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"Homelessness awareness should be built into lessons."

"There are so many websites – there is no one place to go to get all the information."

"I haven't a clue about my rights."

"I would really like to know more about housing rights."

"It felt like an ambush, not support."

"I had no idea where to go. I was sofa surfing for a year before a youth worker stepped in when I turned 18."

"Housing Executive can give housing, but the paramilitaries can take it away."

"I didn't even know the Housing Executive existed – I was 16."

"Homelessness is taboo."

"We learn about algebra, not how to pay rent."

"There is mental health support for illness, trauma, but there isn't actual support for the effect homelessness has on someone's mental health."

"It feels like you leave school and are just expected to know what to do."

"This would really help with waiting lists for all the services, especially things like mental health and drugs services."

"They exploit young people all the time – it's scary."

"By the time you get help, it's already too late."

"Nobody explains the points system."

"Websites feel cold and impersonal."

"No-one expects to be homeless."

FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE TO LASTING CHANGE

Shaping the delivery of the
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS ACTION PLAN



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Introduction

Following the publication of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) and Simon Community approached the Housing Executive to explore how the views of young people could be considered in the delivery of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan (available to access on the Housing Executive's website: www.nihe.gov.uk) and the shaping of any additional actions for the remainder of the delivery period.

While statistical data provides a snapshot of the issue of youth homelessness in Northern Ireland, it fails to convey the living and lived experiences behind the numbers. The qualitative insights captured in this report are vital; they reveal the fear, frustration, and struggle for support that the young people engaged in the workshops faced when they experienced homelessness.

This project was founded on a commitment to meaningful youth participation, shifting the approach from speaking for young people to actively involving them. Through peer-led workshops held across Northern Ireland, the study revealed young people's knowledge, needs, aspirations, and expectations of the housing system, as well as their broader support requirements. This report shares the experiences of young people who have faced challenges; however, it should be noted that these views may not reflect those of all young people in Northern Ireland. The recommendations in this report were co-produced by Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Housing Executive, and Simon Community, and are informed by the voices and experiences of young people throughout the process. The study has also highlighted deeper structural challenges within education, health, and housing that contribute to youth homelessness.

This collaborative partnership helps ensure that services are informed by a broad range of perspectives, including those with lived experience. This approach:

- **Enhances service design** through co-production and shared expertise.
- **Builds trust** with young people by involving familiar and supportive organisations.
- **Improves engagement**, reaching diverse groups across Northern Ireland.
- **Strengthens impact** by aligning efforts and resources across sectors.
- **Informs policy and planning** with real-world insights and feedback.

Ultimately, partnership working leads to more responsive, inclusive, and effective prevention and support services.

Project Approach

This project used a participatory research approach. It was designed and conducted with young people, not simply about them. Young people were involved in setting the aims, developing the questions, choosing methods, helping with analysis, and deciding how the findings should be used. This ensures that the ongoing delivery of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan is shaped by lived experience.

How this worked:

- Planning sessions were held to decide the key issues to explore in the workshops.
- Peer Researchers were recruited and trained to co-facilitate six regional workshops across Northern Ireland, creating safe and inclusive spaces for young people to share openly.
- The workshops were supported by the Young People’s Provider Forum, with targeted outreach to young people living in Foyers, Jointly Commissioned supported accommodation and some living in adult provision.
- By having peers lead the workshops, it built authenticity and trust, helping young people feel listened to and ensuring richer insights.
- Young people enjoyed pizza and a £20 voucher in recognition of their time and contributions.
- In total, 67 young people with living and lived experience of homelessness took part, from both urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland (see Appendix 1 for workshop methodology).

The dates of each workshop and attendance were as follows.

Session	Date	No. in attendance
NI Youth Forum session with NI Housing Executive Youth Forum - Belfast	15/05/2025	4
Simon Community Malone Foyer - Belfast	20/05/2025	13
Flax Foyer - Belfast	27/05/2025	7
Simon Community Young Peoples Project - Coleraine	02/05/2025	4
Strand Foyer - Derry/Londonderry	04/06/2025	11
Magnet Centre - Newry	09/06/2025	28
TOTAL		67

Why this matters:

This report reflects a shared commitment to involving people with lived experience of homelessness in shaping services. This commitment sits at the heart of the Homelessness Strategy 2022–27 and the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

Working together, the Housing Executive, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Simon Community, and young people themselves have created a space for voices to be heard and acted upon. The insights gathered will help shape future planning, service delivery, and prevention efforts as the Homelessness Strategy 2022-27 (available to access on the Housing Executive’s website: www.nihe.gov.uk) and Youth Homelessness Action Plan continue to develop.

Meet the Peer Researchers

Shannon Gordon



I'm a Youth Apprentice with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. I first got involved in 2019, when I helped create a video about young women facing

homelessness, a subject I knew first-hand. It was the first time I heard people speak openly and honestly about something I had lived through. It made me feel seen. In 2020/21, I joined the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Youth Forum, focusing on personal growth and speaking up on housing and community issues. Then, on the 9th of May 2022, I became a Youth Apprentice, a day I often say changed my life. After years of just existing, I finally felt like I was living. I was giving back. Now, I work on the Change Project, delivering workshops in schools, youth clubs, and alternative education settings, breaking the stigma around homelessness, and helping others understand it's not a choice or a character flaw. For anyone who's been where I've been, homeless, in care, unsure of what's next, please know: there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Today, I have a job I love, a flat I can call mine, and a little Border Collie called Pickles who keeps me going. Being a Peer researcher on the Youth Homelessness Action Plan research meant everything to me because every young person deserves to be heard.

