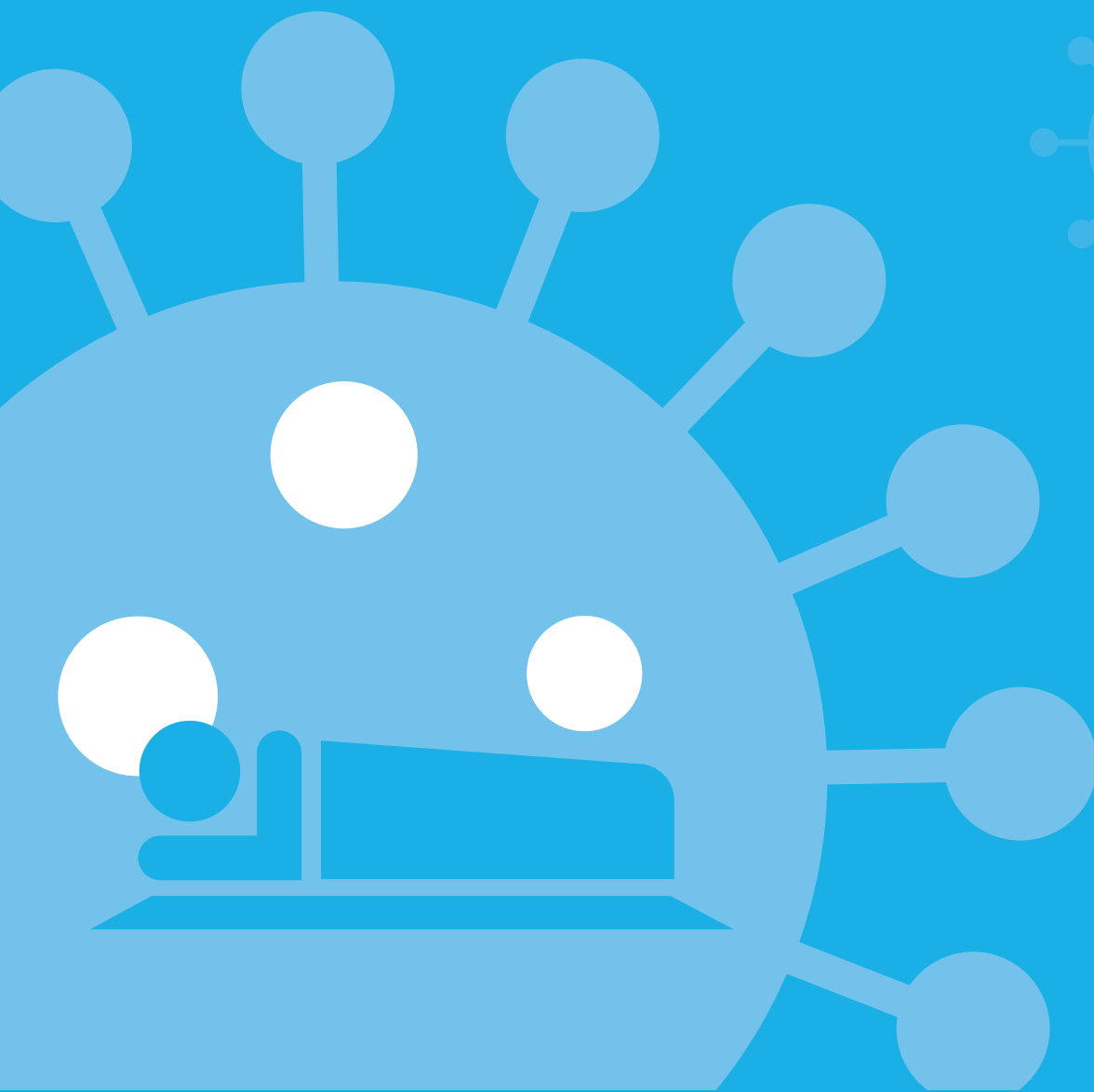


At risk and uncertain

A winter snapshot of young people sleeping rough during the pandemic



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About New Horizon Youth Centre

'Youth Centre' may be in our name but we are so much more.

Every year, thousands of young people across the capital become homeless because of family breakdown, domestic abuse, poverty, experiences of violence, or war and persecution in their home country.

Under-resourced councils are only able to help a limited number of the cases, and with an ongoing housing crisis, cuts to services, a difficult job market, and the current pandemic the rest find themselves homeless and vulnerable at a critical point in their young lives.

