INFORMATION AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN HOUSING NEED

AND THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN

PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

by

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Abstract

The following research is an assessment of the information requirements of young people in housing need (16-25 year olds), and the role of information in preventing youth homelessness.   In addition, other issues associated with information and youth homelessness are also explored, namely ways in which the provision of information to young people in housing need might be improved, and the role of the housing worker.   It is hoped that, by contributing to an understanding of the kinds of information young people in housing need require and the role they would like staff in this area to adopt, staff might be trained more effectively and services to this group might be better planned and more efficiently managed.

The methodology used falls into 2 broad categories, fieldwork and a literature review, and 2 organisations are involved, providing the base for the fieldwork.   These organisations are the Youth Information and Support Centre, Sheffield and The Roundabout Project, Accommodation for Homeless Young People, Sheffield.   The fieldwork divides into semi-structured interviews with staff in these organisations and beyond, questionnaires with young people in housing need, and my own participative observations arising from a 3 month period of volunteering in each of the organisations.   The literature review looks at current thought on the information requirements of young people in housing need, and the belief that information has an active role to play in the prevention of youth homelessness.

The research data used is highly qualitative in nature, and generalisations have been made from specific comments, although no statistical analysis has been attempted.   It is hoped that, by putting previously unresearched material together in a format accessible to service providers and by highlighting areas of information need and scope for improvements, the research undertaken here will be of use to those working with young people in housing need in a variety of settings.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study explores the information requirements of young people in housing need (that is, those aged between 16 and 25 years old who are either homeless, have experienced homelessness or are threatened by homelessness) and the potential role of information in preventing youth homelessness. Youth homelessness has recently increased dramatically, with homelessness amongst the under-18s growing at a rate faster than for any other group (Evans (1996)). As the great majority of young people are not eligible for housing under the 1985 Housing Act, revised 1996, there is no official national record of youth homelessness as presented to the Local Authorities. However, The National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans (1996)) estimates that at least 246,000 young people in the United Kingdom were homeless in 1995; that is, 1 in 30 people between 16 and 25 years old becoming homeless in one year alone. A recent multi-agency monitoring project of young people in housing need carried out between November 1996 and October 1997 by Shelter recorded 896 individuals between 15 and 25 years old approaching agencies for help with their housing problems in Sheffield alone.

The purpose of this study is not to provide an in-depth account of the reasons behind the rapid and continuing growth of youth homelessness, although this will be outlined in Chapter 2 in order to place youth homelessness in context, but rather to promote an understanding of what the information needs of homeless young people are and the potential role, if any, of information in preventing the continued growth of this social problem. For the purpose of my study I borrow The National Inquiry's definition of youth homelessness, and take it to indicate any single person, without dependants, between the

ages of 16 and 25 who is either without accommodation, in temporary accommodation, or staying temporarily with friends or relatives who are unable to accommodate them long term.

It is my hope that the data collected might significantly impact upon the work of staff in this field and on the provision of information to young people in housing need.   Both Garside et al (1990) and Bunnin et al (1994) identify a need for improved staff training on information surrounding legislation and benefits to enable staff to become a more skilled and knowledgeable resource.   Bunnin et al (1994) highlight the need for the housing worker to be aware of information needs that go beyond satisfying the immediate housing crisis and O'Mahony (1988) believes the lack of consensus regarding what is necessary for young people partly stems from a lack of knowledge about young people themselves - what their needs are and how their needs are being met.   It is hoped therefore that, by asking both staff in this area and the young people concerned it may be possible for both statutory and voluntary agencies to establish a sound information framework for use in staff training and service delivery.

The scope of this study has been age-restricted and uses as its base 2 collaborating agencies, The Youth Information and Support Centre, Sheffield and The Roundabout Project, Accommodation for Homeless Young People, Sheffield, chosen for both their similarities and their differences.   "In the UK the term 'youth homelessness' generally refers to homelessness among young single people between the ages of 16 and 25" (Hutson and Liddiard (1994:3)), and it for this reason, stemming from benefit restrictions and the bounds of legislation, that it is young people of this age who have been focused on for study.   It is recognised that the provision of accommodation to under-16s is

inadequate but, due to the complexity of their situation, the under-16s are beyond the remit of this discussion.   Similarly, I acknowledge that there is some consensus that women and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately from homelessness (Gosling (1990), Ainley (1991), Jones (1994), Evans (1996)), and that care-leavers or those who are vulnerable due to alcohol or drug dependency have very specific information needs.   These groups would require quite distinct research into them.

The following discussion is broken down into 8 chapters.   First, the methodology undertaken to obtain the required data is explained, together with any limitations and problems that arose.   Chapter 2 looks briefly at the reasons behind the growth of youth homelessness, discusses the legislation as it pertains to homeless 16 to 25 year olds and looks at the reasons given by young people for leaving the parental/guardian home in an attempt to explode some of the myths surrounding youth homelessness.   Chapter 3 consists of a review of the recent literature, and will highlight what the literature identifies as the main information needs of young people in housing need and the role of information as a preventative measure and, consequently, the potential role of the education system.   I will outline and analyse my own research findings on these two questions in the following two chapters, using data collected from interviews, questionnaires and my own observation (Chapters 4 and 5).   Using my own research and the available literature, I will then suggest ways in which the provision of information to young people in housing need might be improved (Chapter 6).   In Chapter 7, I will discuss the role of the workers in this field in an attempt to identify any conflict between giving information, advice and undertaking advocacy, and whether a discrepancy exists between what the young people want and what the staff are prepared to

offer. In the final chapter summaries will be presented and conclusions will be made based on the literature read and the fieldwork undertaken, before recommendations for future research are suggested.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

The research methods used fall into two broad categories - a literature review and fieldwork carried out in Sheffield during the Summer of 1998. The literature review will look specifically at recent and current thought on the information needs of young people in housing need and will identify the key areas of information need as suggested by recent research. Literature will also be used to consider the belief that "gaps in educating and informing young people about housing and homelessness contribute to the problem" (Multi-Agency Monitoring in South Yorkshire (1997:3)), and thus the potential role of information in preventing youth homelessness and the provision of housing education within the national curriculum will be looked at.

Although the literature can be used in this way to illustrate key points and to identify current arguments and conflicting evidence, it should be noted that, in fact, very little has been written specifically on the information requirements of young people and the importance of information to young people as opposed to the issue of youth homelessness in general, about which there is a wealth of literature. Although this absence serves to highlight the real need for this study and demonstrates the validity of my research, it does also limit the literature review and, consequently, much of what has been read (and appears on the bibliography) can unfortunately only be used to put youth homelessness in context, and not to inform the reader of identified information requirements specifically. Therefore, many of the references in the bibliography do not appear as citations in the literature review.

The fieldwork takes the form of semi-structured interviews with staff working in this area, short questionnaires with young people in housing need and my own participative observation, and is highly qualitative in nature, reflecting only a small sample of opinion from which precise statistical conclusions have not been drawn.   Qualitative researchers are concerned with individual perceptions, and "seek insight rather than statistical analysis" (Bell (1987:4)), and it is this which provides the rationale behind my original choice of sample; up to 20 young people in housing need and a similar number of staff working with those in housing need.   In order to have a base from which to begin my fieldwork, I gained permission to collaborate with 2 Sheffield based organisations.   The Youth Information and Support Centre (YISC) offers "information, advice and support to young people aged 14 to 25" on a wide range of subjects, with enquiries about housing ranking third after health and family/relationships.   YISC is a statutory organisation and part of the Sheffield Youth Service, and is staffed by a Youth Information Worker, a Youth Worker, an Administration Worker and a Team Leader.

By contrast, The Roundabout Project, Accommodation for Homeless Young People is a voluntary organisation and a registered charity, and provides both emergency and longer-term accommodation, as well as a comprehensive support package, to 16 to 25 year olds.   It is staffed by a large team of Project Workers, Relief Workers, a Business Manager, a Lifeskills Co-ordinator and several volunteers. These 2 organisations were chosen because they are both age-restricted and both, potentially, offered me contact with a large number of young people in housing need as well as staff in this area.   In addition, one (YISC) is part of the statutory sector while The Roundabout Project is part of the voluntary sector, and one offers information, advice and

support only (YISC) while the other offers accommodation and an ongoing package of support. Consequently, I felt I may potentially come into contact with longer-term, more ongoing information needs at The Roundabout Project than those presented by the young people at YISC.

I intended to conduct up to 20 interviews with staff working in this field and, in the final instance, carried out 19 interviews with people from various organisations. Hutson and Liddiard (1994) point out the range of organisations that deal with young people in housing need, all reflecting different resources, objectives and responsibilities and providing services that range from accommodation to information on health issues. For this reason, I wanted to interview people from as many different organisations as possible and, in this, I feel my research has been very successful. The list of contributors thus includes those from statutory and voluntary housing and information services, health services and the careers service.

The interviews were semi-structured, using the standardised open-ended interview approach (CRUS Guide 6). Adopting a semi-structured approach ensures that there is sufficient "freedom to allow the respondent to talk about what is of central significance to him or her," while imposing "some loose structure to ensure all topics which are considered crucial to the study are covered" (Bell (1987:72)). Therefore, a combination of closed questions to obtain factual information and more open-ended questions to encourage opinions were asked to each respondent. Responses were recorded in natural language, in addition to being tape-recorded. The interviews were then selectively transcribed and categories imposed in an attempt to code them. An interview schedule is shown in Appendix A. This approach

seemed to work well and allowed for flexibility in response and in the order in which the questions were asked, and the data was easier to analyse than if a completely unstructured approach, requiring more expertise than I have, had been used. I feel the data obtained from these interviews is of a high quality and can be used as the basis for consequent discussion of the information requirements of young people in housing need and the role of information in preventing youth homelessness.

In addition to the interviews with staff, I hoped to conduct mini-interviews following a short and simple questionnaire with young people in housing need. Bell (1987) believes the use of questionnaires is a good way of collecting information quickly and, if well designed, can be easy to analyse and interpret. For this reason, the questionnaires used consisted of closed questions to gain factual information and more open, though still largely structured questions to solicit an opinion (CRUS Guide 5), the primary aim being to keep the questionnaires simple and analysis uncomplicated (see Appendix B).

The third method of fieldwork undertaken was participative observation (CRUS Guide 7). Bell (1987:97) claims that "observation can often reveal characteristics of groups or individuals that would have been impossible to discover by other means." She warns that it is crucial to be aware of *what* you are observing, and to decide how and when observations are to be recorded. To facilitate participative observation, from May through to the end of July I worked as a volunteer at both YISC and The Roundabout Project. By working with staff and, particularly, young people I hoped to gain an insight into their specific information needs. I hoped that personal participation, especially in the Lifeskills programme offered by The Roundabout Project, would allow me to

observe the types of questions asked and enquiries made, from which I would be able to infer what the information needs might be without having to ask any direct questions which may have appeared intrusive.   Thus, it was primarily the *content* of the Lifeskills sessions themselves, and the nature of the contributions from the young people involved, that I was interested in.   At YISC, I hoped to observe the content of the type of enquiries made by young people in housing need, and I certainly gained a valuable insight into information work with young people, as well as the opportunity to speak to young people in housing need.   I recorded any significant observations as close to the time of the event as was possible, but never during its actual occurrence, in a log book kept specifically for this purpose.

2.1 Limitations of the Methodology

It was my intention to ask young people who approached YISC in housing need or who were resident at The Roundabout Project if they would agree to answering the few questions outlined on the questionnaires, confidentiality guaranteed.   At first, I had very little success with this methodology.   After nearly 3 months volunteering at YISC, only 8 young people had presented with a housing need, although they did all agree to "mini-interviews" with me, using the questionnaire as its basis, and supplied me with good quality data.   During the same period I also worked as a volunteer at The Roundabout Project but, unfortunately, at no point during my 3 months there did I feel it appropriate to ask any of the residents to complete a questionnaire.

Concerned about the low number of responses from young people and determined to produce some research that reflected their own perception of their needs as much as those of the staff in this area, I

extended my base and obtained permission to leave questionnaires at the Careers Service and at Nomad Plus, a project aimed at supporting young people in their first tenancy.   This produced a further 8 questionnaires, bringing the total to 16.   Inevitably, the latter 8 were completed simply as questionnaires rather than conducted by myself as mini-interviews, making direct comparison of data more difficult as they revealed a marked difference in detail and openness of opinion. Nonetheless, they have produced some good qualitative data and bring the total number more in line with the number of staff consulted.

Unfortunately, my participation in the Lifeskills programmes at The Roundabout Project did not on the whole afford me the kind of observation data I was hoping for and, with hindsight, I think I was a little naive to expect it to do so.   Attendance at the sessions was consistently poor, and the degree of serious participation from the residents varied considerably.   However, these facts themselves were recorded as valid data and will be used later in the study when the provision of information on lifeskills is discussed as a potential area of information need.

Finally, time was always going to be factor.   Volunteering was time-consuming and tiring, although highly enjoyable, and it would have been of great benefit to the study to have had more time to meet personally with even more young people in housing need.   However, although overall the interviews were more successful than the questionnaires and the participative observation, I feel the data collected from 19 staff interviews, 16 questionnaires/mini-interviews with the young people and my own voluntary work is of a good enough quality to draw some significant conclusions.

CHAPTER THREE: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CONTEXT:

A GROWING CONCERN

3.1 The Scale of the Problem

It is useful to briefly outline the current state of homelessness in Great Britain and to put youth homelessness in a national context. During the 1980s homelessness in Great Britain increased significantly, with Local Authority acceptances of those in priority need under Part III of the 1985 Housing Act more than doubling between 1984 and 1992 (Warrington (1996)). The most recent statistics published by Shelter (1998) for the period between January and September 1997 found 78,750 households in priority need housed temporarily by Local Authorities, with a further 47,980 households not in priority need seeking advice and assistance. In addition, Shelter estimates that, at the current time, a further 41,000 people are living in hostels and squats in England.

Youth homelessness is difficult to quantify as young people without dependants have very few rights to housing and, therefore, seldom are included in a Local Authority's official statistics. However, The National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans (1996)) has calculated that at least 246,000 young people in the UK were homeless in 1995 - that is, around 1 in 30 people between 16 and 25 years old becoming homeless during one year alone. The National Inquiry found that around a quarter of single homeless people sleeping rough or living in hostels or other temporary accommodation were under 25 years old, and account for approximately a quarter of all homeless applications to local authorities in the UK. However, young people between 16 and 25 years old account for only 17% of the total adult population and yet, as these figures suggest, they constitute a far

greater proportion of homeless people (Evans (1996)).   Local statistics published by Shelter as part of their multi-agency monitoring project show that between November 1996 and October 1997, 896 people between 15 and 25 years old approached agencies for help, 32% of whom were under 18 years old.   Local trend data also illustrates that homelessness among young people is growing at a rate faster than for any other group (Evans (1996)).   For example, a hostel for single homeless people in Taunton reports a 3-fold increase in the past 3 years in the number of 16 to 25 year olds using the hostel (Evans (1996)).

As already mentioned, the exact scale of youth homelessness is difficult to quantify.   Official homelessness statistics focus on those categories of people for whom the Government has a responsibility and, consequently, young single people are largely omitted (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   In addition, the number of people recorded in the official statistics relates only to those *accepted* by the Local Authority as homeless, which accounts for only one third of those who *apply* to the Local Authority.   With the exception of pregnant women, very few homeless young people are included in the official, national homelessness statistics (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   Those who do not fall within official definitions of homelessness are commonly termed the 'hidden homeless' (Niner (1989), McCluskey (1994), Warrington (1996)), and include those who are staying with friends/relatives, sleeping rough, living in squats or unfit property or in a range of temporary accommodation.   Problems regarding the definition of homelessness thus further contribute to problems in determining its scale and it is worth repeating here that the definition taken for this study is that adopted by The National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans (1996)), and includes a number of unsatisfactory

housing situations and not just those young people who are literally roofless.