Claire Ní hUisceith



For the past two years I have volunteered as an Executive Committee Member with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. I am deeply committed

to promoting youth participation and social justice, believing that young people must have a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their lives. Being involved in the Youth Homelessness Action Plan was especially important to me because it combined my passion for social justice with the value of lived experience. Through co-facilitating workshops, I supported young people from diverse communities to share their perspectives and contribute to shaping housing policy. This experience reaffirmed my belief that authentic youth involvement is essential to creating effective, compassionate, and inclusive solutions to tackling, preventing, and hopefully ending youth homelessness.

How this document is structured

This report is organised around the main themes raised by young people during the workshops. Each theme is presented in three parts:

- **What young people said** – capturing their voices and experiences directly.
- **Housing Executive response**, i.e. What the Housing Executive is doing – outlining the actions and commitments already in place.
- **Recommendations** - what needs more attention – highlighting areas for further work, gaps, or issues that remain unresolved.

This approach keeps young people’s insights at the centre, while also showing how their views connect to current policy and where change is still needed.



Theme 1: Power and Community Influence

What young people said

“Young people have no power.
No one cares what we have to say.”

“Paramilitaries have far too much
control. They run the communities
through fear.”

“They exploit young people all
the time – it’s scary.”

“Housing Executive can give
housing, but the paramilitaries
can take it away.”

Across all groups, young people identified themselves as holding the least power when asked “who holds the power?” They felt cut off from decision-making and described having little or no influence over what happens in their lives or communities.

Young people described power structures as fragmented and untrustworthy. Views varied between groups, but one issue was consistent: the significant power they believed paramilitaries still hold, even in what is meant to be a post-conflict society. Young people highlighted the following concerns:

- Paramilitaries were seen as controlling housing in some areas, deciding who could live in certain communities.
- Their influence was described as rooted in fear and coercion, creating barriers to housing and support.
- Some young people felt paramilitaries had as much, if not more, power than government.

Why this matters

These experiences do not stand alone. They connect to:

- Transgenerational trauma - the passing of conflict-related trauma across families and communities.
- Cyclical homelessness and vulnerability - how power and control can trap young people in unstable housing or unsafe environments.
- Post-conflict context - acknowledging Northern Ireland's history and the continuing influence of division, community control, and violence.

Housing Executive Response

The Youth Homelessness Action Plan recognises the legacy of conflict as a distinctive and ongoing factor shaping young people's lives in Northern Ireland. Trauma from the Troubles continues to affect those who lived through it directly and is also passed down through generations.

Key issues identified include:

- Collective violence – evidence from Childhood Adversity and Homelessness in Northern Ireland shows that conflict-related violence remains highly prevalent in the lives of young people currently experiencing homelessness, with many continuing to encounter violence across the life course (McAlister, 2025)¹.
- Paramilitary Influence – some young people face threats, coercion, or forced displacement by paramilitary groups.
- Interface Violence – continued tensions at community boundaries create fear and instability.
- Exploitation Risks – vulnerable young people are at increased risk of exploitation and violence, particularly linked to paramilitary activity (McAlister et al., 2018)².

The Action Plan highlights three aggravating factors contributing to youth homelessness in Northern Ireland:

- Paramilitary-related coercive control
- Transgenerational trauma
- Community-level instability and violence

The Housing Executive is working with statutory agencies, arm's-length bodies, and community and voluntary partners to provide holistic support to young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. The shared vision is that housing contributes to a peaceful, inclusive, and fair society. This requires trauma-informed and community-sensitive approaches that recognise both historical and present-day challenges.

¹ McAlister, K. (2025) Childhood Adversity and Homelessness in Northern Ireland: Breaking the Cycle. Belfast: Simon Community Northern Ireland.

² McAlister, S., Dwyer, C., & Carr, N. (2018) Experiencing Paramilitarism: Understanding the Impact of Paramilitaries on Young People in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast

The Youth Homelessness Action Plan highlights the need for targeted, trauma-informed interventions that respond to both the historical and present-day challenges facing young people in Northern Ireland. Sustained collaboration across agencies is essential to lessen the impact of the conflict legacy and reduce youth homelessness.

The NI Executive's Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) has played a key role in developing evidence-based support for young people vulnerable to child criminal exploitation. Building on this, the cross-departmental Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) action plan (available to access on the Department of Health website: www.health-ni.gov.uk), led by the Departments of Justice and Health, seeks to deliver a coordinated response aimed at improving well-being and long-term outcomes for affected children and young people.

Recommendation

Relevant statutory agencies need to give greater focus to the power dynamics highlighted in this report. Young people described how paramilitary influence, coercion, and community control continue to shape their lives and increase their risk of homelessness. These issues require coordinated responses that go beyond housing, involving justice, health, education, and community safety partners.



Theme 2: Homelessness Awareness and Prevention in Schools

What young people said

**“We learn about algebra,
not how to pay rent.”**

“When I was a child I didn’t think I would end up here but if I had of been taught about homelessness in school then at least at the start of all this I would maybe of knew what to do or who to go to sooner.”

“It feels like you leave school and are just expected to know what to do.”

“Homelessness awareness should be built into lessons.”

Education was a recurring theme. Across all groups, young people agreed that schools fail to prepare them for real-life challenges such as homelessness.

Young people said they are frustrated that schools do not prepare them for real-life challenges such as homelessness, housing rights, and living independently. They want practical skills to be taught in school, including how to apply for Universal Credit, manage rent and bills, understand housing points, and access support services.

Examples of Good Practice

Some young people pointed out that a few schools are already doing positive things that could be part of early intervention. These include:

- Running food banks and identifying families who are struggling.
- Organising charity sleep-outs to raise awareness about homelessness.
- Having youth workers or social workers based in schools to provide additional support and early intervention.

Housing Executive Response

As part of early intervention and prevention work, Action 8 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan focuses on increasing targeted youth homelessness prevention activities to reduce the risk of homelessness among young people. A key element of this action is the introduction of homelessness awareness sessions in secondary schools, with direct engagement from organisations that work with young people.

