularly around differing culture and family dynamics which led to conflict.

Without a named professional to support them, young people often felt unsupported and suspicious of support workers who, they felt, made judgements based on their files rather than speaking to the young people themselves.

The lack of support given to help with day-to-day living left young people feeling powerless and having to rely and depend on others. This was made worse when there was no housing offer or plan for after they left care and resulted in them going into homeless services. Rather than feel like a step forward into adulthood, this made care leavers feel like they were taking a step backwards.

Equality and inclusion: LGBTQ+, female, disabled, and/or Black, Asian, and minority ethnic

The final discussion explored the challenges by young people who were LGBTQ+, female, disabled, Black, Asian, or minority ethnic, or a combination of these characteristics. Whilst each group had their own individual challenges, there were similar issues around feelings of isolation, and a lack of understanding. Rather than take the time to listen and understand, young people felt staff shied away from difficult conversations around ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality or disability. This had a negative impact on young people's mental health, which young people felt they already lacked sufficient support for.

LGBTQ+

For a lot of young people who experienced homelessness and identified as LGBTQ+, there was a feeling and fear of being judged and rejected for their sexual orientation or gender identity, which had a massive impact on their mental health.

There are also problems for young people who were comfortable in their LGBTQ+ status but concerned that some of the housing options were in areas and amongst communities who are not accepting of people with different sexual orientations and gender identities. But for other young people, having to 'come out' again in an unfamiliar environment to strangers risked retraumatizing them, with some young people choosing instead to hide this side of themselves.

Women

Young women who experienced homelessness spoke around fear of sexual violence. This was a constant worry and not only present during times when they had nowhere to sleep and were on the streets, but that older women experiencing homelessness had cautioned them about their safety in homeless shelters.

Young women who were pregnant or single parents had added issues in accessing appropriate services, especially healthcare and accommodation, whilst juggling the demands of motherhood and effects of pregnancy.

BAME

Young people felt that there was a lack of understanding from both their own communities but also staff at supported housing projects, which led to them feeling unsafe, abandoned, afraid, and alone. This lack of cultural understanding also meant that proper attention was not paid to placing young people from different religious backgrounds in the same shared accommodation, which led to problems.

Disabled

For young people who are disabled, the problem of inappropriate housing was often amplified further. Housing often did not meet their needs, particularly in terms of mobility requirements, or was further away and incurred added costs because of inaccessible transport, putting more of a financial burden on those young people.

Key themes and recommendations

Across all the discussions as part of the 2022 Youth Homeless Parliament there were several recurring issues and subsequent solutions to overcome these barriers.

Education was a key area, where better training for staff on understanding experiences that differ from their own would allow them to understand young people better and have more compassion. This was particularly mentioned by young people who came from different religious or cultural backgrounds or are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Youth Homeless Parliament members also felt that schools and colleges should also look to better understand what life is like for young people in the care system and the impact this can have on their lives.

They also felt that if schools were better able to spot the early warning signs of potential homelessness, then they may be able to work with other organisations to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place. This need to improve early interventions is something that could make a real difference, by making sure families experiencing problems have prompt access to talking therapies, counselling and family therapy. Young people felt approaches that centered on wellbeing, such as respite care to give young people and their families a break, would have a real impact in deescalating tensions and allow families to work through issues. But it was important to listen to the young people and their families as to what approaches would work for their individual circumstances.

Youth Homeless Parliament members did not feel that it was just institutions like schools and youth services that needed better educating. By teaching young people about LGBTQ+ identities, and around subjects on managing conflict, they would have more resilience and understanding of themselves. Young people needed to be taught what good mental wellbeing looks like, what signs to look out for if they were worried about their own mental health, but also what typical family dynamics and healthy relationships look like. This would allow them to ask

for help if situations were not right. By picking up issues earlier, young people felt that there might be time to resolve situations before they led to homelessness.

Where young people do find themselves homeless, an approach where there is proper consideration given to the young person's needs and not a one size fits all method would lead to better outcomes. Proper partnership working, with the young person's best interests at the heart of those decisions, would provide better outcomes and allow them to feel cared for in situations where their families may not be able to do so.

Care leavers felt that there needed to be a radical review of the care system that increased opportunities for young people to have their voices heard – both within the strategic decision-making process of the care system, but also when deciding pathways for themselves. Young people felt that having a proper plan in place for where young people exiting the care system will go would not only give them something to focus on, it would also stop them needing to access youth homelessness organisations.

The barrier young people mentioned most often was the lack of communication. Youth Homeless Parliament members felt that listening to young people, giving them a voice and say in what happens to them is key to ensuring they go on to lead successful lives and feel empowered to do so. The need to ensure these messages are delivered with young people in mind, by communicating in areas where young people will see them (e.g., social media), and communicating with them in the way they want to be spoken to, is vital to ensuring that messages are seen and understood.

Covid also highlighted several issues, particularly around mental health, but also around some of the less obvious factors relating to poor mental health. With lockdowns and a significant amount of day-to-day life moving online, young people who were already struggling were further disadvantaged. Digital poverty meant that many young people who were experiencing homelessness did not have access to personal equipment, which risked seeing them fall further behind in education or experience more isolation as they were not able to interact online with their friends and support networks.

There was also a feeling that food banks posed a bigger problem for young people who felt embarrassed accessing them. This stigma needs to be erased, and food banks need to be easier to access for young people who need them, both by being able to get to them but also by placing them in locations that feel less stigmatising and conspicuous. Innovative approaches to food poverty, like community kitchens or 'pay as you feel' shops, would reduce the stigma and disempowerment young people felt accessing these needs.

Co-designed Standards

One way to put young people's experiences and needs at the heart of decision making is through the development of standards that are co-designed with young people. This puts them at the heart of decisions made about them, by focusing around listening to them on what works, what can improve, and what young people value. The following are an example of standards developed by young people and adopted by St Basils to ensure an inclusive environment where

young people feel accepted and involved in their community.

The 12 Youth Standards are:

1. Communicate expectations, rights, responsibilities and co-develop house rules with young people.
2. Be caring and build trusting relationships: Keep young people's best interests at heart and be honest and genuine.
3. Ensure environments are calm, safe, welcoming, and homely throughout.
4. Embrace digital engagement and connectivity, ensuring equal opportunities and inclusivity for all.
5. Offer choice for support timings and format. Work in partnership. Listen and adapt.
6. Be friendly, approachable, and fun but keep boundaries clear and consistent.
7. All staff to have a strong understanding of mental health and wellbeing, to help build emotional support and resilience.
8. Help young people succeed long term: Build confidence and self-esteem first.
9. Help young people achieve their dreams. Establish skills, set goals, and lay out steps for the future so progression can be seen.
10. Offer activities and inter-connection with other young people between schemes, to improve wellbeing.
11. Offer real opportunities for young people to be heard at all levels and represented on St Basils Board.
12. Actively encourage and embrace feedback to continually improve service delivery.

The value of Youth Voice

For ten years, Youth Voice and the Youth Homeless Parliament has had the privilege of helping young people experiencing homelessness share their lived experiences with politicians in Westminster, which has helped shape government policy. It has allowed young people experiencing homelessness, who are often some of the most marginalised people in society, to feel valued and empowered by their future aspirations and the future of others like them. By working with the government to put young people's voices in front of decision-makers, Youth Homeless Parliament members over the years hope that they have been able to make a real difference.

Our Ask

We ask that our experiences are considered and used to help shape government policy to improve access to good quality services that will allow young people experiencing homelessness to move on to lead independent lives. We also hope that it will prevent other young people from finding themselves homeless in the first place.