3.2 National Causes for the Growth of Youth Homelessness

As already indicated, the problem of youth homelessness has worsened considerably over the last 10 years. Killeen, in Coleman and Warren-Adamson (1992:201), views this deteriorating situation as a direct outcome of what he calls the previous Government's "social experiments with youth," and indeed such political decisions as the withdrawal of benefit entitlement from the majority of 16 and 17 year olds, the introduction of an age-related welfare system and the reduction of spending on public sector housing go a long way to explaining the continued rise of the problem. These factors, compounded by increased youth unemployment, low wages and the inadequacy of the legislative safety net, all serve to discriminate against the young person attempting to move from childhood into adulthood, and substantiate the belief that "in a real sense homelessness can be viewed as the unsuccessful and incomplete transition from youth to independence" (Doogan in Bramley et al (1988:89)). Without a change in Government policy, young people making this transition will continue to face challenges which they are poorly equipped to deal with.

3.21 High Unemployment and Low Pay

Doogan in Bramley et al (1988:91) believes that "the rise in youth homelessness is but one symptom of the deteriorating economic position of young people that has its roots in the dramatic restructuring of the world of work." Although it is beyond the scope of this study to look at this "dramatic restructuring" in detail, the massive changes in the

youth labour market should be outlined and can be traced back to the late 1970s when the labour supply expanded as a consequence of the baby boom of the 1960s, with a corresponding increase in competition for jobs and mobility of labour (Doogan in Bramley et al (1988)). Allard (1997) cites an unemployment rate for 16 to 19 year olds of 21.2%; Evans (1996) gives a rate of 15% for 16 to 24 year olds. The overall rate of unemployment and national average stands at 8.3% (Allard (1997)), illustrating a significant gap between the unemployment rates of young people and the population as a whole, with the rate of youth unemployment rising faster than unemployment in general (McCluskey (1994)). Of the 896 young people approaching Sheffield agencies between November 1996 and October 1997, only just over 2% were in full or part-time employment. As with official homeless statistics, the true unemployment rate for young people is likely to be even higher than suggested here since official statistics record only those unemployed and in receipt of benefits. As 16 and 17 year olds are rarely entitled to claim benefits, they are excluded from the Government figures (Evans (1996)).

Even those in the minority who do secure a job find themselves on wages significantly lower than the national average, with a full-time male employee of 16 or 17 years old earning only 31% of the average male salary, rising to 69% for 21 to 24 year olds (Evans (1996)). Women between 16 and 18 years old fare little better, earning 44% of the average female wage, rising to 79% for 21 to 24 year olds (Evans (1996)). In addition, these jobs are 4 times as likely to be insecure or temporary than are the jobs of over 25s (Evans (1996)). Consequently, the high unemployment and low pay of 16 to 25 year olds makes this group an unattractive proposition for private landlords and they lose their leverage in the housing market. For those for whom staying in the

parental/guardian home is not an option, homelessness becomes a reality.

It is important to acknowledge the introduction of the 'New Deal' by the Labour Government, effective from April 1998, in an attempt to increase employment and training opportunities for young people.   Thus, all 18 to 24 year olds who have been claiming Job Seeker's Allowance for 6 months are to enter the 'Gateway Process' to establish the skills they require to take up a placement in either a subsidised job, with the Environment Task Force or the voluntary sector, on a full-time education programme, or become self-employed. The National Homeless Alliance (1998) believe this Gateway Process will be critical to the ability of homeless young people to access the scheme.   Unfortunately the impact of this in real terms is too early and too underdeveloped to assess with regard to this study, as indeed is the ability of the New Deal to confront the risk of employers exploiting the free work-trial period of young people, imposing redundancy after 6 months when the subsidy awarded ends, or replacing existing employees with New Deal candidates.   And, of course, the unemployment of those aged 16 to 18 is yet to be tackled at all.

3.22 Changes in Benefit Entitlement

It is widely believed that the Social Security Act of 1986, implemented in 1988, has significantly contributed to the continued rise of youth homelessness (Gosling (1990), Greve (1991), Hutson and Liddiard (1994), McCluskey (1994), Evans (1996), Allard (1997)).   At that time, an age-related system of benefits was introduced with 25 being the age at which the adult rate of entitlement would be paid, and Income Support was withdrawn from 16 and 17 year olds in place of a

guaranteed place of a Youth Training Scheme - a guarantee which has never been fulfilled.   Such changes to the benefits for under 25s were closely linked to fears that the increase in youth unemployment would escalate welfare costs.   The measures were, therefore, introduced in part to discourage young people from leaving home and subsequently claiming state benefits for rent and living expenses (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)), and in part to guard against benefits that are too high serving as a disincentive to work (Allard (1997)).

The direct result however has been an increase in youth homelessness, with young people who are unable to live in the parental or guardian home becoming increasingly unable to live on the available benefits and to obtain and maintain accommodation (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   Such attempts to encourage the young unemployed to live with their parents simply substantiates the view that "a great deal of homelessness is caused by ill-conceived and insufficiently informed policies, reinforced with a strong component of moral imperative about the role and responsibility of parents" (Greve (1991:32)).

In brief, those aged between 18 and 24 are entitled to 79% of the allowance given to those who are 25 years or older, and 16 and 17 year olds are only entitled to Income Support at all in exceptional circumstances.   In the face of criticism, the last Government introduced Severe Hardship Payments, but these are difficult to obtain, are discretionary and are only awarded for a few weeks at a time (Evans (1996)).   Young people are rarely considered a priority for Crisis Loans from the Social Fund, and changes to the Housing Benefit Eligibility Rules for under 25s have meant that there is often a gap between the Local Reference Rent (LRR) set by the Local Authority as the maximum level of Housing Benefit to be paid and what a landlord is

charging (Evans (1996)).   In October 1996, this gap between rent levels widened with the introduction of the Single Room Rate for under 25s, which bases the LRR upon shared rather than self-contained accommodation.   Such benefit reductions have been introduced to discourage those who cannot afford to live independently from leaving home.   What such rationale fails to take into account, and what my research findings further demonstrate, is that, for the vast majority of young people who leave home early, staying with their parents or guardians is not an option.

Under the proposals for the new budget and welfare reform published in March 1998, the principle of "empowerment not dependency" (Economist (1998:35)) was established with the drive to get people off benefits and into work.   The area of welfare reform most likely to affect young people is the reforming of the Housing Benefit system in an attempt to curb the spiralling of the £12 billion bill and the problems inherent in the tapering scale of Housing Benefit, tax and national insurance, which can act as a disincentive to work.   Although details are yet to be finalised, at this stage the suggestion is to abolish the Local Authority administered Housing Benefit and replace it with a Department of Social Security administered tax-credit or top-up to Income Support at a fixed rate, so that even those with high rents do not lose out (Mills (1998)).   However, no mention has yet been made of restoring Income Support to 16 and 17 year olds, or whether the benefit system is still to be age-related.   It is beyond the remit of this study to speculate as to the potential impact of any benefit changes to young people in housing need, but is a possible development of the future which needs acknowledging.

3.23 The Decline of Suitable Accommodation

As Hutson and Liddiard (1994:47) state "it is often argued that the root of youth homelessness lies in a lack of affordable accommodation for young people." Bramley (1989), Greve (1991), McCluskey (1994) and Evans (1996) all describe the decline of the public and private rented sector parallel to the dramatic growth of the private ownership sector since the late 1980s. The Conservative housing policies of the 1980s and 1990s cut Local Authority building programmes by more than 93% from 125,000 completed houses a year in 1969 to just 8,000 a year in 1991 (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)). In addition, over 1 million council houses have been sold since 1980 under the "Right to Buy" scheme but, as the supply of Local Authority housing has reduced, demand has increased (McCluskey (1994)), illustrated by Bramley's study (1989) of Local Authority waiting lists. The net result has been a decline of public rented housing from 32% of Great Britain's total housing stock in 1978 to under 22% in 1991 (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).

Young people without dependants are seldom prioritised for what little public sector and Housing Association accommodation there is, with families primarily being catered for (McCluskey (1994), Evans (1996)). The objective of the Conservative Government's housing policy since 1979 has been to increase owner-occupation, a move successfully achieved with a growth in this sector from 50% in 1971 to 68% in 1991 (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)). Entry costs are high however, and with the weak economic position of most young people, home ownership has never been a reality for more than a minority.

It is the private sector that has traditionally been the most important source of housing for young people. This sector too,

however, is in decline.   Rent increases over recent years have exceeded the rate of inflation, and the substantial one-off payment of deposit plus rent-in-advance excludes many on a low income or on benefits (Evans (1996)).   Evans (1996) finds that those who do rent privately are often in the poorest quality stock, with little tenancy security and, therefore, such accommodation rarely constitutes a long-term home.

In short, young people generally do not have access to public housing and home-ownership is seldom possible.   In addition, the private rented sector on which they have always relied is in decline (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   McCluskey (1994) spells out exactly what the contraction of the housing market means for young people - a return to the parental or guardian home, taking on accommodation which they cannot afford, or homelessness.

3.3 Housing Legislation

In order to fully appreciate the realities facing young people in housing need, it is important to understand the limitations of the statutory obligations of Local Authorities towards them.   Homelessness legislation was introduced in England and Wales in 1985, Scotland in 1987 and Northern Ireland in 1988 (Evans (1996)).   Under Part III of the Housing Act 1985, Local Authority Housing Departments became obliged to provide those unintentionally homeless and in priority need with permanent accommodation.   In 1996 however, this Act was revised so that Local Authorities no longer have a duty to provide permanent accommodation, but temporary accommodation for up to 24 months (Shelter (1998)).

Single young people are generally only accepted for re-housing under this legislation if they are deemed "vulnerable" for some "other

special reason" (Section 189, Housing Act 1996) and, therefore, in priority need.   However, the law states that being of a young age alone does not confer vulnerability and, consequently, few Local Authorities will accept young people as vulnerable and in priority need under the Housing Act 1985 without additional factors, such as abuse or offending, present.   Indeed, a survey undertaken by CHAR in 1993 found only a quarter of Local Authorities would usually define a young person sleeping rough as vulnerable (Evans (1996)).   It should be stressed that Sheffield Local Authority is one of these authorities and regards the very young, that is 16 and 17 year olds, as in priority need. In Sheffield, 16 and 17 year olds can therefore be re-housed under the Housing Act 1985.

In 1989 the Children Act, pertaining to 16 and 17 year olds, was borne out of a dissatisfaction with the existing complex legislation and concerns regarding the role of Social Services in child care protection (McCluskey (1993)).   The Children Act 1989 recognised the need for the provision of accommodation by the Local Authority for "any child in need" whose welfare is likely to be "seriously prejudiced" without accommodation (Children Act Section 20 (3), quoted in McCluskey (1994: Appendix 1)).   A "child in need" is one who "is unlikely to achieve or maintain....a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision....of services by a Local Authority," or whose "health or development is likely to be significantly impaired" or who is "disabled" (Children Act Section 17 (10), quoted in McCluskey (1994: Appendix 1)).

Although the Children Act 1989 may have improved the overall situation for young homeless people in legal terms, in real terms the Act has largely failed young people in housing need (McCluskey and Allard

(1997)).   Research undertaken by McCluskey (1993) found that 18% of Local Authorities were not carrying out assessments at all to establish whether a homeless 16 or 17 year old was "in need," and only 48% of Local Authorities had written policies regarding the eligibility of 16 and 17 year olds for accommodation.   Staggeringly, only 9 out of the 86 Social Services departments studied had a policy to accept *all* homeless 16 and 17 year olds for accommodation under Section 20 (3).   There is evidence that such a situation persists, 5 years after McCluskey's study (1993), as cited in Evans (1996) and McCluskey and Allard (1997) and, while some pockets of good practice exist (of which Sheffield, once again, is one), on the whole Social Services departments are failing to fully implement the Children Act 1989.   The consequence is that young people are often sent to and fro between Social Services and the Local Authority Housing Department, with neither accepting full responsibility.

It is, therefore, the recommendation of the National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans (1996)) and the House Our Youth 2000 campaign (McCluskey and Allard (1997)) that joint policies and assessment procedures are established, at least between Social Services departments and Housing Departments.   Again, with the launch of the multi-agency assessment procedure for homeless 16 and 17 year olds, Sheffield Social Services are providing a model of good practice which should become more widespread.

3.4 Reasons for Leaving the Parental/Guardian Home

One of the greatest myths surrounding the growing incidence of youth homelessness concerns the reasons, on a more personal and individual level, for young people leaving the parental home in an early and unplanned way; is it largely a matter of choice or does it involve a number of push factors?   The belief that young people decide to leave home, and therefore must accept responsibility for any difficulties encountered, was fuelled in the late 1980s by comments from Central Government, such as these made by Margaret Thatcher in June 1988:

> "there is a number of young people who chose voluntary to leave home; I do not think that we can be expected, no matter how many there are, to provide units for them" (Hansard vol.134 p.713, quoted in Hutson and Liddiard (1994:58)).

She was supported in such thought by her then Secretary of State for the Environment, Nicholas Ridley, and thus leaving home per se became one of the keys to explaining the continued rise of youth homelessness, and one for which young people must accept responsibility (Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).

As a consequence, there have been many efforts to demonstrate how, in fact, the very reverse is true, and that "young people do not generally leave home for the fun of it, or to seek adventure" (Rowlands and Seddon (1996:9)).   Before this evidence is looked at, it is interesting to note that Hutson and Liddiard (1994) found that many of the young people they interviewed emphasised that it *was* actually their decision to leave.   On closer questioning however, the authors felt that the young people involved had exercised very little *real* choice and were probably reinterpreting their experiences with the benefit of hindsight, choosing to view the events as something they had been in control of.

Unfortunately, the issue around *why* young people leave home was one I broached with staff only and not with the young people for fear of appearing intrusive, and so I cannot substantiate Hutson and Liddiard's (1994) findings.   Of the 19 staff I interviewed, only 3 mentioned that an element of choice may occasionally be involved, but each of these stressed that this was only so in the minority of cases.

On the whole, therefore, young people appear to leave the parental or guardian home for very specific reasons, rather than drifting aimlessly.   Family breakdown was given by 17 out of the 19 staff members I interviewed as the main reason for leaving.   Such a cause is supported overwhelmingly by a body of literature, such as Doogan in Bramley et al (1988), O'Brien in Blackwell and Kennedy (1988), Gosling (1990), Ainley (1991), Evans (1996), Rowlands and Seddon (1996) and Allard (1997).   Allard (1997) accounts for this by the increasing number of young people being forced to live longer with their parents since the introduction of benefit changes and changes in housing policy since the 1980s, causing particular pressures that eventually force young people to leave home.

Of the young people monitored as part of Shelter's multi-agency monitoring project in Sheffield between November 1996 and October 1997, 31% named family breakdown as the predominant issue. Abuse, either sexual, physical or emotional, is often concealed within these statistics, with 11 out of the 19 staff I spoke to giving this as a major cause, and 13% of Shelter's monitoring sample reporting to be fleeing actual or fear of violence, abuse or some other form of harassment (Shelter(1997)).   Doogan, in Bramley et al (1988), believes much family breakdown is often related to poverty and financial friction at home, and 8 of my respondents supported this claim.   In addition, 8

mentioned friction caused by the integration of a new partner into the family unit and the problems arising from step-families. Indeed, a recent national Scottish survey of 4,000 young people found that step-children were disproportionately represented among those leaving home early, with 44% of young people with a step-parent at 16 years old leaving home by the time they were 19, compared with 33% of those living with a lone-parent and 27% of those living with both parents (Jones (1994)).