School-Based Prevention Work

- Action 33³ of the Homelessness Strategy 2022–27 (Year 4 Action Plan – available to access from the Housing Executive website: www.nihe.gov.uk) commits to delivering homelessness awareness sessions across secondary schools in Northern Ireland. These sessions are already being delivered by the Housing Executive’s Homelessness Strategy Team⁴.
- The sessions are interactive and aim to educate young people about housing and homelessness, building awareness and resilience.
- Local statutory and voluntary organisations also attend, ensuring young people hear about the support services available in their area.
- The Homelessness Strategy Team continues to work with the Education Authority and other stakeholders to explore more opportunities for raising awareness of homelessness within education.

The Change Project – Homelessness Awareness Workshops

The Change Project funded by the Housing Executive and delivered by NI Youth Forum employs a Youth Apprentice with lived experience of homelessness to deliver interactive homelessness awareness workshops for secondary schools, youth organisations, and alternative education providers. The workshops are youth-led, engaging, and designed to increase understanding of homelessness and the support available to young people in Northern Ireland.

³ Action 33 of the Homelessness Strategy: We will continue to roll out the Homelessness Awareness Sessions within schools across Northern Ireland. While the primary focus will be homelessness awareness, we will involve a range of partners to highlight the availability of support services and careers within the housing and homelessness sector.

⁴ The Housing Executive are keen to expand information and awareness sessions to schools, please contact Homelessness.strategy@nihe.gov.uk for more information.

Upstream NI Pilot Programme

The Upstream NI pilot, funded by the Homelessness Prevention Fund and delivered by MACS, is based on prevention models proven in Australia, Wales, Scotland, and England.

The programme uses school-based surveys to identify young people at risk of homelessness and provide tailored support before a crisis develops. Pilot schools are chosen based on:

- High referral rates to social services
- Levels of deprivation
- Poverty indicators

Collaborative stakeholders include MACS, the Housing Executive, the Department of Education, and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The pilot takes a whole-system approach, with coordinated action across statutory, voluntary, and private sectors. The goal is to build a joined-up system where no young person “falls through the cracks.”

Recommendation

The Housing Executive should continue to support and expand school-based homelessness prevention initiatives. This includes interactive awareness sessions in schools and targeted pilot programmes such as Upstream NI. Delivered in collaboration with statutory and voluntary partners, these initiatives take an early intervention approach to identify young people at risk sooner, build resilience, and ensure joined-up support across education and homelessness services.



Theme 3: One Stop Shop

What young people said

"This would really help with waiting lists for all the services, especially things like mental health and drugs services."

"This sounds better - no travelling, more efficient, get it done then and there, without waiting for weeks."

"sounds brilliant"

"this is what is missing in communities"

Young people strongly supported the idea of a One Stop Shop (OSS) - a central, accessible hub where those facing homelessness or crisis could get practical, emotional, and health-related support all in one place. (This is proposed in Action 8 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan⁵).

The OSS was seen as a way to humanise and simplify access to housing, mental health, financial, legal, and education support, reducing the need to navigate multiple services.

While supportive, young people also raised concerns:

Barriers to Access

- **Stigma and Pride** – fear of being judged, embarrassed, or seen as vulnerable.
- **Lack of Privacy** – large open halls were described as impersonal; private spaces are essential.

⁵ Action 8 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: To increase targeted Youth Homelessness Prevention awareness and activities to minimise homelessness for young people. To include: • The introduction of homelessness awareness information sessions in secondary schools. This will include engagement with organisations dedicated to young people. • The introduction of 'one stop shop' multi agency workshops in locations across all regions. • The use of mediation (promotion of existing mediation services) to aid with reunification and return to the young person's family home, when possible. • Referrals to family therapy, counselling and psychological intervention services. • Referrals to Housing Rights Service 'Young People's' Advice and mediation provision. • Referrals to the Children's Law Centre for free independent legal advice and advocacy support.

Design Principles Suggested by Young People

- Spaces should be youth-friendly, welcoming, and not clinical or judgemental.
- Staff should be unbiased, respectful, and maintain confidentiality.
- Services should be co-located and designed with young people's input.
- Privacy and trust are essential: "no one wants everyone knowing their business."

Services Young People Said Should Be Included

- Housing and homelessness support
- Mental health and counselling (with follow-up referrals)
- Drugs and alcohol services
- Financial advice and support
- Youth work, education, and employment opportunities
- GP and basic health access
- Food banks or links to food provision

Young people believed it could also help shorten long waiting times, especially for mental health and drug services.

Young people stressed the importance of clear information-sharing protocols. Having to repeat traumatic stories to multiple professionals was described as harmful; being able to tell their story once was seen as a way to protect mental health and make services feel more supportive.

While many of these services sit outside the remit of the Housing Executive, young people felt that stronger cross-sector links would help create a more effective early intervention model.

Housing Executive Response

The Housing Executive has included the development of a One Stop Shop (OSS) model within Action 8 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, which focuses on targeted prevention activities to reduce youth homelessness. Feedback from the consultation workshops shows strong support for this approach, and the practical suggestions from young people on how the model could work are valuable in shaping its design.

The Housing Executive is committed to continuing consultation with young people to co-design the OSS, using a trauma-informed approach that responds directly to the needs of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The vision is a multi-agency model providing immediate, accessible, and confidential support tailored for young people. This would include free advice and advocacy on welfare benefits, housing, and wider support.

Recommendation

To ensure services are responsive to the needs of young people, the Housing Executive will initiate further engagement sessions with young people. These sessions will support the design and implementation of a pilot One Stop Shop (OSS) model, aimed at providing streamlined access to housing advice, welfare rights and benefits, support services, and other relevant resources.