We provide a vital support network for 16-24 year olds with nowhere else to go. Through the 'one stop shop' services offered at our daycentre, remotely and via outreach we help young people experiencing homelessness in London to improve their wellbeing, change their economic circumstances and find somewhere they can call home.

Commissioned by London Councils, we lead the [London Youth Gateway](#), the pan-London youth homelessness prevention service with partners Depaul UK, Shelter, Stonewall Housing, akt and Galop, supporting about 7,000 young people annually across the capital. In the summer of 2020 the partnership supported the Greater London Authority with the move-on process of 18-25 year olds in its 'Everyone In' accommodation.

New Horizon chaired the [Young People Sleeping Rough Sub-Group](#) of the Mayor's Life Off the Streets Taskforce in 2019, which aimed to get a more accurate picture of scale and experiences of rough sleeping among 18-25 year olds and the services they need.

For as long as young people are homeless and vulnerable in London, we will be on a mission to give their potential a home.

About this snapshot

Covid-19 has been driving young people towards street homelessness. London alone saw a staggering 47% increase of 16-25 year olds sleeping rough in July to September last year compared to the same period in 2019.¹ Nationally more than a third of service providers noticed an increase in young people staying out on the streets at night.²

Who are these young people? What happens when they end up sleeping rough in the middle of a pandemic? What are the obstacles they face in trying to escape or avoid street homelessness?

In order to better understand what support is needed for under-25s sleeping rough, we sought to capture a snapshot of what we are seeing on the ground, using our data for the period between October and December 2020. In addition to analysing data about young people's circumstances, their housing histories, and accommodation outcomes, we interviewed frontline staff and six young people.

During those months we supported 425 young people facing homelessness. We managed this despite having to operate our drop in centre with considerably reduced capacity and, faced with the spiralling Covid-19 contamination rates and new government guidelines, its temporary closure in late December. Covid-19 safety measures do create new challenges both engaging and supporting young people, but we have relentlessly continued our street outreach and remote work.

To ensure a robust data analysis, this winter snapshot only covers those who approached New Horizon for the first time in this period, either through accessing our day centre, engaging with our outreach team or via our remote services. We compared the data with the same months in 2019 so as to focus on what might have changed for young people in this very challenging year.

Compared to the winter months in the previous year, we saw a 20% increase of young people sleeping rough when first presenting to us. Our findings also clearly indicate rising levels of vulnerability and risk, further hurdles in accessing support, and more fragmented and uncertain accommodation trajectories. They point towards an urgent need of youth-specific emergency and move-on accommodation, opportunities to optimise prevention and support by councils and other providers, and the necessity to include young people firmly in local and governmental rough sleeping strategies.

Olivia Marston, with Marike van Harskamp
New Horizon Youth Centre

January 2021

Winter snapshot – key data

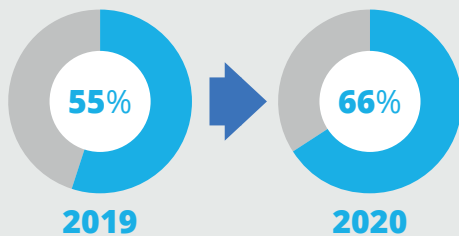
Key characteristics and accommodation outcomes for 18-25 year olds sleeping rough when first presenting at New Horizon Youth Centre between October and December 2020.

Proportion sleeping rough

20% increase of young people sleeping rough in 2020 compared to 2019



Age



Young people sleeping rough aged between **18 and 21 years old**

Notably, the **number of 18 and 19 year olds** we're seeing **has increased**:



35% of young people sleeping rough this winter **up from 13% the previous year.**