Other reasons given by my 19 respondents included drug abuse (4), pregnancy (3), overcrowding (3), lifestyle clashes/need for independence (2), and peer group pressure (2). Two respondents indicated that a drug or alcohol addiction of the *parent's* is often a contributory factor. Such evidence, from my own research and supported by a body of literature, substantiates a recent Centrepoint study showing that 86% of young homeless people had been forced to leave home, rather than leaving of their own accord (quoted in Blair (1998)). It may be that, backed by Central Government's acknowledgement of this truth, the stereotypical image of homeless young people and the myths surrounding their reasons for leaving the parental/guardian home, as perpetuated by the Conservative ideology of the 1980s, may finally be corrected.

3.5 Conclusions

The causes behind the continued growth of youth homelessness are, therefore, both national and more personal but, it is on the national level that change must first occur if the incidence of homelessness amongst 16 to 25 year olds is to decline.   Young people face a typical pattern of discrimination and disadvantage, not only in the labour market and in terms of their access to appropriate accommodation (Greve (1991)), but also in terms of the current welfare and legislative system as it pertains to young people in housing need.   There is ample evidence of young and unemployed people being excluded from private rented accommodation (Gosling (1990), Oxley (1994)), and the National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness finds that three-quarters of landlords prefer to rent to someone who is working (Evans (1996)). Traditionally, the public sector has rarely catered for young single people, and changes to the benefit system a decade ago have made it increasingly difficult for the under 25s to survive financially away from, or even within, the parental/guardian home.

Put simply, the main reasons for young people becoming and remaining homeless are that there is not enough money available to them and not enough suitable accommodation to house them (Greve (1991)).   The consequences of these short-comings are far-reaching. Without a permanent address, young people are led into the "no home, no job, no job, no home" circle (Oxley (1994)), and become vulnerable to such things as ill health, depression, drug abuse, crime, and physical and sexual abuse, leading them further down the path of social exclusion and discrimination.   Gosling (1990:9) believes that "the growing crisis of homelessness amongst young people makes it a national scandal," and it is because of this that the information needs of these young people and the role of information as a preventative measure should be properly addressed.

CHAPTER FOUR: A REVIEW OF RECENT LITERATURE

This chapter will look at current thought on both the information requirements of young people in housing need and the role of information in preventing youth homelessness, as identified by the literature.

4.1 The Information Needs of Young People in Housing Need

As already mentioned, in terms of the information requirements of young people in housing need the literature, as identified by my literature search which I feel was as thorough as possible in the time available, is quite limited.   Consequently, alot of what was read, and appears on the bibliography, does not appear as part of this literature review.   The lack of discourse on the information needs I found to be quite surprising, and of particular note in texts such as O'Brien (in Blackwell and Kennedy (1988)), Abrahams and Mungall (1989), Ainley (1991), Coleman and Warren-Adamson (1992), Ovrebo (in Jahiel (1992)), Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Bhugra et al (1997), with the scope of each of these texts suggesting either a focus on young people or on the views of service users.   I believe this lack of data is critical, as the information requirements of young people in housing need *should* be identified and understood so that information services can be planned and used more effectively, and staff better trained and equipped to meet a range of needs.

Despite this, however, there is a wealth of literature on youth homelessness in general, from which the information needs may be *inferred*, even if they are seldom explicitly stated, and the importance of information to those in housing need has been recognised.   Waters (1992) finds advice and information to be among the 4 main needs expressed by single homeless day centre users, and McCluskey and

Allard (1997: Factsheet 5) state that "the needs of homeless young people are complex and are not solely accommodation related."   Kuehn (1991) reiterates this complexity and the interdisciplinary nature of homelessness which, it can be assumed, gives rise to a variety of different areas of information need.

McCluskey (1993) calls for the need for information and support on the emotional, practical and financial levels and, indeed, there are 6 key areas of information need that can be identified from the literature. Information is primarily needed on housing options and resettlement, the benefits available, employment and training opportunities, lifeskills such as budgeting, cooking and studying, healthcare and ongoing support.

The need for information regarding housing options is, perhaps, obvious, and indeed (Hutson and Liddiard (1994:46)) state that "homelessness is, by definition, a housing issue."   However, by adopting a definition of homelessness which includes not just those who are literally roofless, but also those in temporary or unstable accommodation, a more complex interpretation of housing need evolves.   There are 3 main accommodation types available to young, single homeless people, as illustrated by Garside et al (1990).   These are emergency, medium-stay (approximately 18 months to 2 years) and long-stay or permanent.   Pleace (1995) notes that most temporary accommodation meets only the basic housing needs, and often has the added problems of poor physical conditions and an atmosphere of fear and prejudice.   Many in crisis accommodation, therefore, need information in order to find a home which is permanent, safe, secure and affordable (Garside et al (1990), Bunnin et al (1994)).   Information regarding realistic housing options in terms of resettlement thus emerges as an important need, as indicated by recent research on residents in

YMCA Foyers who articulated a need for more help in finding move-on accommodation (Quilgars and Anderson (1995)).

A second important area of information need covers the complex and confusing system of benefits available to under 25s, and especially to 16 and 17 year olds.   Allard (1996), reporting on 2 residential weekends with young people between 16 and 24 years old who had experienced homelessness, found that information regarding the benefits system emerged as one of the key topics of concern from the young people themselves.   Bunnin et al (1994), in a study of single homeless people of all ages approaching advice services in London, found 71% to be neither working nor studying, but only 66% of these were claiming Income Support.   Evans (1996) finds evidence to suggest that young people are even less likely than average to claim and receive the benefits they are entitled to.   This may be due to a variety of reasons, including a lack of confidence or services which are inaccessible to young applicants, but a lack of information on what young people are entitled to is certainly a contributory factor.   Authors such as Gosling (1990), McCluskey (1993) and Pleace (1995) have recognised the importance information on benefits has in providing the vital financial assistance and support that young people need, and the complexity of the situation following the changes of the last decade further highlights the need for clear information in this area.

The rise in youth unemployment has already been outlined in Chapter 3.21, and the need for more information on training opportunities and appropriate courses of action has been identified by several authors.   McCluskey (1994) highlights a need for more information and guidance regarding finding employment, and Evans (1996) believes that a strategy helping young people into education,

training and employment would be one of the most effective ways of tackling the clear link between unemployment, poverty and homelessness.

Research carried out by Rowlands and Seddon (1996), however, presents an interesting contra-indication to this need for information on accessing employment and training opportunities. They undertook a case-study research project in Scotland based on the Viewpark Project, a hostel for 16-25 year olds. They found that, although staff at the project strongly indicated that the residents needed more help and information on finding educational courses, part-time work and voluntary work experience, a significant proportion of residents did not want his help. For example, in terms of accessing educational programmes as preparation for employment, 45.5% of residents wanted the appropriate information while a substantial 27.3% did not. Regarding finding part-time work, again 45.5% of residents wanted information, while 27.3% did not; and in terms of gaining voluntary work experience, 36.4% of residents did not want this kind of information, compared to only 18.2% who did. Rowlands and Seddon (1996) therefore conclude that, while those not wanting this sort of information are in the minority they nevertheless constitute a very significant minority, reflecting the low priority given by some young people in housing need to information regarding education, training and employment. These findings echo my own research conclusions on the need for information in this area, and the fact that the perceived need for such information varies between housing worker and young person in housing need.

The development of lifeskills to assist young people when they do move onto long-term accommodation is given importance by several

authors, including Gosling (1990), Garside et al (1990), McCluskey (1993, 1994) and Pleace (1995).   Such skills include budgeting, cooking, studying, housekeeping, numeracy and literacy, and the provision of information around these areas acknowledges that "the problems of long term homelessness are to an extent due to lack of skills, knowledge and social development" (Rowlands and Seddon (1996:5)).   My own participation in lifeskills programmes at The Roundabout Project will be outlined in the following chapter, and conclusions drawn about the type of information need I could infer from my own participative observations.

Both Pleace (1995) and Evans (1996) identify the need for information on health.   The links between housing need and poor physical and mental health are generally recognised, and a survey conducted by the Department of the Environment in 1991 found that young homeless people, especially those under 18 years old, experience even more health problems than their older counterparts (quoted in Evans (1996)).   Young homeless people also experience poor access to primary and secondary health services (Stark in Jahiel (1992)), and both Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Evans (1996) find a strong relationship between homelessness and mental health problems.   Hutson and Liddiard (1994) point out the "cause and effect" nature of this issue, stating that mental illness makes young people vulnerable to homelessness, affecting their ability to live independently, and that homelessness can "cause and exacerbate mental illness" (Hutson and Liddiard (1994:64)).

A survey undertaken by the Mental Health Foundation in 1995 (quoted in Evans (1996)) found that a quarter of young homeless people had attempted suicide in the past year and were twice as likely to suffer

from psychiatric disorders than young people who were not homeless. Yet, despite this disturbingly high incidence of mental health problems, the majority had not been appropriately diagnosed and, of those who had, only 15% had received treatment.

Links have also been made between homelessness and drug/alcohol misuse (Hutson and Liddiard (1994), Evans (1996)), although there is some disagreement over the validity of these links in terms of *youth* homelessness.   Another "cause and effect" issue, in 1994/1995, 54% of a national drugs project's (Turning Point) London clients were homeless (Evans (1996)), and Rossi (1989) finds strong links between alcohol or drug abuse and homelessness among *older* groups (quoted in Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   However, Hutson and Liddiard also quote evidence from Randall (1988) to suggest that *young* homeless people misuse alcohol and drugs with no more frequency than their housed counterparts.   Conversely, research carried out for Turning Point's Hungerford Project in 1995, found that only 17% of 837 young homeless people in the West End of London identified themselves as *drug free,* and the charity suggests that it is rare for young people to acknowledge that their drug or alcohol use is a problem.   In addition, Evans (1996) suggests that, as many homeless projects refuse to accommodate drug users, young people tend to conceal their drug use in certain circumstances.   My own research helps to clarify this situation, and highlights a need, as prioritised by young people themselves, for simple and clear information about healthcare and the services available.

Finally, both Garside et al (1990) and McCluskey (1993,1994) acknowledge that "young homeless people often need ongoing help and support in addition to accommodation" (McCluskey (1994:21)).   From

interviews with residents on 25 different premises, Garside et al (1990:121) found that "continued support once they had moved into more permanent accommodation was desired by just over half of the sample," with 37% of these requests coming from residents under 25 years old. Ongoing support includes the provision of information on lifeskills, already mentioned, as well as information on other support services available, social contacts, legal, financial and medical information and accessing advocacy support and, most importantly, must be "flexible, appropriate and geared to need" (McCluskey (1993:8)). Whether or not these ongoing information needs are deemed of importance by staff and young people alike, and whether they are met in practice, will be addressed in the next chapter when my research findings are discussed.

4.2 Information - A Preventative Measure?

It is interesting to note that educational initiatives relating to leaving home and homelessness began over a decade ago, with several authors calling for preventative work in schools and youth clubs at around the same time (O'Mahony (1988), Greve and Currie (1990), Gosling (1990)). In 1987, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations called for information on leaving home to be part of the school curriculum, in order that "leaving home...be placed in a context and preventative work...begun with those who felt the need to move away" (O'Mahony (1988:142)). In 1993, Centrepoint produced a *Leaving Home Project Training Pack for Teachers* and, in 1994, the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation produced *A Housing Education Resource Pack* "in response to a need highlighted by teachers, youth workers and housing staff, for basic information on housing and directly related issues (Oxley (1994:1)). This pack was based on the premise

that the provision of appropriate information can facilitate preparation for leaving home, thus avoiding the need to leave in an unplanned way as a response to a crisis situation. The theory is that this, in turn, will help to avert homelessness. Consequently, the pack included information on preparing to leave home, where to get help and advice, housing options, claiming benefits and the realities of homelessness.

Earlier this year, Shelter produced *One Person's Ceiling is Another Person's Floor: A Teacher's Guide to Housing, Homelessness and Young People,* outlining housing policy and the realities of leaving home. Every secondary school in the country is to receive the pack, and the intention is that information on housing issues and leaving home should become an integral part of the national curriculum. It should be stressed that such information packs, in outlining the realities of leaving home and the available options, in no way aim to intimidate young people into staying at home, which, more often than not, is not a real option. Rather, they are intended to facilitate leaving home in a planned way, with a knowledge of where to go for help and how to exercise one's rights.

The Code of Guidance accompanying Part III of the 1985 Housing Act outlines the duty of each Local Authority to carry out preventative work. The Local Authority obligation, and the rationale behind it, is worth quoting in full:

> "Education is crucial to help young people cope with independent living, and to ensure that they are aware of the risks of homelessness. Housing Authorities should therefore liaise closely with Local Education Authorities to get schools to include projects on housing and homelessness on their

curricula. Young people should be encouraged to discuss, and be given information on, housing options so that they have a realistic idea of leaving home and living independently, and of the potential pitfalls" (Department of the Environment (1994: 4-2490)).

Similarly, under Section 139 of the Housing Act 1996, each Local Authority has a duty to ensure the availability of information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness (Evans (1996)), so it is perhaps worth considering why such initiatives as those described above have had such negligible impact, as indicated by the further attempt by Shelter and the fact that 90% of young people still do not receive housing information while at school (The Big Issue in the North (1998)).

During the 1980s the attitude prevailed, fuelled by the Conservative Government, that a significant proportion of homeless young people left home voluntarily and through choice. Nicholas Ridley, the then Secretary of State for the Environment, announced that

"we should do nothing to tempt young people to leave home, particularly when they do not have a home of their own to which to go" (Hansard Vol. 149 p.1075, quoted in Hutson and Liddiard (1994:58)).

O'Mahony (1988:142) believes that, at that time at least, "doing something positive in this area is interpreted as encouraging the young to leave home," and this might go some way in explaining the low uptake of educational initiatives over the last decade. It was an attitude recognised by the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation who, in

their information pack, pointedly emphasised that the whole concept of providing housing information at school was in no way intended to encourage young people to leave home.

In addition to this hindering attitude, the duty of the Local Authority to provide housing education is blurred.   While in the 1994 Code of Guidance we have seen evidence of the acknowledgement that information can be used as an effective preventative measure, the same Code of Guidance also states that Local Authorities have a duty to try to prevent homelessness "only in relation to those threatened with homelessness" (Department of the Environment (1994: 4-2488)).   This clearly does not include all school pupils, and therefore provides Local Authorities with a clause justifying why housing education is *not* provided in schools.

Jahiel (in Jahiel (1992)) and Hutson and Liddiard (1994) also outline the problems inherent in primary preventative campaigns, such as the long latency period before any results are seen and the largely unquantifiable nature of these results, which may further account for the low level of current preventative work in schools as opposed to the more immediate provision of services to those in housing need.

In addition to housing information provided by *teachers* as part of a preventative campaign, O'Mahony (1988) and Oldfield (1998) also illustrate the benefits of *peer education*.   O'Mahony (1988:162-163) believes that "if skilfully and carefully helped, young people can become an immense fund of support and practical help for each other," and Oldfield (1998) reports on the Homefront Initiative, a youth homelessness prevention project in Bristol.   Drawing on the experiences of young people who have been or who are homeless, the

Homefront Initiative visits schools, youth clubs and children's homes throughout the country providing information on the realities of leaving home in an attempt to prevent young people leaving home in an unplanned way, and so increasing their risk of becoming homeless.   The young people working for the Homefront Initiative are trained in assertiveness, teamwork, public-speaking and video-making, and so the project benefits, not just those young people facing leaving home, but also their peers involved in providing the education.

It is, therefore, the belief of authors such as O'Mahony (1988), Greve and Currie (1990), Gosling (1990), Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Evans (1996) that "information can...be an important part of a preventative campaign to show young people the risks of leaving home" (Hutson and Liddiard (1994:153)).   Evans (1996) entitles the second part of her report for the National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness "Prevention is Better than Cure," and advocates early support and information as necessary to facilitate a successful transition from childhood to adolescence.   The views of staff working with young people in housing need and those of the young people on the role of information in preventing youth homelessness will be discussed in Chapter 6, and it will be seen that housing workers are far less willing to associate information with actual *prevention* than the authors are.

