

## Research briefing: Young, hidden and homeless

April 2012

### Introduction

This briefing outlines new analysis of a range of research into single homelessness amongst people aged 18-25. The study looks at people's experiences of homelessness including the reasons why young people first become homeless; their housing histories and backgrounds as well as the vulnerabilities they face and lengths they go to in order to avoid the harsh reality of sleeping on the streets. It also highlights their interactions with the care and school systems as children, as well as the support services they later come into contact with and what support they are offered. From these findings it considers what more needs to be done to tackle and prevent youth homelessness.

### Key points:

- All forms of homelessness, including youth homelessness, are on the rise.
- The biggest cause of homelessness for young people is being told to leave the family home by their parents. Other common causes are leaving care and being unable to pay rent.
- Young homeless people often do not get the help they need from local authorities or formal support services. Instead, they get by in hidden homelessness situations such as rough sleeping and squatting.
- Young homeless people are considerably more vulnerable than the overall homeless population. For example, 51% have been excluded from school, 40% have experienced abuse at home and 33% self harm.
- 30% have been in care, suggesting that the care system is not offering them the support they need.
- Young homeless people go to desperate measures to avoid sleeping rough, including committing a crime or resorting to sex work to get a roof over their head.
- Urgent action and early intervention is needed to prevent young homeless people developing higher needs and falling into long term homelessness.

### Rising homelessness

The research comes against a background of rising homelessness, after many years of falling or stable levels. In 2011, 107,060 people approached their council as homeless, an increase of 10% on the previous year<sup>1</sup>. Rough sleeping is rising as well, with snapshot street count figures for autumn 2011 show that on any given night there were 2,181 people sleeping rough – an increase of 23% on 2010.<sup>2</sup> However, demographic data is not collected so we cannot break this figure down by age. In London demographic figures are available though, with outreach agencies reporting that 393 (7%) of people seen sleeping rough in London were aged under 25<sup>3</sup> in the year to March 2011.

Independent research predicts that homelessness is set to rise further as the continuing economic downturn combined with the Coalition Government's radical

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<sup>1</sup> DCLG statutory homelessness release, October-December quarter 2011

<sup>2</sup> Rough Sleeping Statistics England – Autumn 2011

<sup>3</sup> Broadway (2011) CHAIN Street to Home annual report 2010-11

reforms and weakening of the welfare state, particularly cuts to Housing Benefit, will leave many more people facing the threat or reality of homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

The youth homelessness charity Centrepoin estimate that as many as 80,000 young people experience homelessness in the UK – whether through sleeping rough, using support services or being accepted as statutorily homeless by a local authority - every year<sup>5</sup> and there are indications that this is on the rise. Almost half of local authorities and homelessness services have seen an increase in the number of young people approaching them for help.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reasons for becoming homeless**

In general, young people become homeless because they are forced to leave their current accommodation and are not able to find a suitable alternative. This can be down to a range of factors, both individual and structural.

Underlying structural factors, such as unemployment rates and lack of adequate affordable housing, create conditions which can cause rates of homelessness to rise. Youth unemployment is currently at 23%, the highest since records began, which may increase the likelihood of young people becoming homeless. With 1.8 million households on the social housing waiting list, demand for housing too is at an all time high.

These structural factors can also indirectly cause homelessness, by creating or exacerbating personal problems such as financial worries or mental ill health and weakening anchor social relationships. This can lead to family breakdown and young people leaving the family home, either by choice or because they are told to go.

In a survey of 437 single homeless people carried out on behalf of Crisis by CRESR, 17% were aged under 25.<sup>7</sup> The main cause of homelessness they cited was being asked to leave the family home by their parents, with a third becoming homeless for this reason. Nearly one in five fled their home to escape abuse, with most (12%) fleeing violence from a family member.

*'I moved away cos of what me dad did to me mum, me dad used to abuse me mum, beat her up and that.'*  
**Neil, early 20s**

Leaving an institution can also be a cause of homelessness for young people. Almost a third of young homeless people have been in care, with the point at which they have to leave being a turning point towards homelessness for some – 6% of all young homeless people became homeless upon leaving care.

7% of young homeless people became homeless upon leaving or being evicted from their previous house because they could no longer pay the rent. This is likely to become more of an issue given the continuing impact of the economic downturn, rising rents and cuts to Housing Benefit are having on the ability of young people to sustain accommodation.