Gender



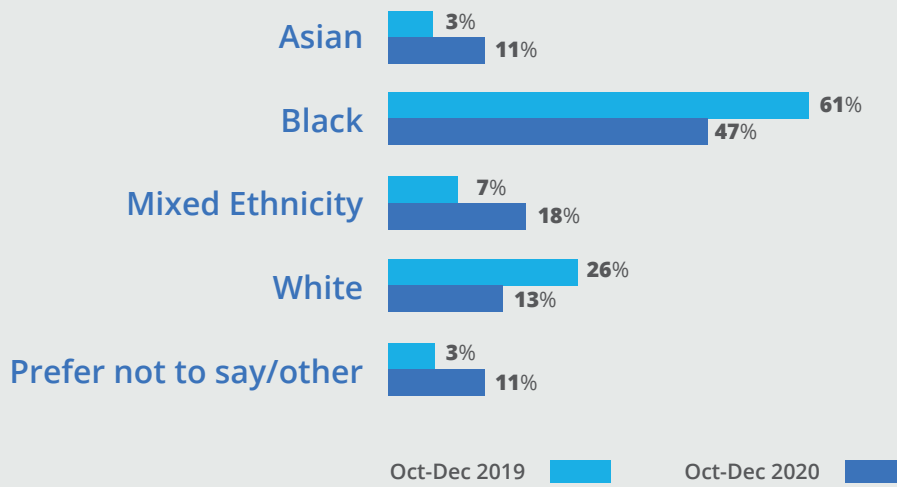
24% of new users sleeping rough are young women.



76% of new users sleeping rough are young men.

The proportion of young women sleeping rough has **more than doubled, compared to 2019.**

Ethnicity



Offending history



36%
young people have an offending history

Additional support needs



46% young people who are sleeping rough have additional support needs. The most common are related to emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Care history



30%
young people have experience of the care system

Current housing situation

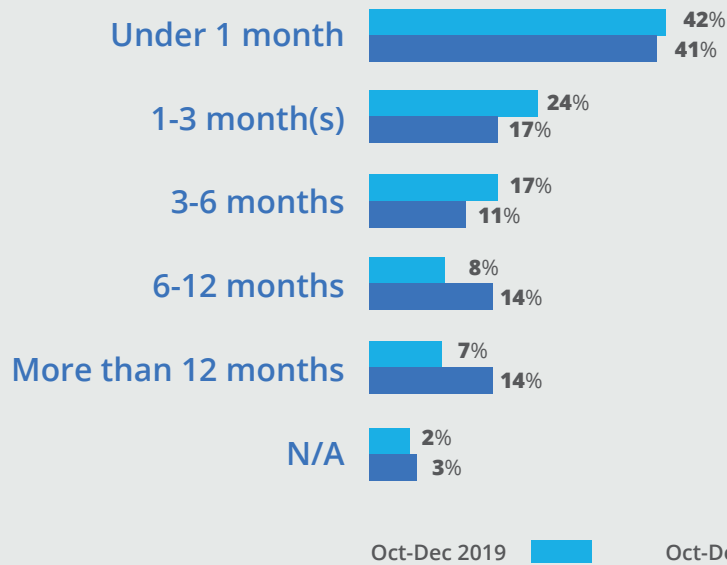


59% of young people who are having to sleep rough when they first arrive at New Horizon have absolutely nowhere else to stay.



A further **17%** are sleeping rough and staying with friends.

Length of homelessness at first presentation



Local authority support

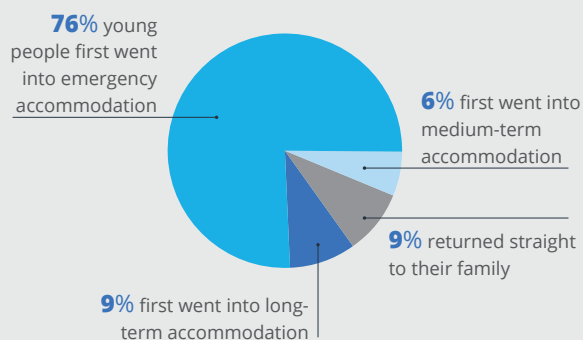
65% young people have already contacted their local council for support when they first come to New Horizon



up from **42%** in 2019

Accommodation outcomes

45% young people accessed accommodation



55% young people could not access accommodation of whom

74% are 18-21 years old

23% are young women and

38% have additional support needs

Of the young people we supported into accommodation, **New Horizon paid for 66%** to stay at backpackers' hostels whilst they waited for alternative options to become available.

Background

The devastating impact of Covid on young people has increased the risk and prevalence of housing insecurity amongst this age group.³ Not only is the pandemic creating and exacerbating some of the main drivers of youth homelessness, but it is also restricting young people's ability to stay off the streets. At the same time that young people's risk of homelessness has increased due to loss of employment or income, strained family relationships and overcrowding, the government Covid safety guidelines and lockdown restrictions are making it difficult or illegal to stay with friends or extended family. As a result, more young people are being left without anywhere to live or just sleep at all.