As part of this, health providers should be invited to 'reach in' to the OSS. This could include input from mental health and counselling services, homelessness health nurses, and drug and alcohol support. Bringing these services into the OSS in a flexible way would help reduce waiting times, prevent young people from having to repeat traumatic stories to multiple professionals, and provide a more holistic model of care.

This approach will:

- Empower young people to shape services that affect them.
- Promote co-design principles in service development.
- Strengthen trust and collaboration between young people and service providers.
- Support joined-up responses across housing, health, and wider services.



Theme 4: Mediation Services

What young people said

“They need to be unbiased – not just taking the parents’ side.”

The voices of young people throughout the workshops highlight a clear need to change how mediation is understood and delivered. They stressed it must be carefully designed and handled with sensitivity, otherwise it could cause more harm. Some felt mediation could make difficult situations worse, while others thought it could be helpful, but only in certain circumstances.

Young people shared mixed, and often negative, experiences with mediation services, especially when these were introduced suddenly or without preparation. Many felt mediation was not always effective or safe, particularly in cases of family conflict.

A recurring theme was that mediation outcomes depend heavily on timing, family dynamics, and the professionals involved. In several cases, young people described mediation workers arriving at their home without warning. For many young people engaged in the sessions, mediation was not a helpful source, rather it was described as ‘intrusive’ and ‘escalated tensions.’

Young people said mediation could work if it was:

- Fair, neutral, and delivered by trained professionals.
- Consent-based, trauma-informed, and not forced.
- Provided in safe settings where both sides consented and felt respected.
- Included mediation outside of the family, for example, with landlords or hostel staff.

“It felt like an ambush, not support.”

Housing Executive Response

Action 8 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan aims to prevent and address youth homelessness through targeted awareness and support. The action aims to utilise existing services such as the Housing Rights Service rather than creating new ones, ensuring efficiency and continuity. The Action Plan highlights the importance of clear and accessible referral pathways to ensure young people can easily connect with the right services at the right time.

Recommendation

The Housing Executive will engage collaboratively with key stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of young people's perspectives and lived experiences regarding mediation services. It will also clarify the scope and availability of existing services offered by organisations such as the Housing Rights Service and Family Mediation NI. These insights will directly inform the continued implementation of Action 8 within the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.



Theme 5: Access to Information and Understanding Rights

What young people said

"I didn't even know the Housing Executive existed – I was 16."

"If it wasn't for Simon Community, I'd be lost."

"Young people are expected to have their own resources – you're just given a number to ring, then it rings out. It's a very scary time."

"Websites feel cold and impersonal."

"No-one expects to be homeless."

"Homelessness is taboo."

"I had no idea where to go. I was sofa surfing for a year before a youth worker stepped in when I turned 18."

"Nobody explains the points system."

"There are so many websites – there is no one place to go to get all the information."

"I would really like to know more about housing rights."

"I haven't a clue about my rights."

Young people across all workshops consistently highlighted that they did not know where to go for help if they became homeless, how to navigate or access available support. Many described entering crisis situations with little or no guidance, relying on chance encounters with youth workers or peers to eventually access services.

Some only reached services such as the Simon Community or the Housing Executive after prolonged instability, reflecting that knowing where to go often came only after lived experience of homelessness.

When contact was made with services, the process was described as confusing and inconsistent. Young people reported being handed lists of phone numbers or told to travel far from their communities.

Online information was widely criticised. Almost all participants agreed there was no single, trusted source of advice. Websites were described as “cold,” full of jargon, or out of date. Young people said the housing points system was not explained clearly and digital systems were hard to navigate. Other barriers included scam websites, English-only content, and lack of reliable access to phones or internet.

Beyond digital platforms, young people said visibility of services in local communities was almost non-existent. Posters, signs, or resources about homelessness were rarely seen, except sometimes in youth clubs or food banks.

In contrast, direct human support was strongly valued. Foyers, supported accommodation staff, and youth workers were described as trusted guides in an otherwise, alienating system.

Young people also linked poor information to stigma and shame. Many said they felt they had to beg for help and were sometimes met with judgement or disdain.

When asked about rights, most admitted to very limited knowledge of entitlements.

They also identified wider issues connected to poor information and support systems:

- Trauma linked to housing instability is overlooked.
- Support in schools is inconsistent and often inadequate.
- Peer pressure and stigma make it harder to ask for help.
- The ongoing impact of conflict and transgenerational trauma is not addressed.
- Long waits and minimal support allow problems to escalate, leading some to drugs or alcohol.
- Professionals are not always trained to understand diverse needs.

Digital and Social Media Engagement

Young people said more should be done to engage them through social media and digital platforms. They felt these channels were under-used by housing and homelessness services.

They called for:

- More targeted, youth-specific communication.
- Co-design with young people to shape how messages are delivered.
- A communication strategy on homelessness that reduces stigma and raises awareness.

While the Housing Executive already uses platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X, young people said it lacks a stronger presence on youth-focused channels.

Housing Executive Response

There is a rich and evolving landscape of resources dedicated to tackling youth homelessness in Northern Ireland. Alongside the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, several strategic frameworks and specialist organisations play a vital role. These include MACS Supporting Young People, Shelter NI (through the SLATE Project), Simon Community NI, Housing Rights Service, Homeless Connect, VOYPIC and Include Youth, all of which provide tailored services for young people, such as advice, advocacy, and support. Additionally, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum amplifies young people's voices through advocacy, research, and youth-led initiatives.

To address young people's concerns about access to information and support, the Youth Homelessness Action Plan includes several commitments. These actions focus on making services more visible, joined-up, and youth-friendly, while ensuring young people know their rights and can access help when they need it.

Action 1⁶ will see the Appointment of Dedicated Advisers for young people, this

- Provides young people with a single point of contact for housing and support.
- Ensures services are joined up through partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies.
- Support is tailored to the individual needs of each young person.