4.3 Conclusions

It has thus been illustrated that, although the literature pertaining to the specific information needs of young people in housing need is surprisingly quite scarce, 6 areas of information requirement can be inferred. These cover the areas of housing options and resettlement, benefits, employment and training opportunities, the provision of lifeskills, healthcare and ongoing support. The role of information as a preventative measure, as made available in schools and also in youth clubs by both teachers and peers, has also been looked at. O'Mahony (1988:141), writing a decade ago, stated that "much more needs to be carried out in schools so that leaving home becomes an integral part of the curriculum and is not just something that is added on to programmes in the final term," and Shelter have now taken up this challenge. Although the impact of this latest preventative measure is too early to assess as yet, the value of prevention and the role of information in this area has been recognised by Central Government (Blair (1998)), and so a climate may be developing in which the provision of housing information to those of secondary school-age is accepted.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS:
THE INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS OF

YOUNG PEOPLE IN HOUSING NEED

Before the findings of my research are discussed, it is perhaps worth repeating the methods of data collection used, as outlined in Chapter 2. In the final instance, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff working in the housing field or who come into contact with young people in housing need.   Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the needs of those facing or experiencing homelessness, I was keen to interview staff, not just based at the Youth Information and Support Centre or at The Roundabout Project where I worked as a volunteer, but also in other organisations which might reflect this wide range of need.   The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre put me in contact with those from other organisations, and I eventually interviewed those from both the statutory and voluntary housing sector, health projects, the Youth Service and the Careers Guidance Service, all of whom have regular contact with young people in housing need.

To obtain the opinions from young people in housing need I used a questionnaire, the primary aim being to keep it short and simple. After only 8 responses from young people with a housing need presenting at the Youth Information and Support Centre, I extended my base and left questionnaires at the Careers Guidance Service and at Nomad Plus, a housing project.   This produced a further 8 completed questionnaires.

Although the data from all 16 questionnaires is highly relevant, there is an unfortunate discrepancy in detail and openness in response between those young people with whom I conducted a "mini-interview" at the Youth Information and Support Centre, and those questionnaires

filled in elsewhere which, I suspect, were completed by the young person alone in a much shorter time and, consequently, in far less detail. There is, therefore, an unfortunate inconsistency in the method of data collection from young people, and this will be taken into account when the research findings are discussed. Of the young people completing the questionnaires, 6 were male and 10 were female, with the youngest leaving home at 14 years old and the eldest at 21 years old.

My final method of data collection from both staff and young people was my own participative observation, arising from my voluntary work at the Youth Information and Support Centre and at The Roundabout Project. At the Roundabout Project, I was able to become involved in the lifeskills programmes, the rationale being that I would be able to find out the needs of young people by inferring from the kinds of questions they asked and the lifeskills sessions they attended. I hoped that volunteering at The Roundabout Project might also give me the opportunity to talk with young people about their experiences. At the Youth Information and Support Centre, I was able to witness the handling of enquiries and observe the kind of information requested by those in housing need, as well as being able to talk to the young people myself. My voluntary work at the Youth Information and Support Centre was of greater success in this respect than that at The Roundabout Project but, nevertheless, I was able to draw some interesting conclusions from my involvement in the lifeskills programmes especially. This shall be discussed as part of my research findings.

From the qualitative data obtained from these 3 methods, I hope I have been able to make significant generalisations from specific information which may be applicable to all organisations, be they from

the field of housing, education, health or careers, who come into contact with young people in housing need.

5.1 The Information Requirements of Young People in Housing Need - the Perceptions of Staff

One of the clearest themes to emerge from my interviews with staff was the distinction between immediate and long-term information needs, something which the literature failed to identify. The Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter felt that there was a "need for different information and different advice at different stages" of the young person's progress through their housing difficulties, and this was a view also indicated by the Business Manager and a Project Worker at The Roundabout Project, and by the Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre. Thus a hierarchy of need emerges, with the immediate needs of physical security - food, shelter, warmth - coming before longer-term requirements, such as health or training opportunities.

This pattern is directly reflected in the ranking of the information needs of young people in housing need, as perceived by staff working in this area. Out of the 19 staff interviewed, 13 prioritised the need for information on housing options, including how to access housing services, and an equal number stated the need for information on benefits; eligibility, how to claim, where to go, how to complete the necessary forms and so on. This need for information on housing options and how to access accommodation, and on the benefits system directly correlates with the need as suggested by the literature.

The area of ongoing support was, similarly, given priority by the staff and also highlighted by the literature consulted. Nine interviewees stressed the importance of providing information on practical issues and 7 mentioned the importance of ongoing support, of which I would suggest information on practical issues is a significant part. The support mentioned included informing the young person where they can get cheap furniture, what other support services are available to assist them, where they can buy cheap food or do their laundry, local information, tenancy support and support finding permanent, move-on accommodation. Both a Youth Worker based in the Careers Guidance Service and the Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre stressed the importance of ongoing support for those who have secured their first tenancies, with a lack of such support creating a situation of high turnover of council properties, with young people not surviving on their own and, once again, experiencing homelessness. The Senior Housing Aid Officer felt that:

> "We (*The Housing Aid Centre*) are not in a position to offer ongoing support....that's one of the problems. Most agencies I think are *reactive* to problems."

A need therefore is identified for a more structured system of ongoing tenancy support, though it should be stressed that the Housing Department at Sheffield City Council does include a tenancy support team, and Nomad Plus is well established, a scheme aimed at supporting young people starting out in a new home. However, the Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council, while acknowledging the good work of the tenancy support team, felt the system as it exists at present is not very successful. She felt the one-to-one support currently offered does not work particularly well with this client group, having undertones of a

parental relationship.   As a consequence, she is currently looking at other ways to support young people in their tenancies, exploring the possibilities of group work and the potential role of peer education.

The question of providing information on health-related issues proved to be amongst the most significant of findings.   Eight out of the 19 interviewed mentioned providing health information to those in housing need, with 5 of these prioritising information on drug issues. The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator and the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team were amongst those who stated the importance of health information and who were best placed, in terms of their roles, to discuss the types of health need that arise amongst young people in a housing crisis.   Both agreed that there has been a cultural shift amongst young people and that this has precipitated a change in emphasis from sexual health needs to needs associated with drug misuse.   Interestingly, both the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator and the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team have found that drug misuse amongst young people is increasingly including alcohol misuse, previously largely the domain of the older "street-drinker," although there was some uncertainty as to whether alcohol consumption amongst young people is actually increasing or simply being admitted to more (the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator).

This evidence may help to explain Randall's (1988) assertion that there is *no* link between youth homelessness and high alcohol consumption (quoted in Hutson and Liddiard (1994)).   Randall (1988) was writing a decade ago and it would appear that this rise in alcohol misuse is a more recent phenomenon.   If indeed there has been a rise in alcohol consumption amongst young people in housing need, this should

be acknowledged by those providing healthcare information to this client group.

As already indicated, there appears to have been a shift away from the need for information on sexual health issues by young people in housing need.   The Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team was informed by staff at The Roundabout Project that their residents were not interested in sexual health issues anymore, and the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator felt that information about contraception was not a priority amongst those in housing need, though the clinic was often attended for pregnancy tests and the provision of emergency contraception.   This continued use of emergency sexual health services perhaps indicates that, while young people may not be actively calling for it, the need for sexual health information still exists. Mental health was another area of health information need mentioned by 3 of the 8 interviewees who rated health needs highly.

It is worth noting the rapid growth of the Youth Clinic in Sheffield since it opened in 1991.   The clinic has developed from offering just 1 to currently 4 drop-in sessions per week, serving between 115 and 140 young people on a weekly basis.   This is indicative of the high priority *young people* are giving to their health needs, as will be further illustrated in Chapter 5.2.   However, despite this, the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team felt that young people, especially young men who may feel that accessing health services is an expression of vulnerability, constitute the group that consistently do not appear to access a service.   Conclusions will later be presented as to whether staff in the housing field are promoting and prioritising the health needs of young people in housing need to the same extent as this client group themselves are.

Conversely, while there is evidence to suggest that staff do not rate health needs as highly as the young people do, the opposite seems to be true of training, educational and employment opportunities. The need for information in this area was presented by 7 respondents, although 3 of these did acknowledge that it was not an immediate information need but a longer-term need, as illustrated by one of the Project Workers in The Roundabout Project's emergency accommodation hostel:

"Very often, in the 2 weeks that people are staying here, it's actually not a priority at all."

However, with 7 out of 19 interviewed claiming this to be an important area of information need, the provision of information in this area is given some emphasis. That young people do not rate it with the same priority will be illustrated later.

Another area of information need mentioned by staff surrounds that of lifeskills. Six interviewees mentioned this as an area of information need, with a further 5 acknowledging its importance when prompted. Topics frequently arising included budgeting, cooking, healthy eating, literacy, numeracy and study skills. There was some consensus that lifeskills programmes are not simply about the provision of information, but also involve developing the skills of teamwork and building one's own self-confidence, assertiveness and self-esteem. This was a view shared by the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus, a lifeskills support programme aimed at supporting young people in their first tenancy, 3 Project Workers at the Roundabout Project, the Young Person's Furnished Accommodation Officer at the Housing Department,

Sheffield City Council and the Senior Re-housing Officer at the Housing Department, Sheffield City Council. One of the Project Workers at The Roundabout Project clearly stated that

> "I don't actually think that their main purpose is information. I think the main purpose is confidence building and....*somebody who's got confidence can access information.*"

The Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus agreed with this sentiment, but did also firmly acknowledge that the provision of information is part of the process of building one's confidence and self-esteem. Thus, the provision of information in the area of lifeskills can be said to start a cycle of self-development, with information and knowledge increasing self-confidence which, in turn, increases one's ability to access information on a range of issues.

There was some disagreement, however, on the relevance lifeskills training has for *all* young people in housing need and what emphasis it should be given by staff. The Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre believed that

> "In terms of the information needs....I think lifeskills are fundamental...and...where the biggest gap is."

He ranked the provision of lifeskills, housing and benefit information as the key, and immediate, information requirements of young people in housing need. A City Centre Youth Worker, however, felt that the provision of lifeskills information to young people did not tend to have any relevance to them until later, after the accommodation and financial needs have been met. The priority *young people* give to lifeskills

information will be discussed shortly, and I am able to draw some conclusions from my own participation in the programmes at The Roundabout Project.

Other areas of information need mentioned by staff included information on leisure activities (3), counselling services (2), mediation services (2), debt management (1) and legal rights (1). Of these, the low number naming counselling services is of particular significance, as will be illustrated in the next section when the information needs according to the young people themselves are assessed, and it will be illustrated that, like health needs, there is a significant discrepancy in the importance given to information on counselling services by staff and by young people respectively. The need for information surrounding mediation services in an attempt to repair broken family relationships will surface again in Chapter 7, when ways of improving the provision of information will be discussed.

It is also notable that only one interviewee mentioned the need to provide young people with information about their legal rights to accommodation. McCluskey (1993, 1994) found that many young people in housing need were unaware of their rights to housing, especially under the Children Act 1989. She called for more widely publicised information targeted at young people to fill this information gap. However, staff in this area clearly did not feel that this was a priority area of information need and, interestingly, neither did the young people from whom I collected data. It is possible therefore that, with a plenitude of complex issues to resolve when facing or experiencing homelessness, young people are happy for someone more experienced to initiate the legal process for them and to take the lead in

this.   Staff appear to recognise this and, possibly, the danger of information overload with a very vulnerable group of young people.

5.2 The Information Requirements of Young People in Housing Need - the Perceptions of the Young People

The areas of information need prioritised by young people in housing need proved to be similar to those given by staff, but with a significant variation on emphasis on several areas, notably training, education and employment opportunities, health and counselling services.   As with the staff members, the need for information on accommodation options and benefit entitlement was ranked highest by the young people, with 15 and 11 out of the 16 young people in the sample naming these needs respectively.   Interestingly, the young people surveyed expressed a greater need for information on *move-on* accommodation (15 out of 16) and on the ongoing support available than on *emergency and immediate* accommodation (11 out of 16).

This reflects the importance of ongoing support to young people in housing need, as indicated by the Senior Housing Aid Officer and mentioned previously.   It is also interesting that a City Centre Youth Worker felt that young people do not tend to ask what ongoing support is available to them.   This is perhaps symptomatic of young people not wishing to appear vulnerable and attempting to assert some personal control over their situation.   If this is indeed the case, staff need to be aware of this and ensure that ongoing support and options for move-on accommodation are readily offered and made available, without it necessarily having to be asked for.

A significantly higher proportion of young people indicated the importance of information on lifeskills than staff did, with 10 out of the

16 respondents claiming the need for this information and 2 unsure, compared with only 6 out of 19 staff members mentioning it unprompted.   The areas of need most frequently cited were budgeting and study skills.   However, there is a very notable discrepancy between what the young people said they wanted in relation to the provision of lifeskills information and what I observed in reality; observations supported by comments from various staff members.

For example, a City Centre Youth Worker felt that young people, on the whole, do not tend to think about the area of lifeskills, and the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus talked about the problems she has regarding low and inconsistent attendance at her lifeskills sessions, which are targeted at those already in, or awaiting, their first tenancy. The lifeskills programmes offered at The Roundabout Project are directed primarily at young people who are at a slightly earlier stage of the re-housing process than this, being largely for residents in the short or medium-stay hostel, although those in the more permanent cluster houses are free to access the sessions also.

During my time as a volunteer at The Roundabout Project, I was meant to be involved in the provision of 7 lifeskills sessions on a variety of topics.   Of these 7, only 4 actually went ahead due to no attendance at the others; and of these 4, attendance stood at 6 (sexual health and drugs awareness), 3 (drugs awareness), 2 (women's health), and 1 (sexual health).   To put these figures in perspective, there are a total of 41 bedspaces at The Roundabout Project; 7 in the direct access/emergency hostel, 8 medium-stay bedsits, and 26 long-stay cluster house spaces.   The 3 sessions that were not attended at all were to be on budgeting, living independently, and drugs awareness.

Although, through my participative observation, I was able to record positive comments describing these sessions as "educational" and opinions stating that lifeskills sessions are useful in "helping you to live on your own," the poor attendance rate strongly indicates that young people are not prioritising lifeskills, despite my findings suggesting that young people recognise their value.   It was seen earlier that the Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre ascribed substantial importance to the provision of lifeskills information, ranking it on a level with housing and benefits information, but it seems clear that, for the young people themselves, it is *not* a priority.

In this area, therefore, staff are faced with a challenge.   The majority of young people seem to want lifeskills information and recognise the need for it.   However, far fewer are actually taking up opportunities to attend sessions, such as those run by Nomad Plus and at The Roundabout Project.   This may raise issues of publicity and promotion, but also begs the question of how best to convey this type of information to young people in housing need, and through what methods.   The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council summed up the dilemma thus:

> "My major reservation is, the ones you are going to get there are the ones who are motivated, and there is a whole group out there who are not that far down the line.....How do you motivate those other young people to even get to that next stage?"

The fourth area of information need identified by the young people was the need for information on training or educational opportunities and on finding employment.   Nine out of the 16 who completed a questionnaire expressed a need for this type of information,

with another 1 unsure.   I feel, however, that this relatively high proportion may need qualifying.   Five out of these 9 completed their questionnaires at the Careers Guidance Service and, therefore, I would tentatively question the impartiality of their response.   I did not get the opportunity, unfortunately, to speak personally with any of these 5 people.   Of the 8 young people with whom I did conduct a "mini-interview," 4 emphatically stated that they did *not* want this kind of information.   These young people commented that they already knew how to get a job, or that getting a job was not a problem; the difficulty was getting one they could enjoy.   One young person said that, when you are moving from place to place, employment or training opportunities are only ever at the back of your mind.