Increasing demand for support is not being met by provision- a recent survey of 57 youth homelessness organisations across the UK found that only 22% believed there was sufficient support for young people being forced to sleep rough in their area.⁴ At New Horizon we have seen a rising number of young people sleeping rough when they first come to us, with a 20% increase between October and December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Outside of these numbers lie many young people who are on the brink of sleeping rough when they present at our services, most often sofa surfing, and whom do in fact end up with nowhere to stay while they are engaging with us. Finding places for young people to stay in the short term and call home in the long term has become an even bigger challenge that we and the young people using our services face.

Since the start of the pandemic the government has invested in supporting people sleeping rough off the streets, including through its largely successful 'Everyone In' initiative which enabled thousands to self-isolate, keep safe and often move on to somewhere stable to live via close partnership between government, councils, voluntary sector and other key agencies.⁵ Overwhelmed by the sudden but persistently high costs of the pandemic and increasing levels of homelessness, local authorities and bodies like the Greater London Authority are however now struggling more than ever to meet their statutory housing duties. Despite some further government investment to tackle rough sleeping in recent months, London alone faces a £24m funding gap already.⁶

Young people sleeping rough are potentially at much higher risk of feeling the brunt of this. They already had to navigate a broken system in which their homelessness is not only often hidden but also invisible in rough sleeping numbers, services and strategies.⁷ It is against this background that we offer this winter snapshot, with a commitment to work together on the solutions young people need now and in the longer term. We are keen to utilise our unique expertise of youth-specific rough sleeping services for those aged 18-25 most likely to fall through the gaps in their transition into adulthood and independence, at time when the odds seem especially stacked against them.

Key findings

Our snapshot research of young people sleeping rough between October and December 2020 showed that:

1. Particularly vulnerable cohorts of young people are increasingly sleeping rough and at risk
2. Young people are contacting their local councils more, but are not accessing support
3. Young people have increasingly fragmented pathways into emergency and long-term accommodation, exposing them to greater risk

1. Particularly vulnerable cohorts of young people are increasingly sleeping rough and at risk

More young people at higher risk are sleeping rough. Compared to the previous year we are seeing more than double the number of young women without anywhere to stay when they come to us. The young people sleeping rough we support are also younger, with an 11% increase of 18-21 year olds, while more than a third were just 18 or 19; an increase of 22%. These groups of under-25s are at significantly higher risk of harm and exploitation when street homeless or in temporary living arrangements.⁸

More young people have been homeless for 6 months or more. Young people are coming to us with longer histories of homelessness. The most common length of time experiencing homelessness is still under 1 month, consistent with 2019, which indicates that young people continue to be able to seek and get essential support, although too late to prevent their street homelessness. However 28% had been homeless for 6 months or longer; nearly double the figure in October-December the previous year, demonstrating that more young people have experienced difficulties in finding solutions and accessing accommodation during the pandemic.

The government's 'Everyone In' Covid emergency accommodation started at the end of March 2020, and in London many under-25s have experienced its positive impact. However the steep rise of long-term rough sleeping amongst the young people we support nine months later leaves no doubt that many might not have been able to benefit from this crucial provision. For instance they may have struggled to access the referral pathways, were newly rough sleeping after the first few weeks of the scheme, or did not know where to seek help with their housing situation in the first place.

"It's really hard to get young people classified as rough sleeping- getting a CHAIN number, outreach services can't find them, getting assigned a housing officer, getting verified – it's a lot for young people to be chasing them for and there's a tendency not to go through with the full assessment. It's a struggle for young people to get temporary accommodation now." Advice worker

Often it is because the systems in place to find people sleeping rough and help them into accommodation quickly are not really designed with young people's experiences and ways of dealing with street homelessness in mind.⁹

Young people sleeping rough are being forced to put themselves at risk.

Young people experiencing street homelessness are often living day to day in extreme uncertainty, waking up unsure of where they will stay that night. For many this means putting themselves in unsafe situations including staying with strangers, sleeping in cars, sleeping on night buses and sleeping at their workplace.¹⁰

"Sometimes I've even had to stay at boys' houses just to have somewhere to stay." Denise, 22

However these arrangements often become untenable and are rarely a sustainable option, forcing young people to face sleeping outside.