⁶ Action 1 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: The introduction of dedicated Housing Advisors and Team Leaders in all Areas to be established to take a lead, in relation to young people presentations in their area. The aim is to make sure there is consistency in the provision of service for young people to ensure they receive the appropriate support and assistance as required. This will also include working closely in partnership with the relevant HSCT, shaping the service around the needs of the young person.

As part of Action 4⁷ of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, the Housing Executive is developing a dedicated online advice and support hub for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This hub will:

- Replace existing youth content on the Housing Executive website.
- Be tailored to the distinct needs of 16–17-year-olds, 18+ young people, and care-experienced young people.
- Provide clear, accessible information in youth-friendly language.
- Include referral pathways and contact details for free independent advice and advocacy services.
- Promote partner organisations offering additional advice and mental health support.
- Respond directly to young people’s calls for warm, human-centred communication, trauma-informed support, and practical tools to navigate housing challenges.

In addition, under Action 15 of the Homelessness Strategy 2022–27 (Year 4)⁸, the Housing Executive has developed a Communications Action Plan to improve public understanding of homelessness and available support. The plan focuses on:

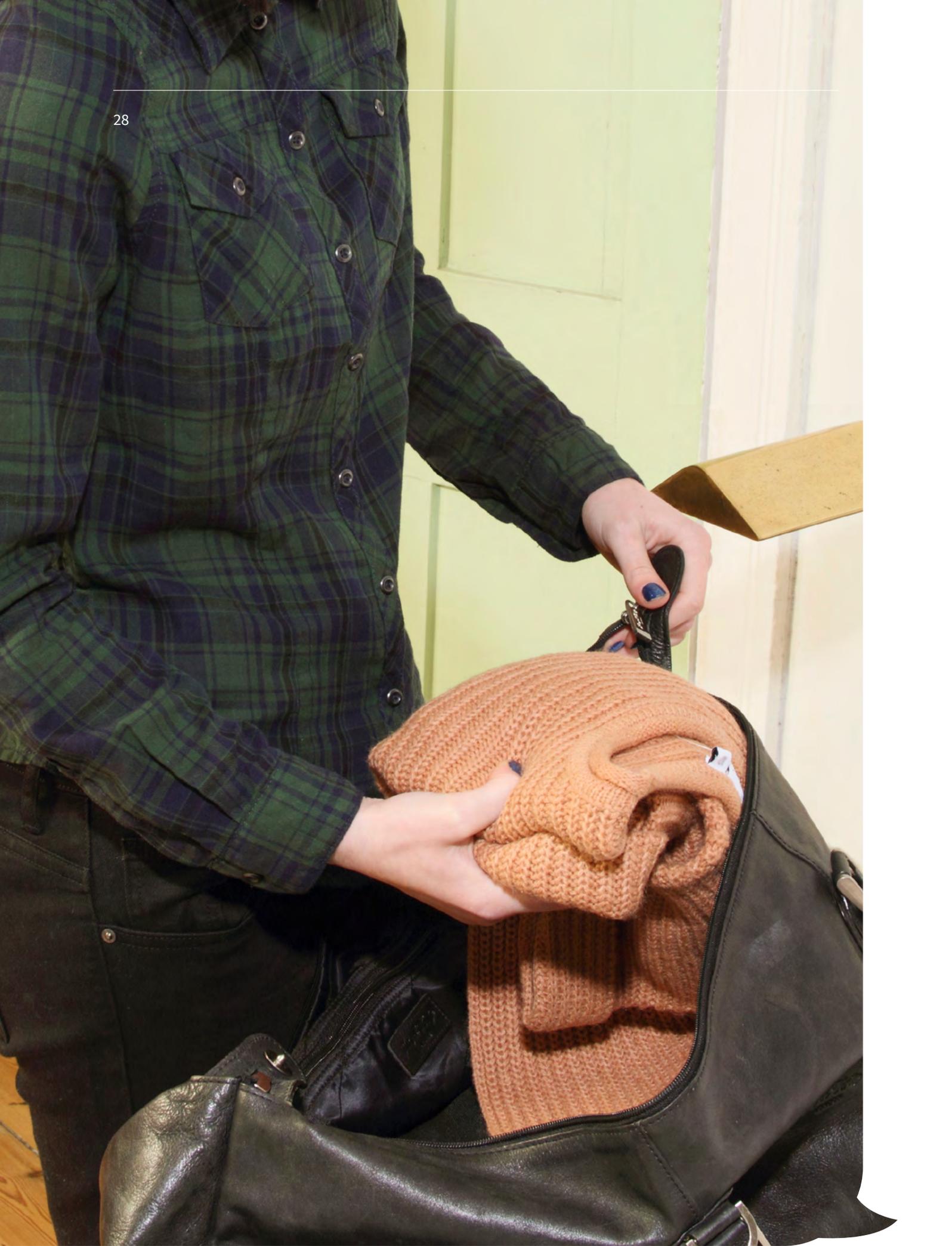
- Raising awareness and reducing stigma.
- Providing accessible, clear content.
- Using multiple social media outlets.
- Targeting messages to specific groups, including young people.

⁷ Action 4 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: The introduction of accessible advice and information for young people about homelessness and housing, what their housing and accommodation rights are, in addition to options available to them in consultation with young people. This information will be added to the Housing Executive’s website and include details of useful contacts who may offer free independent advice and advocacy to assist them.

⁸ Action 15 Homelessness Strategy: We will continue to showcase collaborative work in the sector, within relevant Housing Executive departments and Homelessness Local Area Groups. With the support of our internal Communications Department, we will raise awareness of homelessness and the available support for households using a variety of media and channels, with a specific focus on homelessness prevention.