I would suggest therefore, from my conversations with young people, that information of this nature is not a priority for young people in housing need.   If the 5 who responded at the Careers Guidance Service are treated with caution, only 4 out of 16 young people said they would like this information, compared with the 7 out of 19 staff who considered it to be of importance.   This correlates with the findings of Rowlands and Seddon (1996) presented earlier, and thus it seems that staff may give greater emphasis to these information needs than the young people do.

The fifth area of information need identified by young people was that of health.   Four out of 16 indicated a definite need for information on health issues, and another 4 indicated a possible need.   Statistically, this may appear to be quite low but, once again, I would like to qualify this finding and suggest that, in fact, young people in housing need assign much more emphasis to health needs than these statistics would suggest, and possibly more so than many staff in the

housing field, with only 7 out of 19 mentioning the need for information on health issues.

Firstly, as already illustrated, only 4 out of the 7 lifeskills sessions I was supposed to be involved in at The Roundabout Project went ahead due to no attendance at the other 3. I think it is significant that each of these 4 sessions were on health related subjects - drugs, women's health and sexual health. Secondly, the phenomenal growth of the Sheffield Youth Clinic since it opened in 1991 from 1 clinic per week to 4, with a turnover of around 115 to 140 young people each week, indicates that young people, in general, are highly prioritising their health needs. Unfortunately, the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator had no statistics available to indicate the proportion of these young people attending who are in housing need, but with their high level of outreach work and publicity and their links with hostels throughout Sheffield, there is no reason to presume that young people in housing need are not accessing this service. Indeed, in a recent survey conducted by the clinic to ascertain potential use of a counselling service, housing ranked fourth out of 11 issues young people said they would like to speak to a counsellor about.

There is also some evidence to suggest that many young people in housing need may not admit, or even recognise, that they have a health need. One young person I spoke to told me at some length about his previous problems with drugs misuse but, when I asked him if he had ever considered himself to be in need of health information, he answered no. Indeed, the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team, as already mentioned, felt that some young people, especially men, tended not to confront their health needs for fear of appearing weak or vulnerable.

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In addition, the 4 respondents who answered a definitive "yes" to the need for health information were all interviewed by me, whereas the 4 who were unsure completed questionnaires at the Careers Guidance Service. Understandably, the responses on the questionnaires I received from young people varied considerably between those I spoke to personally at the Youth Information and Support Centre, who went into far greater detail and were considerably more open and frank in their responses, and those who answered outside of the Youth Information and Support Centre and without me present. A wide range of health needs were revealed by those I spoke to at the Youth Information and Support Centre, including mental health, drug misuse, sexual abuse, eating disorders and self-harm. I believe these issues are perhaps too sensitive for alot of young people to trust to a faceless researcher, as I must have appeared to those answering outside of the Youth Information and Support Centre.

Consequently, I feel that young people in housing need are indicating a very strong need for information on health issues, and more so than the statistics from the sample group suggest. I also believe that, considering this, there is a distinct possibility that young people are placing more emphasis on their health needs, even if they are "voting with their feet" as the growth of the Youth Clinic might suggest, than many staff in the housing field are aware of.

A final significant area of information need may be inferred from the findings from both staff and young people. The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator has recently conducted a survey amongst young people attending the clinic to ascertain whether young people feel there is a need for a counselling service to be established within the clinic.

Although at the time of writing, official statistics from this survey were unavailable, the Nurse Co-ordinator felt that the results would show approximately 2 to 1 in favour of setting up this service.   In addition, information needs mentioned under the "other" category of the young person questionnaire included how to deal with personal relationships, personal development and bereavement - needs which could perhaps be met through a counselling service.   However, only 2 staff interviewed mentioned the need for information on counselling services for young people in housing need (and one of these was the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator conducting the study).   Therefore, it would appear that young people are recognising this as an area of information need, while the majority of staff are not.

5.3 Conclusions

The findings from both staff and young people themselves reiterate the importance, omitted by the literature, to distinguish between the immediate and the long-term information needs of young people in housing need.   There is consensus among the 2 sample groups that the immediate information needs are those of housing options and benefit entitlement.   Within the bracket of housing options however, young people emphasise the need for information about move-on accommodation to a greater extent than the staff (15 out of 16 young people mentioning this need as opposed to 9 out of 19 staff members mentioning the need for practical help, and a further 3 indicating the need for ongoing support, including finding move-on accommodation and offering tenancy support).   There does, therefore, appear to be a need for more information on the ongoing support available, including such things as finding a first tenancy, tenancy support and where to access cheap furniture and food.

There is also a slight, but nonetheless significant, difference in emphasis between staff and young people in housing need in the areas of health information provision and information on training schemes, educational opportunities and employment.   In terms of healthcare needs, both the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator and the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team have noticed an increase in the incidence of young people in housing need presenting with problems relating to alcohol misuse, and a decrease of interest in sexual health information.   Overall, using my own participative observations from The Roundabout Project's lifeskills programme, the rapid growth of the Youth Clinic and the range of health needs identified by those I spoke to personally as evidence, I would suggest that young people are lending more weight to their health needs than many staff are.

The same is true of information about counselling services.   The survey conducted by the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator suggests that 2 to 1 young people in general would use a counselling service, but only 2 members of staff interviewed identified this need.   It is perhaps accurate to suggest therefore, that more information should be provided, and not necessarily only if asked for, on available counselling services, and what counselling has to offer.   A recent conference, "Building Bridges" held in May 1998 for voluntary and community groups working with children and young people, also identified this need and the need for information on health, and reported that

> "Young people's counselling services and support for health needs to be developed" (Sheffield City Council et al (1998:46)).

In terms of information on training schemes, educational opportunities and employment, it seems that this is an area of information need that is of more importance to the staff than to the young people in housing need.   Staff ranked this third (7 out of 19 respondents) while young people ranked it fourth (9 out of 16 respondents), with over half of these (5) answering at the Careers Guidance Service.   Statistically the difference may be slight, but nevertheless I feel the emphasis is important, with 50% (4 out of 8) of the young people I interviewed emphatically saying they did *not* want this kind of information.

In terms of the provision of information relating to lifeskills, such as budgeting, cooking, living independently and studying, the situation is somewhat blurred.   Young people in housing need *appear* to be giving it greater emphasis than staff (10 out of 16 young people mentioning the need for it, compared to 6 out of 19 staff), but evidence of poor attendance from both the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus and my own observations at The Roundabout Project seems to contradict the interest expressed by young people.   It is, therefore, suggested that staff face the challenge of converting this interest, which reflects a recognition of the need for such information, into more positive action. The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council suggested that it can be difficult to get young people to commit to something which has no immediate, tangible results, and staff in this area need to consider, therefore, how to rise to this challenge.

Finally, it is worth repeating that only 1 member of staff and no young people mentioned the need for information on the legal entitlements of young people in housing need; a need identified by McCluskey (1993, 1994).   In all other areas however, there is a general

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consensus between those areas of information need inferred from the literature and those identified by both staff and young people.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH FINDINGS:
INFORMATION - A PREVENTATIVE MEASURE?

As a direct consequence of some of the attempted educational initiatives of the last decade previously outlined (The National Council of Voluntary Organisations 1987, The Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation 1994, Shelter 1998), I was interested to gauge the response

of both staff and young people to these initiatives.   I wanted to learn whether staff felt their impact to be negligible due to the complexity of the reasons forcing young people to leave home, or whether they were considered useful as a means of directing and informing young people, or even whether they were considered to be a direct contributory factor to the prevention of youth homelessness, as the literature would suggest (O'Mahony (1988), Greve and Currie (1990), Gosling (1990), Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Evans (1996).

The need for preventative work, and not just crisis work, emerged as a key issue during the Vulnerable People Task Group event in July 1998.   The nature of this preventative work was a further area of interest to me and, consequently, I also asked staff what sort of information such educational packs should contain.   Thoughts on peer education and outreach work also surfaced, and the findings relating to information as a preventative measure shall be presented next.

6.1 The Perceptions of Staff

Six out of the 19 staff members interviewed believed unequivocally that information has a clear role to play in the prevention of youth homelessness.   The Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre felt that information in schools, school libraries, public libraries and youth clubs

> "would be fundamental in helping to prevent youth homelessness - making people realise what it actually *means* ...giving people access to practical resources."

It is interesting to note that, following the production of the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation's *Housing Education Resource Pack* in 1994, the Housing Aid Centre in Sheffield offered to go into local schools to provide some housing education.   No school took up the offer.   Consequently, the Senior Housing Aid Officer stressed that, to be fully effective, such information must be an integral part of the national curriculum due to the pressures already facing teachers, a view supported by the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team.   Those supporting the role of information as a preventative measure talked about the part pre-emptive information can play in assisting informed choices and preparations in leaving home.   A City Centre Youth Worker commented that

> "regardless of what the issue is, the most important thing is giving people factual information."

The majority of staff however (11 out of the 19 interviewed) had reservations about the contribution information given at an early stage could actually make to the *prevention* of youth homelessness.   Most of these reservations centred on the lack of choice the vast majority of young people have in leaving home early.   As the Business Manager at The Roundabout Project said

> " I'm not sure of the role of information in *preventing* it.   If some of the major causes of youth homelessness are actually things like abuse at home, how is information going to help that?"

The general consensus was that information could certainly *educate* but not actually *prevent,* and that prevention was an over-optimistically high aim.

The Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team felt that information on homelessness would challenge homeless stereotypes and help to remove the stigma attached to being homeless by promoting an understanding of how people can find themselves in that situation.   A Youth Worker at the Careers Guidance Service, and 3 Project Workers and the Business Manager at The Roundabout Project all felt that information given at school was important in raising awareness of the support services available and in developing the confidence to access these services.   A City Centre Youth Worker and the Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter believed the provision of information was important, not so much in preventing people from leaving home, but in ensuring that when young people *do* leave home, it is in a *planned* way.   The Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Project spoke of having supported 2 or 3 schemes in the past, all of which had "died a death."   There does, therefore, appear to be unanimous support for information on leaving home and homelessness to be given at an early stage, despite disagreements as to its actual or potential role.   However, in the past the lack of a systematic, co-ordinated approach between housing projects, the Housing Department and the Local Education Authority has blocked any efforts.

The Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre believed that it is

> "fundamental... for anybody who is reaching the age of 15 or 16 onwards to have basic information about how to find

accommodation (*and*) what sort of skills are needed to keep the accommodation."

There was indeed general consensus amongst all the staff interviewed as to the kind of information an educational pack should contain.   Eleven interviewees believed information should be provided, primarily, on the places young people in housing need can go to for support and information.   Seven wanted information to be provided on the realities of living independently, including living on very little money, coping with isolation, and the reality of life in a hostel.   The importance of providing information that challenges stereotypes and preconceived ideas was mentioned by 4 respondents, and given particular weight by the Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team and the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus, both of whom felt that raising issues of how people get to their position in life, including those who become homeless, was an important way of the challenging the stigma attached to homelessness.   Four respondents also felt information should be given on mediation - how relationships might be repaired, how you can maintain a life at home and what mediation services are available to help you to do so.   The role of mediation will be more closely assessed in the next chapter on improving the provision of information to young people in housing need.

Other areas of information to be contained within educational packs included the legal obligations of the Local Authority (3 respondents), benefit entitlement (2), the advantages and disadvantages of living at home (2), and lifeskills information (1).   Shelter's recent pack, *One Person's Floor is Another Person's Ceiling: A Teacher's Guide to Housing, Homelessness and Young People,* covers these areas

comprehensively, although it impact in real terms can only be speculated on at the current time.

The importance of *outreach work* as a preventative measure was also recognised by 5 respondents. One of the Youth Workers based at the Careers Guidance Service mentioned that her and a co-worker were trying to get out into schools more, having acknowledged that

> "lots of young people don't have the opportunities to think out what leaving home really involves...leaving home early."

Both the Young Person's Furnished Accommodation Officer and the Senior Re-housing Officer at Sheffield City Council agreed that people in the housing field were better placed to inform and to facilitate a planned approach to leaving home than teachers are; something with which the Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre agreed. Unfortunately, as has already been mentioned, offers from the Housing Aid Centre to visit schools following the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation's information pack were turned down. The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre has had a similar experience. Going into a school to talk about contraception and sexual health, she was asked if there was anything else she would like to speak on. She suggested housing and homelessness, but the school resisted. There are indications, therefore, that the education system is currently failing young people facing homelessness. Local Education Authorities may agree with the theory, but they do not appear to be putting it into practice. It will be interesting to learn whether Shelter's current attempts to remedy this situation succeed.

The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator drew some interesting comparisons between the provision of sexual health education in schools, at times systematic, at times quite ad hoc, and the total lack of a comparable housing education programme.   She spoke of the "teaching it encourages attitude" that she often encounters regarding sexual health education, and wondered if, as applied to leaving home, this could account for its non-existence (in her experience) in schools:

> "I've never seen anything on housing information in secondary schools."

By contrast, the Youth Clinic provide every secondary school in Sheffield with a sexual health notice board, outlining all the sexual health services available to young people in the City.   The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator felt that to provide something similar in the way of housing services would not present too much of a problem, and could be of considerable value.

At the Vulnerable People Task Group event, the possibility of using the school nurse to convey housing information in addition to their more usual role was aired.   The Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter mentioned having spoken to some school nurses who were indeed interested in extending their remit to housing and homelessness issues.   The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator agreed that school nurses do provide an excellent service, but felt that proper consideration must be given to their already extensive workload.

The role of *peer education* in preventing youth homelessness also surfaced at the recent Vulnerable People Task Group event, and was mentioned by 4 of the interviewees.   The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council, speaking of the possibility of educating people

into *not* becoming homeless, believed that starting the education at around age 16 was too late.   She felt that information on leaving home and homelessness should be delivered to those 13 years old and onwards, and should, ideally, come from their peers:

> "Peer education, or as close as you can get to it, works best with the young client group."

A City Centre Youth Worker described peer education, based on the experiences of those who have faced or are facing homelessness, as more "hard hitting," and a Youth Worker based at the Careers Guidance Service commented that, in comparison to teacher education,

> "peer mentoring, producing that information and passing that information on....would probably be more of an advantage."

The Project Worker for 16-21 year olds at the Social Services Planning Section did comment, at the Vulnerable People Task Group event, on the importance of carefully planned peer education, ensuring that the young people involved in the education are given proper training, support and supervision, and that tokenism is avoided.   Following the kind of model demonstrated by the Homefront Initiative in Bristol, described earlier, the use of peers to educate young people could be managed very effectively, ensuring the benefits run both ways.

The use of information at an early stage, *before* young people are forced to leave home in an unplanned way in response to a crisis situation, therefore emerges as a measure of some importance. Whether such information can actually *prevent* youth homelessness is more actively debated, with the majority of staff feeling that this is

perhaps unrealistic in light of the complex reasons behind youth homelessness.   A smaller, but still significant, proportion of staff advocated the benefits of both outreach work in schools, as initiated by those working in the housing field, and peer education.   The views of the young people on the provision of information at a stage preceding their housing crisis will now be discussed.

6.2 The Perceptions of Young People in Housing Need

Of the 16 young people who completed a questionnaire, 11 felt that the provision of information at school or at a youth club *before* they had been forced to leave home would have helped to avert their homelessness or, at least, would have prepared them for what to do and where to go.   One commented that, although she had a fairly good idea of how hard leaving home and coping alone was going to be, some prior knowledge would have helped her to access the appropriate services more quickly.