"I went to my friend's house because I had nowhere to stay and luckily she was still there. I stayed on her floor but her neighbours are really nosy and her tenancy doesn't allow guests so I had to leave." Ali, 20

"Around October time I was chucked out of my parents. Sometimes I was sleeping rough, I was sleeping in a block entrance. I was calling charities and they were telling me no, then Centrepoin told me about New Horizon. I asked my friend if I could sleep on the sofa for a bit, did that for a couple of days. I was going to New Horizon while I was sofa surfing and sleeping rough." – Jack, 21

From our previous work with the youth sub-group of the Mayor of London's rough sleeping taskforce, we know that a lack of awareness of where to go to for support means that young people might stay on the streets and be in danger for longer.¹¹ None of the young people interviewed for this snapshot report knew about any outreach services, and very few were familiar with other homelessness organisations. This was confirmed by frontline staff at New Horizon: *"Most of the young people haven't heard of outreach services, our outreach team is usually the first to find them. Most other outreach referrals don't find the young person- they don't go into buildings. More young people are sleeping in stairwells at the moment."* Recent research suggests this is a nationwide-issue, with many young people at greater risk of sleeping rough because they do not know where to go for help.¹²

2. Young people are contacting their local councils more, but are not accessing support

Set against already intense budget challenges to address their statutory homelessness duties, local authorities have been confronted with overwhelming demands on, and costs of, their homelessness services. In recent months they have made calls for further central government funding in order to meet the rising costs during, and beyond, this winter.¹³ Meanwhile young people facing homelessness have long struggled to access or benefit fully from local authority provision despite legislation like the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2018.¹⁴ Centrepoin estimates that 58% of cases of young people presenting as (imminently) homeless in England were not prevented in 2019-20.¹⁵ Our snapshot research indicates that local council provision might indeed be creaking at the seams this year, making it even harder for under-25s to get the support they need to escape street homelessness.

Increasing numbers of young people sleeping rough sought support from their councils first but few were assessed. 65% of young people sleeping rough had already contacted their local council about their housing situation before they came to New Horizon; up from 42% in the same period the year before. Of those who have contacted their local council, only 26% said they were assessed under the HRA, and of those who were, just 58% received a personal housing plan. Ultimately this means that only 15% of young people who were sleeping rough and had contacted their local council for help received a personal housing plan. None of the young people in the snapshot cohort had been offered accommodation as part of the homelessness relief duty.

It is increasingly difficult for young people to access support from their local authorities. We know from experience and other research that accessing support from local councils is difficult for young people.¹⁶ It involves lengthy and complex processes, which can be hard for young people to navigate and juggle alongside other commitments.

"Our advice team spends a lot of time chasing councils. Young people don't understand where in the process they are. They might not know who their social worker is or when their next meetings are." Advice worker

The shift to online services prompted by the pandemic has made things more difficult for young people and created new barriers to accessing support. Under-25s are often engaging with multiple agencies and now have to do this all online or on the phone, which they tend to find hard to stay on top of it. There are also accessibility issues for young people, particularly those rough sleeping, such as having the right device, being able to charge it, accessing internet or minutes, or finding a space to speak confidentially.

"I started [a homeless application] but it's expired. It was hard to keep in contact. The worker sent me some emails and I had to fill out a form but I didn't have a laptop. I called them and haven't heard back since." Denise, 22

This trend is not unique to New Horizon: research by Centrepoin has found that young people are finding it harder to access support and secure accommodation across the country because local authorities and other organisations have closed physical spaces and moved services online.¹⁷

Young people are disengaging from local authority support without alternative options.

Young people frequently reported that they had not found councils helpful, and they either had not been signposted anywhere else or they had been sent to inappropriate services. When contacting their councils for housing support, they were told they were not in priority need, they should try and find a job first (at time of high youth unemployment), or they should call back later. Many young people spoke of a limited response that discouraged them from persisting and so they disengaged, often without knowing where else to seek support. Young people's testimonies from the most recent youth homelessness research by Homeless Link also confirmed the challenges experienced across the country when trying to get support from their local council.¹⁸

"I went to the council first and they said [...] they couldn't help me. I had to sleep around my block for a month or two. I didn't know about any other organisations." Mohamed, 19

"I spoke to [the] council where I'm from. I only got to speak to one person on the phone. I said I was homeless. I told them I had nowhere to stay, I'm physically threatened at home. They told me to call back. They didn't mention a homeless application." Ali, 20

Local authorities are obviously under enormous pressure and facing increasing demand. As the first port of call for many however, there is clearly enormous potential here to better link up young people with the support they need to prevent or relieve rough sleeping, in collaboration with the voluntary sector.