Recommendations

- The Housing Executive should co-design the new youth-specific advice hub (Action 4) with young people to ensure it is accessible, inclusive, and rights-focused.
- The Housing Executive should host a consultative workshop with young people to shape communications under Action 4 and Action 15, ensuring messaging is relevant, stigma-free, and youth-focused.
- The Housing Executive, alongside housing providers and partner organisations, should continue to actively promote and strengthen access to independent rights and advocacy services, such as Housing Rights and the Children's Law Centre. This will help ensure young people can access clear information, advice, and advocacy on housing and homelessness, including their legal rights and entitlements.



Theme 6:

Access to accommodation

What young people said

Young people said that when they became homeless, the accommodation offered at the point of crisis was often limited and not suitable. Many felt they had little or no choice in where they were placed.

B&Bs and Hotels

These were described as inappropriate for young people, leaving them “to their own devices,” isolated, and without support.

Generic Adult Hostels

These were a major concern, particularly for young women. Young people described them as unsafe and frightening, with exposure to drugs, domestic incidents, and adults with severe mental health needs.

Foyers and Youth Accommodation Projects

In contrast, Foyers and youth-specific accommodation projects were praised. Young people valued these as stepping stones to independence, offering structure, advice, and support. In some cases, the option of self-referral was available, which was seen as helpful, though this was not consistent across all projects.

Gaps Identified

Young people from rural areas said they often could not access youth accommodation projects or simply did not know these services existed. Many described being moved far from family and support networks, which caused distress and isolation. Some young people had to leave education or jobs behind because of these placements.

Housing Executive Response

The Housing Executive has a statutory duty to provide temporary accommodation for people assessed as homeless. This includes hostels, single lets, or Housing Executive and Housing Association properties. B&Bs and hotels are used only when no other options are available and for the shortest possible time.

Demand has increased significantly for temporary accommodation, from 4,527 placements in 2019/20 to 11,887 in 2024/25, reflecting the impact of the pandemic and limited affordable housing. While efforts are made to place young people in suitable accommodation, initial placements may not always meet their needs.

It is important to note that for 16–17-year-olds, Articles 18, 21 and 46 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 place duties on Health and Social Care Trusts to provide accommodation and safeguard the welfare of children in need, working in co-operation with other public bodies such as the Housing Executive.

A summary of statutory requirements of both Housing Executive and Health and Social Care Trusts is explained in Appendix 2.

The Housing Executive continues to develop housing and support options that are timely, youth-focused, and better aligned with young people's circumstances.

Action 9 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: Shared Tenancies Model – Expanding Housing Options Across NI

What it is

The Shared Tenancies Model⁹ is being expanded across Northern Ireland to give young people more choice in their housing options. It combines practical preparation for shared living with support in finding suitable housemates, reducing isolation, and improving tenancy sustainability.

Key Components

- Pilot review – learning from the existing scheme to strengthen future delivery.
- MACS Tenancy Ready Programme – preparing young people for shared living through skills in budgeting, bills, expectations, and conflict resolution.
- Housemate matching – helping young people find compatible co-tenants to support more stable, positive living arrangements.

Benefits

- Choice – young people have more say in where and with whom they live.
- Preparation – tenancy readiness training builds essential life skills.
- Stability – provides safe, sustainable accommodation.
- Independence – encourages personal growth, responsibility, and integration into the community.

Why this matters

Shared Tenancies promote a person-centred approach, with housing solutions developed collaboratively between the Housing Executive, support organisations, and young people themselves. This model empowers young people to shape their living arrangements, reducing isolation and building skills for long-term independence.

⁹ Action 9: To expand the Shared Tenancies model across all regions, this action will include a review of the existing pilot, taking into account any learning outcomes from the current pilot in the Belfast area.

Action 10 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: Housing First for Youth – Immediate Housing with Wraparound Support

What it is

Housing First for Youth¹⁰ provides immediate access to housing with no preconditions, combined with flexible, wraparound support. It is delivered in partnership with the Simon Community and Health and Social Care Trusts (Northern, Belfast, and South-Eastern). The Youth Homelessness Action Plan includes plans to explore expanding this model to other areas.

Core Principles

1. Immediate access to housing without conditions such as sobriety or treatment.
2. Youth choice and self-determination in housing and support.
3. A positive youth development approach, focusing on strengths and potential.
4. Individualised, client-driven support tailored to each young person.
5. Social and community integration to build belonging and reduce isolation.

Why this matters

Housing First for Youth takes a preventative approach, reducing the risk of long-term homelessness and promoting stability for young people with complex needs. It is particularly focused on Looked After Children aged 16–18 who are at risk of entering adult homelessness without early intervention. Many of these young people have experienced trauma and require flexible housing and tailored support to build independence, resilience, and long-term stability.

¹⁰ Action 10: Explore the upscaling of Housing First for Youth to other areas.

Action 12 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: Preventing Homelessness for Care Leavers

The New Foundations Programme

This is a cross-departmental initiative involving housing, health, justice, education, and economy partners, alongside arms-length bodies. It takes a “corporate family” approach, ensuring agencies work together to support care leavers.

Key Objectives

- Increase the supply of safe, stable, and affordable accommodation.
- Provide early, housing-led, and person-centred support to reduce homelessness risk.
- Offer wraparound services to build life skills, well-being, and independence.
- Strengthen collaboration across sectors to improve education, employment, and health outcomes.
- Reduce reliance on temporary accommodation and improve efficiency.
- Deliver eight core actions, including: gap analysis, pathway planning, support provision, early intervention, education/employment access, and legislative/policy reform.

Why This Matters

The programme moves beyond traditional housing models by focusing on prevention rather than crisis response. It aims to build a supportive ecosystem for young people leaving care, fostering independence, well-being, and long-term stability.

Recommendations

- The Housing Executive should continue to promote and expand youth-focused housing initiatives, including Shared Tenancies, Housing First for Youth, and the New Foundations Programme.