Of the 5 remaining respondents, 3 felt that information given at school would not have been useful, 1 was unsure, feeling that he already knew where to go without being told at school, and 1 did not answer this question.   Of the 3 who did not feel that it would be of any use, one commented that

"you ignore everything you hear at school anyway,"
and one other felt that people might be tempted to leave home too early.

Both these doubts could be addressed by a carefully planned and delivered programme.   The Shelter pack, for example, contains a mixture of self-directed exercises, groupwork and discussions to

facilitate learning, and in no way attempts to glamorise leaving home or paint a picture of living independently as a kind of Utopia.   The realities of leaving home and the options available are outlined in such a way as to neither intimidate young people into staying in an intolerable situation, or to tempt young people to leave for what might be perceived, wrongly, as an easier life.

It is unfortunate, and a regrettable limitation, that I did not ask young people for their views on the value of peer education.   However, one young person who had been struggling with homelessness and drug dependency for 6 years commented, unprompted, that he would like the opportunity to go into schools and tell his story.   He said that, until 6 years ago, he felt that he had everything.   By telling his story, he believed he would be able to explain how easy it can be to lose everything, thus removing some of the stigma associated with homelessness, and educating young people of the realities of homelessness and of the support services available.

6.3 Conclusions

There is, therefore, a high level of agreement between the staff interviewed and the young people consulted that information on housing and homelessness given to young people *before* they leave home would be of considerable use.   The majority of staff, however, did not believe that information could actually *prevent* youth homelessness, as the literature suggests (O'Mahony (1988), Greve and Currie (1990), Gosling (1990), Hutson and Liddiard (1994), Evans (1996)).   The Business Manager at The Roundabout Project stated that

> "Giving all the information you like is not going to stop youth homelessness,"

but that a well planned housing education programme could give

> "information in a way that enables them (*young people*) to access services themselves."

The role of information in averting homelessness is therefore more one of *education* than *prevention,* and is a role which the young people of the sample recognised as well.

There was a general consensus between the literature read and the staff interviewed as to the kind of information housing education programmes should aim to convey.   Identifying places to go to for support and information and outlining the realities of living independently are the priorities, but information also has a valuable role to play in challenging stereotypes, raising awareness of the mediation services available, and explaining the legal obligations of the Local Authority and benefit entitlement.

The potential role for peer education was recognised by a significant proportion of staff, and endorsed by one young person spoken to.   The need for more active outreach work by staff from the housing field in schools was also identified.

Information, given at a stage prior to leaving home, thus has an important role to play in educating young people about the realities of leaving home but ultimately, in terms of preventing youth homelessness,

"only.... a decent welfare benefits system and a proper housing system would completely eradicate it" (Project Worker at The Roundabout Project).

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPROVING THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN HOUSING NEED

Part of my research was aimed at ascertaining the extent to which the young people surveyed were satisfied with the information they had received since leaving home. This level of satisfaction will be presented next, along with the range of services accessed by young people in order to obtain this information. It will be seen that, although on the whole young people seem to be content with the information received, they are generally acquiring this information in an unstructured and unsystematic way. Consequently, ways in which the provision of information might be improved will then be put forward, as suggested by both my research findings and the literature consulted.

7.1 Are Young People in Housing Need Happy with the Information Received?

Out of the 16 young people in the sample, 8 said they were happy with the information received, compared to 6 who were unhappy and 2 who did not answer this question. Of the 8 who were satisfied, 3 had accessed the Homeless Section of the Housing Department and 3 the Youth Workers at the Careers Guidance Service, 1 had rung around hostels herself, 1 had been to the Youth Information and Support Centre, and 1 had turned to friends for information. That the majority were content with the information they had received since leaving the parental/guardian home reflects positively on the work of staff in this area, and the wide range of information sources used, from leaflets and posters to reference material and other colleagues.

However, a very significant minority (6 out of 16) indicated dissatisfaction with the level of information received. One felt that the service she had accessed had "palmed me off," while another spoke of being sent from place to place. These complaints suggest that young

people often feel that they are not dealt with effectively at the place at which they present. Therefore, before ways of improving information provision are looked at, the range of places a young person in housing need might visit for information and support will be considered.

7.2 The Range of Information Access Points

Staff were asked where young people might go to access information to help them in a housing crisis, and young people were asked where, indeed, they had been.   Both groups in the sample prioritised the Homeless Section at the Housing Department (8 out of 16 young people, and 14 out of 19 staff).   Other ports of call cited included voluntary agencies, the Careers Guidance Service, the Youth Information and Support Centre, Social Services, hostels, schools or colleges, the Probation Service, Sheffield Information Services at the Central Library, Citizen Advice Bureaux and Housing Associations.

This list is fairly extensive and not necessarily representative of the most efficient service.   Indeed, the Senior Re-housing Officer at Sheffield City Council felt that

> "the way the system's set up at the moment, it would be quite difficult for a young person to know where to go."

This indicates that there is a need to structure and streamline the provision of information to young people in housing need to facilitate the accessing of information in a more systematic way.

7.3 Improving the Provision of Information: Suggestions from the Literature

In consensus with staff opinion, discussed later, the literature advocates a more co-ordinated, efficient approach as the best way forward in terms of improving the provision of information.   O'Mahony (1988:155) believes that "in general the picture is one of a vast number of people doing a great deal of good work largely in isolation," and this need for better co-ordinated information is also stressed by Hutson and Liddiard (1994).

It is something that has been recognised centrally and on a national level, as indicated by the recent Government funding of a "Streets Tsar," with a £145 million budget for an initial 3 year period. This "Tsar" is to appointed by March 1999 to develop strategies to reduce homelessness in England by two-thirds by 2002 (Hall (1998)). The "Tsar" will essentially be a national co-ordinator, assisted by 6 similar specialists in Birmingham, Oxford, Manchester, Cambridge, Brighton and Bristol to facilitate local co-ordination.

Kuehn (1991), McCluskey (1993) and Hutson and Liddiard (1994) all call for the adoption of a multi-agency approach to maximise this co-ordination.   McCluskey (1993,1994) names voluntary agencies, the Housing Department, the Department of Social Security, the Department of Education and Employment and Social Services as the major players in the provision of information to those in housing need, and believes that each body must listen to and learn from the other. Hutson and Liddiard (1994: 153) find that "many agencies emphasise the importance of appropriate information networks for resolving the problem of homelessness," and these networks are clearly best achieved by a policy of open communication and co-ordination *between* agencies, not just *within* agencies.

Miller-Huey (1994), in his research designed to show the positive measures that public libraries in the USA are taking towards the problem of homelessness and to examine policies regarding user conduct, found that a significant proportion of homeless people do make regular use of public libraries, and are welcomed into public libraries.   He sent questionnaires to public libraries in 60 of the largest metropolitan areas of the USA, and received 37 responses.   He found that 43.2% of the respondents provide reading materials in centres for the homeless, 86.4% refer homeless users to night shelters, day centres and other projects, and 56.7% allow persons without a permanent address to be issued with a library card.   Of this latter group, the number of cards issued ranged from 2 or 3 a week to over 1,000 per year.

This illustrates that, in the USA at least, libraries are participating in the multi-agency approach taken towards homelessness, and are being frequently accessed by homeless people.   I would suggest therefore that, with their policy of open access, public libraries are ideally placed for the provision of basic information to those in housing need, especially in terms of signposting and informing people of where to go for further assistance.   Indeed, as mentioned, 86.4% of Miller-Huey's sample *do* refer homeless users to other projects and, extending this good practice to the UK, would further broaden the access of homeless people to information.

O'Mahony (1988) believes that by increasing the amount of outreach work undertaken, and by mobilising the young in terms of peer education, the provision of information to those in housing need would be further improved.   These measures have already been discussed in

some detail in Chapter 6, in terms of using information as a preventative measure.   O'Mahony (1988) also believes that by improving the skills of staff working with young people in housing need, and ensuring that workers recognise the values of homeless young people and have the ability to see the world through their eyes, the provision of information will be further enhanced.   It is my hope that this research, by identifying the needs and priorities of homeless young people in terms of information, will go some way to achieving this aim.

7.4 Improving the Provision of Information: Suggestions from Research Findings

One of the most frequently cited means for improving the provision of information mentioned by the staff interviewed was the need to share information, developments and resources, and to improve communication and co-ordination between the services.   It was a theme that emerged at the Vulnerable People Task Group event and was explicitly recommended by 8 of those interviewed and also by 1 young person, who commented that there seemed to be a need for better communication between agencies, arising from his personal experience of some services he had used not knowing about the Youth Information and Support Centre.

The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council felt that

"there's a great need for co-ordination and to actually *move* information, not just internally but *across* boundaries."

She wanted to

"extend the support and information-sharing beyond just the group within a particular organisation to make it cross-organisation and multi-agency."

The benefits of the multi-agency approach, which has already been developed in Sheffield in terms of the multi-agency assessment procedure for 16 and 17 year olds in housing need and in the formation of the Vulnerable People Task Group, a collaboration of various voluntary and statutory agencies working with vulnerable people, were spelt out by several respondents.   The Senior Re-housing Officer at Sheffield City Council described the multi-agency approach as being

"about young people accessing the.....most appropriate route for themselves,"

and her colleague, the Young Person's Furnished Accommodation Officer, believed such an approach

"will make the service a lot more accessible for young people"

by offering a one-stop, consistent approach for all young people, who will be able to acquire information wherever they present.   The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council mentioned plans for a one-stop information shop within the next few years and, if this comes to light, such an initiative will certainly further facilitate the easier access of information.

The Co-ordinator of the Homeless Assessment and Support Team mentioned the advantages of sharing information in terms of

avoiding duplication. Matthew (1988:7) believes "one of the most common problems which occurs in nearly all communities is the duplication of information on the same subject because organisations are unaware of initiatives elsewhere" and, considering that the provision of information is highly resource-led, avoiding such duplication would be particularly beneficial. The Young Person's Furnished Accommodation Officer at Sheffield City Council mentioned how

> "it's quite difficult for us centrally to find out what's going on in each area,"

considering that there are 15 different housing areas across the City. Sharing information therefore would also improve communication issues, and help to build and maintain an ongoing dialogue.

The Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter felt that many individual organisations tend to have a very detailed, but rather small, network of knowledge, and do not have the information necessary to constitute a broader picture. She felt, therefore, that by sharing information and adopting a multi-agency approach, the training and understanding of staff dealing with a wide range of issues would improve. This sharing of skills and expertise was also mentioned by a Youth Worker at the Careers Guidance Service as a benefit of the multi-agency approach.

Interestingly, only 1 of the staff members interviewed mentioned the use of Information Technology to facilitate the sharing and distribution of information. The Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects felt that

"we need to have a database with up-to-date information on agencies."

He believed that using IT would facilitate information up-dating, and that there were significant benefits to be had by making information accessible to both staff and young people via the Internet. A recommendation of a recent conference, "Building Bridges", for voluntary and community groups working with children and young people is to

"use computers to link information" (Sheffield City Council (1998:36))

and, although the danger of information overload and potential difficulties in finding the appropriate database were aired at the Vulnerable People Task Group event, the potential of IT regarding the sharing of information, improving service co-ordination and communication may have been recognised.

The need for information to be better managed and kept up-to-date also arose from the interviews. Two Project Workers and the Business Manager at The Roundabout Project mentioned that the management of their information resources was very ad hoc, and things such as the acquisition and the up-dating of information would generally fall by the wayside compared to other staff duties which were more highly prioritised. The Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus experienced similar problems, although she was hoping that the imminent appointment of a part-time worker might go some way to the improved management of the information stock. The Young Person's Furnished Accommodation Officer at Sheffield City Council felt that, with legal

entitlements to benefits and housing changing with such regularity, keeping information up-to-date was a constant problem, and the Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator felt the same about the stock of sexual health information.   The report from the recent "Building Bridges" conference recognised and highlighted this need for information to be better managed, stating that

> "a need exists for someone to take overall responsibility to distribute information" (Sheffield City Council et al (1998:22)),

and this should be extended to include responsibility for up-dating the information.

Three Project Workers at The Roundabout Project and the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus all identified the issue of accessibility of information as an area which needs improving.   A Project Worker at The Roundabout Project said that the current stock of information at the Project

> "could be made more available to the young people; more immediately accessible,"

and this was a view supported by her co-workers.   Another Project Worker felt that young people could benefit if the information was better displayed, so that it was not a case of them having to ask for the information or, alternatively, having it forced upon them.   The Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus also felt that better displaying would promote more open access, and help to create an atmosphere where young people could obtain information about almost anything related to housing.

A young person in housing need who I spoke to also recognised poor access as a problem, and suggested that it would be beneficial and appropriate to have information about how to access emergency accommodation at public places, such as railway or bus stations. The need to bill-board information also arose at the recent Vulnerable People Task Group event, and would certainly be a resourceful and efficient way to improve information provision to those in need.

Linked to issues of physical access are issues of intellectual access, notably literacy. Information does not simply have to be readily available; it must also be relevant and appropriate, and this means being in a clear format and easy to use. The Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre felt that

> "the vast majority (*of information*) is not particularly targeted at young people."

He and 3 Project Workers at The Roundabout Project mentioned the low literacy levels of some of the young people who approach them in housing need, and of the importance of this being reflected in the information they can provide. Therefore, suggestions were made about the simplification of language and text, using different formats to convey information, recognising language differences, and making sources attractive to young people. The Youth Clinic Nurse Co-ordinator mentioned that young people who use the clinic are consulted about which posters they would like to see in the waiting areas, and chose the Youth Clinic contact card currently in use.

The issue of providing information on mediation services for young people facing leaving home has already arisen as a, somewhat neglected, information need of young people in housing need. Here, it is discussed in more detail as an improvement and an addition that should be made to the current provision of information. The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council described how the Homeless Section receive about 500 applications for re-housing from 16 and 17 year olds each year. However, the Local Authority re-houses successfully only about 1 in 3 of these young people; the rest drop out of the housing system at some unknown point. Whether they return home or find some alternative accommodation unaided by the Local Authority is not known. The fact that such a high proportion drop out of the housing system suggests to the Hostels Manager

> "the need for greater mediation really. Sometimes what they seem to need is time away from the situation....for people to cool down, and then *maybe* they can go back into that situation again."

Finding help maintaining a life at home if, and only if, the situation is manageable was also mentioned by 2 Project Workers at The Roundabout Project and by the Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre. It was also a need highlighted at the recent Vulnerable People Task Group event, and acknowledged in the recently produced Multi-Agency Assessment Guidelines. In considering all housing options for 16 and 17 year olds, assessors under the Children Act 1989 are now asked to consider the family home as an option, and to

"discuss the possibility of mediation with all young people and make referrals to South Yorkshire Family Mediation where it is felt appropriate" (Multi-Agency Assessment Guidelines (1998:10.3)).

It is stressed that young people should not be pressurised or forced into mediation, and that both parties must be willing. South Yorkshire Family Mediation is described as

"an independent service able to help young people and their families settle questions and differences around living together" (Multi-Agency Assessment Guidelines (1998:10.2)).

The fact that information is now being supplied on mediation services marks a considerable improvement. However, the Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre felt that there is still

"not enough information about mediation services....mediating between young people and their families."

Maybe the full impact of this recent improvement is yet to be felt, or maybe it still has some way to go before the need for information on mediation is completely satisfied.

The benefits of bringing information on housing and leaving home into schools have already been discussed in Chapter 6, but was mentioned again by 4 respondents in terms of how the current provision of information should be improved and is, therefore, worth repeating

here.   The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre felt that there was a need for

> "more information going into schools.....pre-emptive stuff,"

and 1 of the Youth Workers at the Careers Guidance Service said it would be beneficial to at least

> "give a pack out to each school-leaver of what resources there
> are throughout the City."

This could be a valid alternative if Shelter were to be unsuccessful in their current bid to get housing education onto the national curriculum, and would at least ensure that every 16 year old is provided with basic information relating to housing needs.

