

Participation for Social Justice

The Development of a Young Peoples Charter on Housing in Northern Ireland

Introduction

The continued shortage of affordable housing means that many young people in Northern Ireland face major constraints in their housing choices, greatly impeding their ability to move towards sustainable, independent living. In addition many young people face further challenges in accessing suitable housing due to significant financial or support barriers.

Very often when young people are leaving home or seeking accommodation, it is within the context of wider change in their lives, which can add further pressure to what can already be a complex or stressful situation. For some this may be a move to take up further education or employment opportunities, whilst for others it may be due to a crisis such as family breakdown.

To further highlight these challenges and most importantly to begin to look at how young people's access to affordable, sustainable housing might be improved, The Council for the Homeless NI (CHNI) in partnership with The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), set out to develop a 'Young Peoples Charter on Housing in Northern Ireland'.

The charter set out the key issues young people are facing in relation to housing and their ideas and recommendations for change or improvement.

The NI charter has fed into similar strands of work being carried out in England, Scotland and Wales, and forms part of a UK-wide Young Peoples Charter co-ordinated by JRF.

Methodology

The main aims of the charter project within Northern Ireland have been to:

1. Highlight the policy and practice barriers that adversely affect young people's housing choices.
2. Give young people a strong voice in developing solutions and recommendations that reflect the diversity of opportunity and challenges that they face.
3. Highlight wider social and economic issues, including work, education, health and support that impact on young people's transitions to independent living.
4. Work with the education, housing and youth work sectors to identify workable solutions, reflective of today's challenging economic climate.





This project was led by young researchers from CHNI's Youth Speak project, who spoke directly to over 160 of their peers, aged between 16 -25 years, across Northern Ireland, about their housing experiences, challenges and aspirations for the future. This consultation included a programme of focus groups, questionnaires and one to one interviews. The peer researchers spoke to as diverse a range of young people as possible to ensure that the charter findings were truly representative.

This short paper summarises key findings from this youth led consultation and sets out some of the key recommendations made by young people in respect of these.

Key Findings from Consultation

Rights and Responsibilities

Young people felt strongly that they should have the '*right to a home*', which was more than simply a roof over their heads and represented a place where they could feel empowered, safe and supported.

Most of the young people consulted relished the responsibilities and challenges of independent living and all that this might mean for them. They felt that all young people need to recognise the importance of their own role in achieving this, by taking on an appropriate level of responsibility for their own independence, and doing their best to create and maintain their 'home'.

Preparation for Independence

All young people talked about the need for better education, information and advice about housing options or preparing to live more independently.

It was clear from the consultation that, in general, leaving home information and education is not reaching young people effectively. Few young people reported adults having talked to them directly about housing issues or the challenges of independent living. In addition to this, many reported being unclear about what support was available and where they should go to find housing information or

accommodation, either in an emergency situation or when making a more planned move.

Those who had left home without proper planning or familial support simply had to make the best of what resources they felt were available to them at the time. For these young people, their housing choices were clearly affected by their socio economic circumstances. Securing housing was often only one of many complex issues they were dealing with in moving towards independence, for e.g.; estrangement from family, mental health issues, addiction or poverty.

Housing Options

Young people expressed concern about the impact of wider economic factors, such as the recession and how these impinged on both their current and future housing goals.

The findings reflected a whole spectrum of opportunity, aspiration and very often situational necessity in relation to housing. For some young people this move to independence was seen as a journey with many stops, for others simply securing a home or moving out of the family home was the end point.

Those young people with more complex needs or with little or no informal support networks were more likely to cite Social Housing, in particular Housing Executive accommodation as their preferred housing choice.

Private rented sector accommodation was seen as an unattractive housing option and was perceived as often being of a poor standard, significantly overpriced and relatively insecure. Renting privately appeared to be a common but very difficult reality for those young people who had limited family or social supports and due to limited options in other areas of the housing market this was perceived as not a choice, but more as a case of the only option available.

Some young people felt discriminated against in exercising their housing options because of their age and associated negative stereotypes of young people, and a common thread



across the spectrum of young people was the need to live in accommodation and an area where they felt safe, welcome and accepted.