Theme 7: Mental Health

What young people said

“By the time you get help, it’s already too late.”

“There is mental health support for illness, trauma, but there isn’t actual support for the effect homelessness has on someone’s mental health.”

Mental health emerged as one of the most prominent themes in the workshops. Young people said homelessness and poor mental health feed into each other, with one often making the other worse. Young people shared that mental health had a major impact on their lives and described frustration with the current system. Long waiting lists, sometimes several months, were seen as making their situations worse. Young people shared that sometimes having a mental health issue can make you vulnerable to homelessness, and being homeless can make your mental health worse. The consensus was that mental health support should be more accessible and responsive to young people’s needs.

Key areas discussed during the workshops highlighted:

- Trauma linked to housing instability is overlooked.
- Support in schools is inconsistent and often inadequate.
- Peer pressure and stigma make it harder to ask for help.
- The ongoing impact of Northern Ireland’s conflict and transgenerational trauma is not addressed.
- Long waits and minimal support allow problems to escalate, leading some to drugs or alcohol.
- Young people called for better-trained professionals who understand diverse needs.

Housing Executive Response

Action 7¹¹ of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan focuses on collaborating with key stakeholders and young people to identify and address mental health and well-being challenges that contribute to youth homelessness.

Consultations with young people will be instrumental in shaping this action. Key themes emerging from the workshops include:

- A need for relational, trauma-informed approaches that acknowledge lived experiences.
- A desire for consistent, human responses from support services.
- Recognition that mental health support is a critical component of homelessness prevention, even when it falls outside the direct remit of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan.

The 2025/26 Homelessness Prevention Fund, supported by the Department for Communities and managed by the Housing Executive, has launched initiatives to prevent homelessness and improve young people's health and well-being. These projects support the delivery of Action 7 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan and show why early help is essential.

The 2025/26 Homelessness Prevention Fund is providing funding to 12 projects across Northern Ireland to support young people specifically, in addition to other areas of homelessness prevention. The projects will aim to provide various interventions, including help with rent deposits, building resilience, independence, and raising awareness of homelessness.

Recommendation

Mental health support should be embedded within homelessness services, not treated as an external add-on. The Housing Executive, homelessness providers, Health and Social Care Trusts, and voluntary partners should work together to:

- Ensure trauma-informed mental health provision is available directly within homelessness settings.
 - This should be considered through a test-and-learn approach, starting with a time-limited pilot at one site (e.g., Malone Foyer) to explore feasibility, demand, and overall impact before any wider implementation.
- Train frontline homelessness staff to recognise and respond to mental health needs in supportive, youth-friendly ways.

¹¹ Action 7 of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan: To collaborate with key stakeholders and young people to identify and address problems associated with mental health/well-being and the associated impact this has on youth homelessness.

Summary

This report presents the views of 67 young people with lived experience of homelessness across Northern Ireland. Their contributions highlight persistent structural barriers, gaps in support, and opportunities for earlier intervention. The findings show youth homelessness is shaped by community dynamics, conflict legacy, limited access to information, inadequate youth-specific accommodation at the point of crisis, and constraints within current mental health provision. Young people were clear that effective prevention requires trauma-informed, joined-up responses across housing, education, health, justice, and youth services.

The Housing Executive's Youth Homelessness Action Plan sets out a clear commitment to strengthening early intervention and improving access to support and accommodation. Each theme summarises what young people said and how the Housing Executive is responding through current actions, programmes, and partnerships.

1. Power and Community Influence

Young people felt they hold little power in their communities and highlighted ongoing paramilitary influence, coercion, and community-level control. Conflict-related violence remains widespread across their life course (McAlister, 2025). The Youth Homelessness Action Plan acknowledges these dynamics and promotes trauma-informed, multi-agency responses.

2. Homelessness Awareness and Prevention in Schools

Young people said schools do not prepare them for real-life challenges such as budgeting, housing rights, and navigating support. Some positive practice exists, but provision is inconsistent. The Housing Executive is expanding homelessness awareness sessions and early-identification programmes, including the Upstream NI pilot.

3. One Stop Shop (OSS) Model

Young people strongly supported a single youth-friendly hub for housing, mental health, and practical support. Privacy, trust, and co-design were essential. The Housing Executive is progressing co-design work to develop an OSS pilot and explore ways for health services to “reach in.”

4. Mediation Services

Experiences of mediation were mixed. Young people said it must be voluntary, trauma-informed, and delivered by trained, neutral professionals. The Housing Executive will work with key services to clarify pathways and ensure safe, consistent provision.

5. Access to Information and Rights

Young people described difficulty knowing where to go, how to get help, or what their rights are. Information was often confusing and inaccessible. The Youth Homelessness Action Plan commits to Dedicated Advisers for young people and the development of a new youth-specific online hub co-designed with young people.

6. Access to Accommodation

Young people reported limited choice and unsuitable crisis placements, especially B&Bs, hotels, and adult hostels. Youth-specific options such as Foyers and supported accommodation were valued but unevenly available. The Housing Executive is expanding youth-focused options, including Shared Tenancies, Housing First for Youth, and the New Foundations Programme.

7. Mental Health

Mental health was a major concern. Young people said long waits, stigma, and inconsistent support worsen both homelessness and well-being. Action 7 focuses on collaborative work to strengthen mental health support and early intervention.

Issues Requiring Multi-Agency Intervention

Although many concerns raised by young people are reflected within existing Housing Executive actions, two areas remain outside its direct remit and require broader cross-departmental support:

- **Paramilitary influence and collective violence** – Young people described coercion, threats, and displacement that directly shape housing security. These issues require coordinated responses with justice, policing, youth services, and community safety partners.
- **Mental health support within homelessness settings** – Young people want timely, trauma-informed mental health support embedded directly within accommodation settings. Current structures rely on external pathways that are slow and difficult to access.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Stigma, limited visibility of services, and the ongoing impact of conflict legacy were raised in all regions. Peer-led engagement increased honesty and trust, and young people showed a strong willingness to contribute to solutions.