3. Young people have increasingly fragmented pathways into emergency and long-term accommodation, exposing them to greater risk.

Particularly vulnerable cohorts of young people sleeping rough are more likely to remain locked out of accommodation.

Of the under-25s who were sleeping rough when they first came to us, 45% were accommodated in short or long term housing (41% accessed new accommodation options and 4% returned to their family). This means that 55% young people did not quickly secure a housing option to help them off the streets. Of this cohort 74% were aged 18-21, 23% young women and 38% had additional support needs. Each are particularly high risk groups who had nowhere to keep warm and safe.

There is a growing shortage of emergency accommodation for young people.

For young people sleeping rough or at the cusp of street homelessness, winter night shelters can often be an absolute lifeline, and we refer 18-25 year olds to some excellent shelter partners across London. Crisis at Christmas offers a much welcome temporary solution during the festive period. The number of shelter bed spaces, already insufficient, has however much reduced to become Covid-secure, amidst spiralling demand.

Of the young people we supported into accommodation between October and December 2020, New Horizon had to pay for 66% to stay at backpackers' hostels whilst they waited for alternative options to become available. Such arrangements are often a last resort, only made for those whom it is judged a safe option.

“There’s no turnover or voids in the shelters so we’re having to put young people in backpackers. There’s a younger demographic there but it’s still not youth specific.” – Advice worker

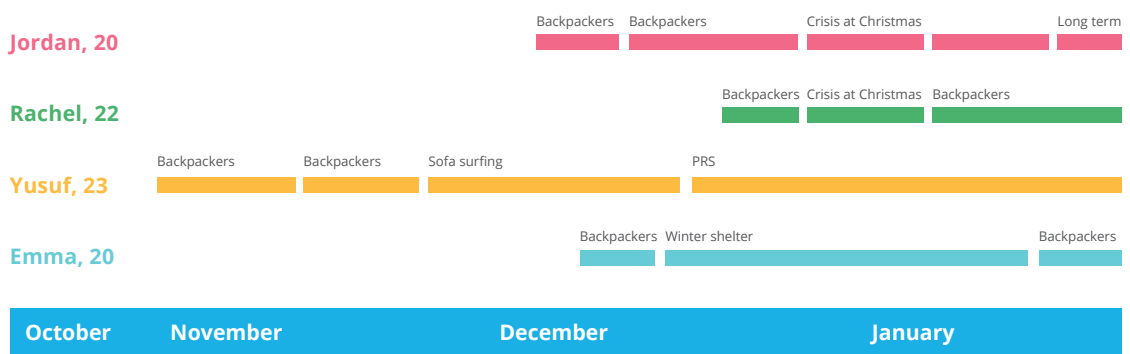
The dedicated floor for under-35s in one of the new ‘triage hubs’ for those newly sleeping rough, which has been funded by the Greater London Authority since November 2020, is very welcome but also does not meet the shortage. None of the young people we supported in the last couple of months of the year could access it as the hub was consistently full.

Limited spaces in emergency provision and long waiting lists means that we frequently have to find stopgap solutions, and that young people experience very fragmented and unsettling accommodation trajectories; a trend other youth homelessness providers are confirming too.¹⁹

Young people do not have sustainable move-on options from emergency accommodation.

Even young people who access accommodation struggle to find stable housing. By mid-January 2021, 59% of those who accessed crisis accommodation in October-December were still in emergency provision, 28% were in long-term housing and 13% in medium-term accommodation. Emergency accommodation like winter shelters is essential and keeps under-25s from sleeping on the street or placing themselves in danger, but the lack of move-on options means that many remain unstably housed or even return to sleeping rough or sofa surfing. A large number who benefited from the seasonal provision are now once again in backpackers’ hostels paid for by New Horizon, which is particularly the case when we get further into winter.

Examples of young people's accommodation trajectories after they come to New Horizon



“Many young people go back to sofa surfing as there’s long waiting lists for other accommodation options.” Youth worker

Jordan's story

Jordan was seen by New Horizon's outreach team at the beginning of December. He agreed for us to place him in a backpackers' hostel, and stayed there for nearly three weeks whilst referrals to other options were made and he had to wait for a space to become available. As that took a while, he moved into Crisis at Christmas over the festive period, which gave some respite. When that closed however he had to return to a backpackers' hostel as there were no immediate move-on options. Here Jordan slept for another three weeks with many others older than himself before he was finally able to move into YMCA accommodation, two months after knocking at New Horizon's door.