Barriers to Independence

Many young people described facing significant financial barriers in terms of their access to housing. Although living costs were often the same for a single young person in terms of bills and rent, they often have access to less financial resources due to their age in terms of benefit restrictions, lower wages and rising levels of student debt. Therefore many young people struggled to access certain areas of the housing market and often find themselves forced into unsuitable shared living arrangements in the private rented sector.

High demand for social housing in certain areas can make it even harder for young people to get accommodation. Those consulted reported concerns that it is young people who are offered accommodation in low demand areas, often associated with lower levels of amenities or higher levels of crime or anti social behaviour and that these factors can greatly impact on young people's ability to resettlement successfully.

Help and Support

Young people were very clear that housing was about more than just 'bricks and mortar'. The care and support of family members or significant others was cited by young people as crucial in helping people to succeed and make the right choices.

Young people without this type of

support faced increased difficulties and felt that the formal support networks they could access often lacked flexibility. Those interviewed described a feeling that they needed to reach a crisis point before being able to access help. In addition, many felt that due to age, vulnerabilities or particular challenges faced, some young people may 'try and fail' at living independently and currently felt penalised because of this.

Young Peoples Recommendations

The recommendations made by young people, via the charter, aim to promote better housing options, support and preparation for young people so that they might be supported to achieve their full potential, and move into adulthood in a positive and productive way.

Rights and Responsibilities

Promote and ensure young people's right to housing and a home, and support them in taking on the responsibilities that this creates.

- Young people's 'right to a home' can and should be supported, via those pledges made by local government in the 'Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People 2006-2016' (OFMDFM).

Preparation for Independence

All young people should be better prepared for the challenges of independent living through the provision of compulsory leaving

home and housing education and via access to appropriate, timely housing information and advice.

- Leaving home and housing education should form an integral part of the curriculum for both formal and non formal education settings.
- Greater promotion and more widely available housing advice and information services for all young people.
- Ensure youth advice and community organisations know how to access up to date information, advice and training on housing issues and promote better joint working arrangements across these sectors.

Housing Options

Improve young people's housing choices and access to accommodation that best suits their needs.

- Ensure that the housing options that are available to young people are appropriate, suitable and safe by addressing issues of affordability, standards and needs assessment.
- Ensure that the private rented sector becomes a more attractive and viable alternative for all young people
- The introduction of a voluntary 'youth friendly' registration scheme for landlords and the expansion and development of rent guarantee scheme models.
- Introduce a simpler and speedier process of applying for social housing that takes into account both young people's needs and their readiness for independent living, through a review of the current system, for the allocation of social housing.

Barriers to Independence

Remove the inequalities in welfare policy that impact negatively upon young people on the basis of their age alone.

- Ensure fair treatment of young people in relation to the housing benefit system through the abolishment of reduced welfare benefit levels to those aged less than 25 years.

Ensure that young people's access to support in terms of accommodation, finance and employment is needs based and responsive to individual circumstances.

- Ensure equal opportunities in social housing and support for all young people aged 16-25 years.
- Greater recognition that for most young people age is often not the only defining feature of their support requirements, therefore any support arrangements must be holistic and appropriate to their individual support needs and circumstances.
- Ensure that young people are able to access meaningful education, training and work opportunities without becoming financially worse off than if not working and in receipt of benefits.

Help and Support

Young people should have access to flexible support services that aim to prevent housing crisis where possible and that are responsive to young people's changing needs and circumstances.

- Ensure access to timely help and support for those young people most at risk of housing difficulty, through the provision of mediation services and supports and access to young people's advocacy services.
- Ensure that those young people with specific support needs or limited support networks can access the services they need through appropriately resourced and flexible floating or tenancy support services, to help build local community connections, aimed at reducing isolation.

For a full copy of the findings and recommendations from the 'Young Peoples Charter on Housing in Northern Ireland', please visit www.chni.org.uk or email susan@chni.org.uk

Further information on the UK Charter project is also available via;
www.jrf.org.uk/publications/young-people-housing-charter
www.jrf.org.uk/film-gallery/young-peoples-housing-maze
www.youngpeoplemovingon.org.uk



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