Conclusion

Young people demonstrated resilience, insight, and a strong desire to shape the services that affect their lives. Their voices provide a vital evidence base for strengthening youth homelessness prevention. The Housing Executive's Youth Homelessness Action Plan shows a clear commitment to improving access to support and accommodation, expanding early-intervention work, and embedding youth voice.

While many issues raised by young people are already being addressed, paramilitary influence and the need for embedded mental health support require coordinated responses across justice, health, education, and community safety partners. By maintaining momentum, increasing transparency, and placing youth voice at the centre, Northern Ireland can build a system of support and accommodation that is responsive, trauma-informed, and grounded in dignity and respect.

Appendix 1: Workshop Methodology

SESSION PLAN

Session Title: YHAP peer workshops		Session Number:		Session Duration: 6 workshops	
Date: 20th May 2025	Start Time: 17.00	Finish Time: 19.00	Venue: Malone Foyer		
SESSION PURPOSE / AIM:					
To meaningfully involve young people in the review and delivery of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan (YHAP) through a co-produced research process led by young people, supported by NIHE, NIYF, and Simon Community.					
SESSION OBJECTIVES:					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection of young people’s views on the Youth Homelessness Action Plan. • Thematic analysis and reporting of findings by Peer Researchers (NIYF), with input from NIHE and Simon Community. • Develop a co-produced final report to inform the NIHE’s review of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan, Homelessness Strategy Action Plan, and the development of the new homelessness strategy. • Host an event in September 2025 to share key findings and next steps. 					
Time	Activity	Staff	Resources		
16.30	Arrive and Pizza	AS/SG/CH	Pizza		
17.00	Icebreaker – Ask young people their name and why they have come to the workshop. This will help establish purpose	SG/CH	Chairs in a circle		
17.10	Overview of workshop, introduction to peer researchers and next steps	AS	Copy of YHAP		

17.15	Who has the power to end/prevent homelessness in NI? Young people are provided with a range of cards and asked to rank them in order of who they feel has the most power in NI . (included are media, government, police young people etc) Group discussion then takes place around power, what is it, who has it and how do young people take power back	SG/CH	Flash cards and prompt questions
17.30	Agree/ Disagree statements that focus on information available to young people around housing and homelessness in NI	SG/CH	Agree Disagree List of statements
17.45	Break		
18.00	Homeless prevention – list of ways to prevent homelessness (awareness sessions, one stop shop, mediation, mental health and psychological support etc) to be presented on flipchart – group discussion around each option	SG/CH	Pre-prepared flipchart and markers/ sticky notes
18.20	Housing options – design your own community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people will be put into small groups • Each group will create their ideal housing solutions • This will include Health, activities, education, leisure, organisations etc that are important to them • Reflect within the wider group 	SG/CH	Markers, flipchart
18.45	Design a star for our wishing wall. Each young person will be given a star and asked to consider what thing they would change to be able to end/prevent homelessness in NI. The stars from all groups will be collected and displayed at the event in the form of a wishing wall.	SG/CH	Stars and markers
18.55	Next steps, vouchers and close	AS	Vouchers

Appendix 2

Statutory Responsibilities

It is worth highlighting that for young people aged 16–21, the Regional Good Practice Guidance – Meeting the Accommodation and Support Needs of 16–21 Year Olds (currently under review) provides a joint framework to support consistent assessment and response across services, particularly for 16- and 17-year-olds who may be owed a duty of care. Under Articles 18, 21, and 46 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Health and Social Care Trusts are required to provide accommodation and safeguard the welfare of children in need, and can formally request co-operation from other public bodies, including agencies such as the Housing Executive, District Councils, Education and Library Boards and other designated agencies.

The Housing Executive has a duty to secure accommodation for those who meet the four tests of homelessness outlined within the Housing (NI) Order 1988 and are found to be statutorily homeless. In order to be accepted as statutorily homeless, an applicant must be eligible, homeless/threatened with homelessness, in priority need and not intentionally homeless¹².

Individuals assessed as statutorily homeless may be placed in temporary accommodation, which may include voluntary sector hostels, single lets, or properties within the Housing Executive or Housing Association portfolios. The use of non-standard accommodation, such as B&B's and Hotels, are only used when no other options are available and for the shortest time possible. While efforts are made to match individuals, particularly young people, with the most suitable accommodation, initial placements may not always fully meet their needs. In such cases, more appropriate options are sought as they become available.

Demand for temporary accommodation has risen sharply, with placements increasing from 4,527 in 2019/20 to 11,887 in 2024/25. This growth has been driven by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and wider socio-economic pressures, including limited affordable housing and move-on options.

In line with statutory duties outlined within the Housing (NI) Order 1988, individuals who have been accepted as statutorily homeless, are owed a duty to secure temporary accommodation and/or permanent accommodation. The duty can be discharged upon rehousing within the social housing sector, or the refusal of two reasonable offers.

¹² In Northern Ireland the Housing (NI) Order 1988 (as amended) identifies the Northern Ireland Housing Executive as the agency tasked with responding to homelessness. The Order places a statutory duty on the Housing Executive to provide interim and/or permanent accommodation for certain homeless households, dependent upon investigations and assessment of their circumstances. In order to be “accepted” as statutorily homeless, a household must meet the four tests of: • Eligibility • Homelessness • Priority Need • Intentionality. Any household that meets these four tests will be accepted as a ‘Full Duty Applicant’ (FDA) and will be owed a full housing duty. The full housing duty includes ensuring that accommodation is made available for the household as well as the provision of temporary accommodation where necessary and assistance with the protection of the household’s belongings.