It should be stressed that, in many ways, Sheffield does represent a good model of information provision.   The multi-agency assessment procedure and the operation of the "bedbank," a single phone number from which agencies can find out which hostels have bedspaces available for any given night, are excellent examples of the multi-agency approach in process.   So to is the work of the Vulnerable People Task Group, which includes representatives of statutory bodies and voluntary and independent agencies, and aims to encourage the development of strategies which address the needs of homeless or rootless communities in Sheffield.   In addition Shelter, in partnership with Midland Bank, have recently produced a South Yorkshire directory outlining housing options as they relate to young people, and have distributed it to every local agency in South Yorkshire.   Finally, on 15th September 1998 the *Directory of Services for Young People in*

Sheffield will be launched, listing all statutory, voluntary and independent agencies working with the City's young people.

Sheffield, therefore, rates well in terms of information provision. However, as the suggestions from staff members indicate, there is still room for improvement, especially in the areas of co-ordination and communication, and management and accessibility. It is also important that service providers remember to learn from the young people they are serving. They appear to be seldom asked.

7.5 Conclusions

It has thus been seen that, although half of the young people in the sample were happy with the information they had received since leaving the parental/guardian home, half therefore were not, suggesting that there is room for improvement in the provision of information to young people in housing need. The numerous points of access for information indicate that the single most important step forward, as identified by both staff and literature, is the adoption of a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach which advocates the sharing of information. The report from the recent "Building Bridges" conference concluded that

> "the sharing of information is important as it leads to effective communication, responsibility and accountability" (Sheffield City Council (1998:24)),

and other benefits discussed with the staff interviewed included the avoidance of duplication, the expansion of networks of knowledge and improved staff training. The role of ICTs in achieving this has been

recognised, as has the importance of the one-stop shop, which is perhaps the ultimate goal of a multi-agency approach.

Better co-ordination between agencies must also be accompanied by better management of information stocks and more consistent and systematic approaches towards keeping information up-to-date. Issues of open access to information have been highlighted, and not just physical access but intellectual access also, with the need for information sources to reflect the low levels of literacy of some of the users. Improving information on mediation services was also suggested by some of the staff interviewed, and increasing the level of outreach work, peer education and information provision in schools was reiterated and advocated as a means of improving information provision.

Co-ordination, implying information-sharing and multi-agency working, is presented as the key however, by both staff in this field and by the literature consulted. The appointment by Central Government of a "Streets Tsar" recognises this importance, and may help to ensure that steps such as those already begun in Sheffield are adopted nationally. However, the variety and abundance of suggestions for improvements from the 19 staff members interviewed indicates that, even in Sheffield, there is still room for considerable improvement and that staff cannot be accused of complacency about what has already been achieved.

CHAPTER EIGHT: INFORMATION, ADVICE OR ADVOCACY: THE ROLE OF THE HOUSING WORKER

In this chapter, literature and field work will be combined to draw conclusions on the role of those working with young people in housing need and, specifically, on the long-running debate between giving information, giving advice and providing advocacy support. Much of the literature, (National Consumer Council (1977), Matthew (1988), Bunch (1993), Youth Access (1997)), suggests that the distinctions between these 3 concepts are often very blurred. It is beyond the scope of this study to assess in detail the role of staff working in this sector and to analyse any varying perceptions between staff and young people as to their professional role, but I was interested to ascertain whether staff working in the information sector considered there to be any notable distinction between information, advice and advocacy. I also wanted to discover any feelings of tension between the 3 concepts, and how staff predominantly defined their role. Definitions and current thought from the literature will be presented first, followed by a discussion of the research findings.

8.1 The Literature on the Information, Advice or Advocacy Debate

Bunch (1993:18) claims that "the process of information-advice-advocacy is often referred to as a 'continuum'." He believes that the boundaries between the 3 are blurred, and not often recognised by service users who may have expectations that go beyond the limitations imposed on an organisation. The latest report from Youth Access (1997) also implies very ambiguous distinctions between the concepts of information, advice and advocacy, and it is worth considering some definitions of the 3 terms.

Youth Access (1997) describe a young person's information service as one which enables young people to make decisions and choices, and Bunch (1993:17) describes advice as "information tailored

to individual need." This can be a fairly neutral activity, for example setting out the options from which a young person makes their own choices, or it can involve a degree of evaluation of available options and recommendations. By suggesting that giving advice can ever be a neutral activity, Bunch (1993) is implying that the boundaries between informing and advising are far from clear.

Advocacy is "needed where a client is not capable of obtaining the information, services, benefits or justice to which he or she is entitled" (Bunch (1993:17)). Matthew (1988) believes this often involves the act of referral to another agency but, essentially, it involves someone acting on the client's behalf. The National Consumer Council (1977) found that there was considerable variation among information agencies as to how far they were prepared to go with a client, and conclude that "all advice centres should be more aware that people have varying capacities to help themselves and that many people need more than just advice if they are to get their problems solved" (National Consumer Council (1977:73)). They believe that information and advice centres must, therefore, be prepared to undertake advocacy. Indeed, O'Mahony (1988:158) believes that advocacy is "an integral part of a wider preventative strategy," and that many young people would not leave home at all if advocacy was more readily available. Bunnin et al (1994) found evidence to suggest that the role of the housing worker is expanding to include advocacy; my own research findings will look at whether this is, indeed, the case.

8.2 Research Findings: The Role of Staff working with Young People in Housing Need

The vast majority of staff interviewed fully recognised and acknowledged their role in the provision of information, advice and advocacy services. In terms of information provision, 13 respondents named this as a major feature of their work. The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre described her main role as

> "the provision of information in order to allow young people to make the most informed choices,"

and a Project Worker at The Roundabout Project described herself as a

> "resource for young people to use."

Interestingly, an equal number of respondents, 13, described advocacy as a major aspect of their work. The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre mentioned how workers are often given more credibility than a young person, and have the advantage of not being a consumer of a particular service. A City Centre Youth Worker described how he is often asked to act as "the appropriate adult" in certain circumstances, and the Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre said that

> "we would try, wherever possible, to negotiate directly for them if....they wanted assistance."

Examples of advocacy work undertaken included liaising with other agencies, making phone calls and writing letters on the young person's behalf, accompanying them to court and elsewhere, and introducing them to other services.

Again, a significantly high number of staff (11) named giving advice as an important aspect of their work.   A Project Worker at The Roundabout Project felt that

"sometimes people want something very rigid that they can hold onto,"

and the Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre said that she is

"not necessarily completely neutral about all the information I am giving."

However, she stressed that any advice given is based on a sound information or knowledge base rather than on an uninformed personal opinion, and a City Centre Youth Worker and the Senior Housing Aid Officer at the Housing Aid Centre agreed that, if the young person asks for advice, you must take their lead and offer that advice.

Other roles mentioned by the staff interviewed included befriending and support (5), facilitation (2), mediation (1), and signposting (1).   It is significant however, that the overwhelming responses lay in the areas of information, advice and advocacy work and, as this directly reflects the literature pertaining to community information services, I was interested to find out if the staff interviewed identified any conflict or tension between these 3 dominant aspects of their work.

A Youth Worker at the Careers Guidance Service, while recognising and defining the different levels of information, advice and advocacy, perceived no tension at all between the 3, feeling that

> "all of them intermingle depending on the role....all 3 of them hold hands."

The Youth Information Worker at the Youth Information and Support Centre agreed with him, saying that the service they provide exists entirely for young people and, consequently, they will support and empower young people in any way necessary.

Others, however, were less convinced that these 3 levels of service co-exist quite so harmoniously.   The Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter felt that some agencies struggle with the issue of giving advice in addition to information, and felt that giving advice can be quite dangerous without up-to-date information and the skills necessary to use and interpret that information.   She believed that, even when giving information, young people might interpret this as advice and so, consequently, agencies have to be careful to give information which they, on an organisational level, believe in.   A City Centre Youth Worker felt it was better, in general, to avoid giving advice and instead to present information and choices in such a way that encourages the young person to make up their own mind.   She did agree, however, that sometimes you are explicitly asked to advise and then you should oblige, but with caution.   The Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects was clear that he never gives advice, and a Project Worker at the Roundabout Project was emphatic that

"I *don't* see my role as advisor.   I don't think I know best what young people should be doing."

However, it is unlikely that young people themselves recognise the potential conflict between receiving information and receiving advice and, from my research findings, young people predominantly said that they *did* want advice.   Twelve out of the 16 young people in the sample said that they wanted and needed advice, compared with only 2 who did not want advice and 2 who were unsure.   Of the 12 who wanted advice, 8 felt they were appropriately given it.   Others felt they could have been given more guidance, and one felt it would have been useful to get the opinions of "professionals" about the best choices to be made.

It seems, therefore, that some staff working in the housing sector are more cautious about giving advice than young people would like them to be.   Although 11 out of 19 staff interviewed recognised that providing advice is an important part of their role, a significant minority did not perceive this to be part of their work.   It is possible that a proportion of these prefer to leave it to other agencies with more experience of advising, as the Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects indicated.   However, three-quarters of the young people surveyed wanted advice or some sort of guidance that surpassed simple information.   It is possible, therefore, that there is a discrepancy between what young people need and what some staff members are prepared to offer.

A similar picture emerges in terms of the provision of advocacy support.   The Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter felt that

> "in terms of advocacy, I think there is a *really* important role to play there which hasn't been fulfilled in Sheffield."

This opinion is of interest considering that 13 out of the 19 staff interviewed *did* recognise advocacy as an important aspect of their work, thus apparently contradicting the perceived inadequacy of advocacy support identified here.   However, some significant comments from staff did emerge as part of my research.   Both the Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects and the Business Manager at The Roundabout Project spoke of a limited role regarding advocacy, both supporting the belief that it is best to give

> "information in a way that enables them (*young people)* to access....services themselves." (Business Manager, The Roundabout Project)

Both these staff members talked about encouraging self-reliance, and supporting young people to take important steps themselves, and the Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects said that

> "it's only on the rare occasions that we'll actually step in and make the phone calls and referrals for another person."

Others freely acknowledged the difficulties inherent in providing an advocacy service.   A Project Worker at The Roundabout Project, a City Centre Youth Worker and the Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council spoke of the difficulties of performing an advocate's role within one's own organisation.   The Project Worker at The Roundabout Project felt it was difficult to properly take on the role of advocate on

behalf of a young person within the organisation in which you work when you cannot act totally independently of that organisation.

It was interesting that a City Centre Youth Worker, the Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council, and the Senior Re-housing Officer at Sheffield City Council all spoke of the difficulties of being part of a statutory organisation and acting as advocate. The Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council felt that young people often do not regard the Tenancy Support Team in particular as part of the Housing Department and, consequently, do not fully understand their limitations. The Senior Re-housing Officer at Sheffield City Council was reluctant to describe herself as an advocate, preferring instead to use the term "facilitator." She felt that

> "we have to draw the line somewhere....we have a particular role and function and we take it as far as we can, but there are other agencies who are more able to take that (*advocacy*) on in the community."

The implication here is strong, suggesting that the independent and voluntary sectors are better placed to undertake advocacy work than the statutory sector. A City Centre Youth Worker, part of the statutory sector, agreed with this, but strongly felt that it need not present a difficulty; if handled professionally, there should be no tension.

It would appear therefore that, although staff are recognising advocacy as an important part of their role (13 out of 19 respondents), they may not be acting it out very convincingly. The statutory sector may have particular problems in this area, and yet 8 out of the 13 who

claimed advocacy support as part of their role were from the statutory sector. This contradiction is further compounded by the conclusions of the recent "Building Bridges" conference that "advocacy to help a young person to put their views forward is non-existent or inadequate" (Sheffield City Council et al (1998:39)), and there appears to be some discrepancy between what staff members perceive their role to be and how it operates in practice.

8.3 Conclusions

The importance of flexibility in the role of those working with young people in housing need was mentioned by several interviewees; the need to respond to needs as and when they arise and to allow the young person to determine the appropriate level of professional staff involvement. Taking this flexibility into account, information, advice and advocacy emerged as the 3 key areas of the staff's work.

The importance of advocacy in helping young people to solve problems, and even as part of a preventative strategy, has been recognised by the literature (National Consumer Council (1977), O'Mahony (1988)). Bunnin et al (1994) indeed suggested that the role of the housing worker was expanding to include an element of advocacy. With 13 out of 19 interviewees claiming this to be part of their role, it would seem, in theory at least, that she was right. In reality however, limitations on the degree of advocacy work being undertaken are revealed. Both the Young Person's Resource Worker, Shelter and the recent "Building Bridges" conference claim the provision of advocacy support to be sorely lacking. Concerns were raised by several respondents that advocacy may be disempowering to the young person and a driving force of self-reliance emerged, as best

summarised by the Project Manager of the Cathedral Breakfast and Archer Projects:

> "we'll support you and encourage you, but you must make that step yourself."

Others, predominantly those from the statutory sector, spoke of the difficulties of acting as an independent advocate within your own organisation, which rather implies the need for an independent advocacy support service.

Tensions also emerged regarding giving advice in addition to information.   A significant proportion of staff expressed some hesitancy over giving advice, with only 11 out of the 19 interviewed unequivocally happy to do so.   However, the majority of young people surveyed (12 out of 16) wanted more than the simple provision of information; they were looking for advice also.   It may be, therefore, that often the advice that young people with housing difficulties need is not being offered to them.

The findings of this study therefore indicate that staff are very aware of the distinctions between information, advice and advocacy, even if the boundaries are blurred, as the literature suggests (Matthew (1988), Bunch (1993)).   Predominantly, staff identified their work with young people in housing need as encompassing all 3 of these concepts. Tensions, however, do exist around the areas of giving advice and undertaking advocacy work, and both emerged as areas still being debated.

CHAPTER NINE:

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary objective of this study has been to assess the information requirements of young people in housing need and to discover whether information has a role to play in preventing youth homelessness. In so doing, other issues associated with information and youth homelessness have also been explored, such as how the provision of information to young people in housing need might be improved and the role of staff in this field.

The research has been highly qualitative in nature, and the methodology has been divided into 2 categories - a literature review and fieldwork. The fieldwork took 3 forms; semi-structured interviews with staff working with young people in housing need, short questionnaires with young people in housing need, and my own participative observation based on 3 months of voluntary work at the Youth Information and Support Centre and The Roundabout Project.

Conclusions will now be made based upon the fieldwork undertaken and the literature consulted. Each chapter will be dealt with in turn and opinions summarised, before overall conclusions are presented and the final significance of the research study validated. Finally, recommendations for further study will be made.

9.1 Youth Homelessness in Context: A Growing Concern

This chapter looked at the scale of youth homelessness in Great Britain today, and the causes behind its significant increase since the 1980s. Although youth homelessness is difficult to quantify, the National Inquiry into Preventing Youth Homelessness (Evans (1996)) has calculated that at least 246,000 young people in the UK were homeless in 1995. Young people between 16 and 25 years old account for

around 25% of single homeless people, but constitute only 17% of the total adult population (Evans (1996)). Local statistics put together by Shelter as part of their multi-agency monitoring project between November 1996 and October 1997 found 896 people between 15 and 25 years old approached agencies in Sheffield alone.

The causes of youth homelessness may be considered on both a national and on an individual level. Nationally, young people have suffered the disadvantages of high unemployment and low pay, the introduction of benefit restrictions in 1988, and the reduction of suitable accommodation with a decline in the both the public and private rented sectors. Legislation has failed young people who, nationally, are rarely accepted for re-housing under the 1985 Housing Act, revised 1996. The 1989 Children Act, introduced as a kind of legislative safety net for 16 and 17 year olds, has been implemented inconsistently (McCluskey (1993, 1994)).