Young people are increasingly at risk in emergency accommodation. It has been widely evidenced that emergency accommodation can often put young people at risk. Previous incidents of harm, power imbalances with others in the accommodation and exposure to substance abuse are all factors increasing the risk to a young person in temporary living arrangements.

In our snapshot research, both young people and New Horizon staff described ways in which emergency accommodation, including the last resort of backpackers' hostels, usually is not really suitable or can be detrimental to the young person's health.

"Emergency accommodation isn't tailored to young people's needs. There's often conflict in the rooms which can be triggering or traumatic. There are older, entrenched rough sleepers who might have long histories of substance misuse and there's a potential for exploitation there." Advice worker

"I stayed in [backpackers] for a week or two. They put me in a room with 6 people who had loud conversations until 2 or 3am and would fight. I was only getting 2.5 hours of sleep and it was really grinding me. I felt like I wanted to be on the street more. They were all older than me, and I felt like I couldn't say anything. It really wasn't helping with my anxiety." – Ali, 20

Such risks are exacerbated now as Covid-19 continues to have a disproportionately detrimental impact on young people's mental health.²¹ 55% of the young people we supported to access emergency and medium-term accommodation have additional support needs, most commonly related to emotional wellbeing and mental health, and at least 26% have experienced complex trauma. They are at higher risk of having their mental health deteriorate, and in even greater need of measures to prevent this, including having rapid access to safe and youth-specific emergency and longer-term accommodation when sleeping rough.

Niall's story

Niall first got in touch with New Horizon in December. After being kicked out of his family home he'd been staying at his friend's house but with Covid restrictions that had become increasingly difficult. He'd contacted his local council but after offering him one option that wasn't possible for him, they hadn't signposted him anywhere else. He didn't know about other support so he had been sleeping in stairwells for over a month. After coming to New Horizon he was ok with us putting him in a backpackers' hostel while he waited for space in a shelter. After one opened up he was able to stay in a shelter for 2 weeks over Christmas and New Year. He'd liked it as he had his own room. When it closed he had to return to a backpackers' hostel. 6 weeks after first calling New Horizon, and 3 months after becoming homeless he is still there and says he feels frustrated that Covid has made everything slower.

Conclusion

It is clear from what we are seeing at New Horizon that not only are more young people sleeping rough, but these young people are also increasingly vulnerable. Too many young people are being left on the street, facing greater risk and greater uncertainty. Young women, 18-21 year olds, those with additional support needs and those with longer histories of housing insecurity have nowhere to stay at all, and are forced to put themselves in unsafe situations.

During the pandemic delivery has been impacted across the sector, and all organisations and services are struggling to engage and support young people remotely. However there is evidently a missed opportunity for achieving better outcomes for young people when so many are contacting their local councils for help, yet so few can access the support they need. Similarly our snapshot indicates that tailoring rough sleeping services to the specific experiences and needs of young people is crucial to preventing and solving rough sleeping amongst under-25s. This cohort would benefit greatly from an end-to-end youth-specific process covering prevention, outreach, referral, and accommodation, and from further partnership work between voluntary sector providers and local authorities to remove the blockages in the system.

The lack of adequate emergency accommodation for young people is not new, but as we have seen from the experiences of young people supported by New Horizon, it demands much greater urgency if we are to protect young people and offer sustainable pathways into housing. We are encouraged to see how this need is increasingly understood and acted upon by policy and decision-makers.²² Alone as well as together with our sector and local government partners, New Horizon has already asked government to invest in immediate and longer-term emergency accommodation provision and move-on options, and will continue to advocate for age-appropriate provision.

Early this year the National Audit Office concluded that the 'Everyone In' scheme highlighted the severe underestimation of street homelessness levels over recent years, and that the government's rough sleeping strategy will need revision if it intends to end rough sleeping by 2024.²³ The underestimation might be more modest in London, given the more developed data recording in the capital, but our winter snapshot shows that government and local rough sleeping strategies must create more space for young people to meet increasing demand, increased risk and growing gaps in suitable accommodation provision. There is now a great opportunity, and even greater necessity, to include young people and youth specific provision firmly in immediate next steps, funding and strategic planning.

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