It was also illustrated, through the use of both literature and my own fieldwork, that young people rarely exercise an element of choice in leaving the parental/guardian home. The prevailing attitude of the last decade was that young people were, in a large number of instances, leaving home voluntarily. Thus, one of the greatest myths surrounding youth homelessness grew, and considerable research has been done in an attempt to explode this myth. My fieldwork showed family breakdown to be the predominant push factor forcing young people to leave home, with 17 out of 19 staff members frequently coming across this reason. This often conceals other factors, such as sexual, emotional or physical abuse, financial friction and the integration of a step-parent into the family unit.

9.2 Recent Literature: The Information Requirements of Young People in Housing Need and the Role of Information as a Preventative Measure

In terms of the information requirements of young people in housing need the literature is, unfortunately, quite scarce.   However, there is a wealth of literature on youth homelessness in general, from which 6 areas of information need can be inferred.   The first of these areas relates to housing options and resettlement, and is identified by Garside et al (1990), Bunnin et al (1994), Hutson and Liddiard (1994), Quilgars and Anderson (1995) and Pleace (1995).   The second area of information need covers the complexities of benefit entitlement, recognised by Gosling (1990), McCluskey (1993), Bunnin et al (1994), Pleace (1995), Allard (1996) and Evans (1996).   The need for information on training and educational opportunities, and on finding employment, can also be inferred from McCluskey (1994) and Evans (1996).

Several authors, such as Garside et al (1990), Gosling (1990), McCluskey (1993,1994) and Pleace (1995) also give importance to the development of lifeskills to prepare young people for greater independence.   There is, therefore, a need for information on such skills as budgeting, cooking, studying, housekeeping, numeracy and literacy.

A fifth area of information need relates to health, as identified by both Pleace (1995) and Evans (1996), particularly with regard to mental health and drug/alcohol misuse.   Finally, both Garside et al (1990) and McCluskey (1993, 1994) acknowledge the need of young people in housing need for ongoing help and support.   This includes the provision

of information on tenancy support, move-on accommodation, and other support services available.

The strength of information as a preventative measure is endorsed by O'Mahony (1988), Gosling (1990), Greve and Currie (1990), Hutson and Liddiard (1994) and Evans (1996).   Recent initiatives to bring education on housing and homelessness into schools include those by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (1987), the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation (1994) and, currently, Shelter (1998).   Due to an undercurrent of thought that "teaching it encourages it" and confusion surrounding the statutory duty of the Local Authority to provide preventative education but only "in relation to those threatened with homelessness" (Department of the Environment (1994: 4-2488)), so far such initiatives have met with poor uptake in schools and, therefore, have had a limited impact. Consequently, Shelter are pushing to see information on housing issues incorporated into the national curriculum.

9.3 Research Findings: The Information Requirements of Young People in Housing Need

In general, there is overall consensus between the 6 areas of information need inferred from the literature and those identified by both staff and young people in the sample.   However, my research revealed an important distinction between the immediate and the long-term information needs of young people in housing need.   There was agreement between the staff interviewed and the young people surveyed that the immediate areas of information need were related to housing options and benefit entitlement.   Young people, however, did emphasise the need for information on move-on accommodation and on

the ongoing support available to a greater extent than staff did.   This includes more information on finding a first tenancy, tenancy support, and accessing cheap furniture and cheap food.

In terms of health-related information needs, an increase in problems involving alcohol misuse has been identified, with a subsequent need for more information on these issues.   I would also conclude that young people are emphasising their health needs to a greater extent than staff are.   Only 7 out of the 19 staff interviewed acknowledged the need to provide information on health issues, but the rapid growth of Sheffield's Youth Clinic, my observation of attendance at The Roundabout Project's lifeskills sessions on health topics, and the range of health needs mentioned by the young people I spoke to personally would suggest that this is an area of substantial importance to young people.

A similar situation emerged regarding the provision of information on counselling services.   Only 2 staff identified this as an area of information need, but it would appear that young people voted approximately 2 to 1 in favour of the provision of counselling at Sheffield's Youth Clinic.   In addition, the recent "Building Bridges" conference urged that counselling services to young people be greatly developed.

The provision of information on training, educational and employment opportunities was also discovered to be of varying importance, with staff giving it more emphasis than young people. Statistically, this may not appear to be the case, with 7 out of 19 staff members naming it an area of information need, and 9 out of 16 young people.   However, 5 of these 9 young people answered questionnaires

at the Careers Guidance Service, and 4 out of the 8 I spoke to personally emphatically did not want this kind of information, while a further 3 were unsure.   In light of this, and Rowlands and Seddon's findings (1996) that training, education and employment needs are of more importance to staff than to young people, I would question the impartiality of the responses given at the Careers Guidance Service.

Significantly more young people mentioned the need for information on lifeskills than staff did (10 out of 16 young people, compared with 6 out of 19 staff members).   However, while young people clearly recognise the importance of lifeskills information, evidence of a somewhat contradictory pattern of behaviour emerges from my own experience of poor attendance at the lifeskills sessions at The Roundabout Project, supported by comments from the Co-ordinator of Nomad Plus about similar problems.   I would conclude therefore that, in the provision of information around lifeskills, staff face the challenge of converting the expressed interest from young people into positive action.

9.4 Research Findings: Information - a Preventative Measure?

There is a general consensus between staff and young people in housing need that information given at school or at youth clubs about housing and homelessness has an important role to play.   However, the majority of staff believed that information could not *prevent* youth homelessness, as the literature suggests, due to the complexities surrounding young people leaving the parental/guardian home.   However, information can facilitate young people to leave home in a planned way, with some knowledge of where to go and what to expect.   The role identified for

information *before* young people leave home is, therefore, one of *education,* not prevention.

There was agreement between the literature consulted and the staff interviewed as to the kind of information a housing education pack should contain.   The support available and the realities of living independently were prioritised, but also it was felt that such information packs had a part to play in challenging the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding homelessness, outlining the mediation services available and explaining the legal obligations of the Local Authority and benefit entitlement.

The potential role of peer education as a preventative measure was recognised at the recent Vulnerable People Task Group event and endorsed by 4 respondents, although care should be exercised to ensure its careful planning and implementation.   Extending the provision of outreach work was also recommended by 5 respondents as a means of educating young people into *not* becoming homeless.

9.5 Improving the Provision of Information to Young People in Housing Need

Eight out of the 16 young people in the survey were happy with the information they had received since leaving home, 2 were unsure, and 6 were not satisfied.   This suggests that there is room for improvement in the provision of information to young people in housing need.   My research highlighted the numerous points of access for information on housing-related issues, and it has been concluded that the most appropriate way forward is to adopt a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach as recommended by both the literature (O'Mahony (1988),

Kuehn (1991), McCluskey (1993), Hutson and Liddiard (1994)) and by 8 staff members interviewed.

Sharing information and resources would reduce duplication of effort, improve cross-organisational communications, expand networks of knowledge and improve staff expertise.   In Sheffield, the implementation of the multi-agency assessment procedure for 16 and 17 year olds, the formation of the Vulnerable People Task Group, the forthcoming launch of the *Directory of Services for Young People in Sheffield,* and the possibility of a future one-stop shop are all examples of important initiatives in this direction.   Nationally, the appointment of a "Streets Tsar" by March 1999 will aid the co-ordination of national and local programmes.   However, with nearly half the young people in the sample dissatisfied with the information they had received, Sheffield must further develop its admirable multi-agency efforts.

The need for better management of information stocks has also been identified, and the need for a more systematic approach to ensuring that information is kept up-to-date, possibly with the aid of ICTs. Issues of physical and intellectual access have also been raised, and it was recommended that information could be better displayed and access could be more open.   There is also a need for more information sources to be targeted at young people specifically, presented in an attractive way and in a format which reflects the below average levels of literacy of some young people in housing need.

9.6 Information, Advice or Advocacy: The Role of the Housing Worker

According to the literature, (Matthew (1988), Bunch (1993), Youth Access (1997), the distinctions between giving information, advice or acting as an advocate are blurred.   The staff interviewed, however, were quite aware of the differences between the 3, and they each emerged as the key areas of the housing worker's role with almost equal weight (13 out of 19 mentioned they give information, 13 mentioned they provide advocacy support, and 11 mentioned they offer advice).

Tensions however did emerge, and I would conclude that the picture is not as clear as these statistics might suggest.   In terms of providing advocacy support, while in theory 13 out of 19 respondents said they were involved in this, significant limitations surfaced.   The recent "Building Bridges" conference report found advocacy support in Sheffield to be "non-existent or inadequate" (Sheffield City Council et al (1998:39)), and doubts were raised by several respondents that advocacy may be disempowering to the client.   Others voiced concerns, especially amongst the statutory sector, of acting independently within one's own organisation, and this suggests a need for independent advocacy workers.

Contradictions also emerged regarding the provision of advice. Eleven out of 19 staff mentioned they give advice, while others revealed some hesitancy.   However, the vast majority of young people in the sample (12 out 16) said they wanted advice.   It is possible, therefore, that some staff members are being over-cautious at the expense of not providing young people with the service they want.

9.7 Final Conclusions

The following conclusions represent generalisations made from the specific data obtained.   It is hoped that these conclusions might help staff, in Sheffield and elsewhere, who come into contact with young people at varying stages of their housing need to provide a more efficient and more informed service.   It is also hoped that the information contained within this study might contribute to a heightened awareness of the information requirements of young people in housing need which, in turn, might positively affect the training of staff in the provision of appropriate information.   Together, information and training can lead to a more thorough understanding of youth homelessness and of the realities of using information as a preventative measure.

- The national causes of youth homelessness are high unemployment and low pay, benefit restrictions, a shortage of affordable accommodation, and the failure of the legislative safety net

- Young people do not leave home through choice; family breakdown is the predominant immediate cause

- Six areas of information need can be inferred from the literature; housing, benefits, training/educational/employment opportunities, health, lifeskills, and ongoing support

- There is a general consensus between the information needs inferred from the literature and those identified by staff and by young people in housing need

- Research findings draw a distinction between immediate and long-term information needs

- Alcohol-related health needs are increasing, with a corresponding need for more information in this area.   Interest in sexual health information is decreasing

- Young people appear to attach more importance to their health needs than many staff do

- There is a need for more information on counselling services

- There is a need for more information on the ongoing support available, especially tenancy support

- Staff appear to attach more importance to training, educational and employment needs than many young people in housing need do

- Staff face a challenge regarding the provision of information on lifeskills, in finding the best way to convey this type of information, and in converting the interest expressed by young people in housing need into more active participation

- The literature strongly recommends the use of information as a preventative measure against youth homelessness

- The majority of staff do not believe that information can *prevent* youth homelessness, but that it can educate and prepare young people for leaving home

- A potential role for peer education is recognised by both staff and by the literature

- There are currently too many points of access for information on housing issues, making some young people feel they are pushed back and forth between services

- The multi-agency approach is the best way forward in terms of improving information provision. A one-stop shop would be particularly beneficial in streamlining the provision of information to young people in housing need, and is perhaps the ultimate goal of the multi-agency approach

- There is a need for information to be managed and up-dated in a more systematic way, possibly with the aid of ICTs

- Physical access needs to be more open; issues of intellectual access need to be recognised

- Information, advice and advocacy constitute the 3 key areas of the housing worker's role

- Advocacy support, however, may be quite limited in practice

- A significant proportion of staff expressed concern about giving advice. However, the majority of young people would like advice

9.8 Opportunities for Further Research

As already indicated, this study into the information requirements of young people in housing need has been extended to consider the use of information as a preventative measure and consequently the potential role of the education system.   In 1993, Centrepoint produced a *Leaving Home Project Training Pack for Teachers* and in 1994 the Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation produced a *Housing Education Resource Pack* to be used at 16 years onwards in secondary schools. Earlier this year, Shelter published *One Person's Ceiling is Another Person's Floor: A Teacher's Guide to Housing, Homelessness and Young People* in order that teachers might be able to impart information and highlight the issues relating to leaving home, and will be sending the pack to every secondary school in the UK.

My research identifies some interesting opinions from both staff in this field and young people themselves as to the potential benefit and validity of such programmes, and I think it would be interesting to conduct some research into the take-up of such initiatives in schools and any measurable impact they may have had locally.

Secondly, there was a general consensus among those working with young people in housing need that the multi-agency approach is the way forward in terms of improving the provision of information to young people in housing need.   Such an approach represents a move away from the idea that the young person must go to the *right place* for information, to the idea that the young person should be provided with an information service *wherever* they present with their housing need. In light of this, on the 20th July 1998, the multi-agency assessment procedure was launched in Sheffield, a joint agreement between Social

Services, Housing Services, The Roundabout Project, SHED (a drugs project), the Education Department and the Careers Guidance Service to assess 16 and 17 year olds in housing need under the Children Act 1989 as they present themselves, rather than having to refer them on to Social Services.

In addition, the Hostels Manager at Sheffield City Council mentioned to me that when the Housing Department get a new building in 2 years time, they will be looking into the idea of having a one-stop information shop in that building.   Therefore, I also think there is the potential here for some research into the impact and effectiveness of this multi-agency approach on the provision of information to young people in housing need.

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Agency:

Job Title:

1.   What are the reasons commonly given by young people for leaving the parental/guardian home?

2.   Is this often the young person's first port of call? If not, where else might they have been?

3.   What do you consider to be the main information needs of young people in housing need (ie. what are the most frequently asked questions)? Housing, employment, benefits, training opportunuties, lifeskills, health..........?

4.   What sources of information do you have available for young people in housing need? What form does this information take (verbal/leaflets/posters....)? How effective do you think it is in meeting the information needs/how could it be improved?

5.   Do you think information has a role to play in *preventing* youth homelessness (ie. information made available before young people leave home)? If so, how do you think this information should be made available (at school, in youth clubs...)? What sort of information should it contain? (NB. Shelter's info. pack/teacher's guide, outlining housing policy and realities of leaving home).

6.   How do you regard your role as ....? (Advice V Information V Advocacy)

7.   How do you think young people perceive your role?

8.   Are you often required to take on the role of advocacy? If so, are you able to take on this role?

9.   **Roundabout Staff only:** Do you offer ongoing support to those you have housed more permanently? If so, what form does this take?

Appendix B

Questionnaire for young people in housing need

I would be very grateful if you could spend a few moments completing this questionnaire to help me with some research into the sorts of information young people in housing need might find useful. Confidentiality is guaranteed, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to. Please answer by circling the appropriate response where necessary.
Agency: YISC/Roundabout

1.   How old are you?

2.   Are you male/female?

3.   Is this the first time you have left home/lived away from home?
      YES
      NO
      If not, how old were you when you first left home?

4.   When you left, where did you go to first for information?

5.   Are you happy with the information you have received since leaving home?
      YES
      NO

6.　　Do you need information on any of the following (now or possibly in the future)?

Finding emergency accommodation	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Finding long term accommodation	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Benefits	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Finding employment	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Training Schemes	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Health matters,inc drugs, sexual health	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Lifeskills eg. cooking, budgeting, studying	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW

Any others? (Please give details)

7.　　If you have answered "YES" for any of the above, do you think you will be able to get the information you need on:

Finding emergency accommodation	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Finding long term accommodation	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Benefits	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Finding employment	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Training Schemes	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Health matters, inc. drugs, sexual health	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
Lifeskills eg. cooking, budgeting, studying	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW

Any others? (Please give details)

8.　　Would you like to be given advice as well as just information?
　　　YES
　　　NO
　　　DON'T KNOW

9.　　If you have ever asked for advice on your housing situation, did you get it?
　　　YES
　　　NO
　　　HAVE NEVER ASKED

10.　　Would you have found it useful to have been given some information on leaving home BEFORE you had to leave home, eg. at school?
　　　YES
　　　NO
　　　DON'T KNOW

11.　　Have you ever heard of:

The Foyer Schemes?	YES	NO
Self-build Projects?	YES	NO