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<sup>4</sup> Heriot Watt University and the University of York (2011) *The Homelessness Monitor*, Crisis. All statistics are taken from this research and refer to survey respondents aged 18-25 unless otherwise specified.

<sup>5</sup> Centrepoin (2008) Youth Homelessness in the UK

<sup>6</sup> Homeless Link (2011) Young and Homeless

<sup>7</sup> Reeve, K. (2011) The hidden truth about homelessness: experiences of single homelessness in England, Crisis UK

## Housing history

Young homeless people often first experienced homelessness at a very young age, with 35% of those young people surveyed becoming homeless for the first time before the age of 15. Homelessness at a young age which is not resolved can lead to ongoing homelessness, with a significant minority (42%) of all homeless people having first become homeless before the age of 20.

There are support systems available for young homeless people, but the evidence shows us that not all young people get the help they need and many are hidden from formal service provision.

72% of young homeless people surveyed have sought help with housing from their local authority at some point during their homelessness career. However, most are not offered the assistance they need. Over half found the support they were offered was not helpful, and 20% said it was 'useless'. Many are simply turned away with nowhere to go and get by outside formal service provision and hidden from help.

Young people aged 16 and 17 and care leavers up to the age of 21 are in 'priority need' for housing and so are entitled to accommodation when they approach their local authority for help<sup>8</sup>. The 2009 Southwark Judgement<sup>9</sup> also obliges children's services to provide accommodation and support to homeless 16 and 17 year olds - previously it had not always been clear whether homeless people in this age group were the responsibility of children's services or of local authority housing teams. However, vulnerability does not end at 17 and young homeless people aged 18 can therefore find that there is a cliff edge in support. They are likely to be dealt with solely by housing teams and generally will not be in 'priority need', meaning that they are not entitled to housing.

Single homeless people, or those not in 'priority need', should still get meaningful advice and assistance but we know that this too often doesn't happen. A Crisis mystery shopping exercise found that many participants received little advice, were sign-posted to hostels which were full or were given useless written material.<sup>10</sup> It is shocking that young, vulnerable people can be turned away with little or no help and no solution to their housing crisis.

Only 15% of young homeless people surveyed had spent the previous night in a hostel and just over half (53%) have ever stayed in a hostel. This suggests that young people are not always accessing the support services that are available. Their experience of homelessness too often involves being hidden from help. After leaving the family home, young people typically move through a variety of circumstances. This might include sleeping on a friend's floor, spending a period of time in a squat or sleeping rough.

Rough sleeping is very common amongst young homeless people, with 38% sleeping rough the night before they were surveyed, and 78% having slept rough at some point in the past. Yet it appears a significant proportion of young rough sleepers are not always quickly getting the help they need with 58% of young homeless people surveyed who had slept rough the previous night reporting they had not had contact with a rough sleepers team at all during the previous month. One

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<sup>8</sup> These priority need categories were introduced by The Homelessness Act 2002

<sup>9</sup> Further information is available here

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldjudgmt/id090520/appg-1.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Crisis (2009) No-one's Priority: The treatment of single homeless people provided by local authority homelessness service

reason for this may be that young homeless people hide themselves away when sleeping rough because of fears for their safety or because their age makes them feel particularly vulnerable.

Rough sleeping is a dangerous form of homelessness. People who sleep rough experience very poor health, with conditions being caused or exacerbated by exposure to the elements. They are also at an increased risk of violence, often from members of the public. It is therefore particularly concerning that so many young, vulnerable people are resorting to sleeping on the streets.

*"I've got to sleep on the streets with old men, I'm only young, I'm not old yet, I've only just turned 23...it was freezing last night, I didn't sleep last night...I just can't do it anymore."*

**Emma, 23**

Squatting, far from being a marginal tenure, is actually a common way for young homeless people to get by with 43% of those surveyed having stayed in a squat at least once. The squats that homeless people live in are often derelict or in poor condition, and sometimes offer little more protection than sleeping rough.

Young people often rely on friends or family, who may only be able to accommodate them for a night or two, during periods of homelessness. Virtually all those surveyed had stayed with family or friends due to a lack of other options at some point.

Emma's story (below) shows the different and transient homelessness situations that young people may move through.

### **Personal circumstances and support needs**

Some young homeless people have relatively low support needs and led stable lives before they became homeless. However, in general homeless young people are considerably more vulnerable than the overall homeless population.

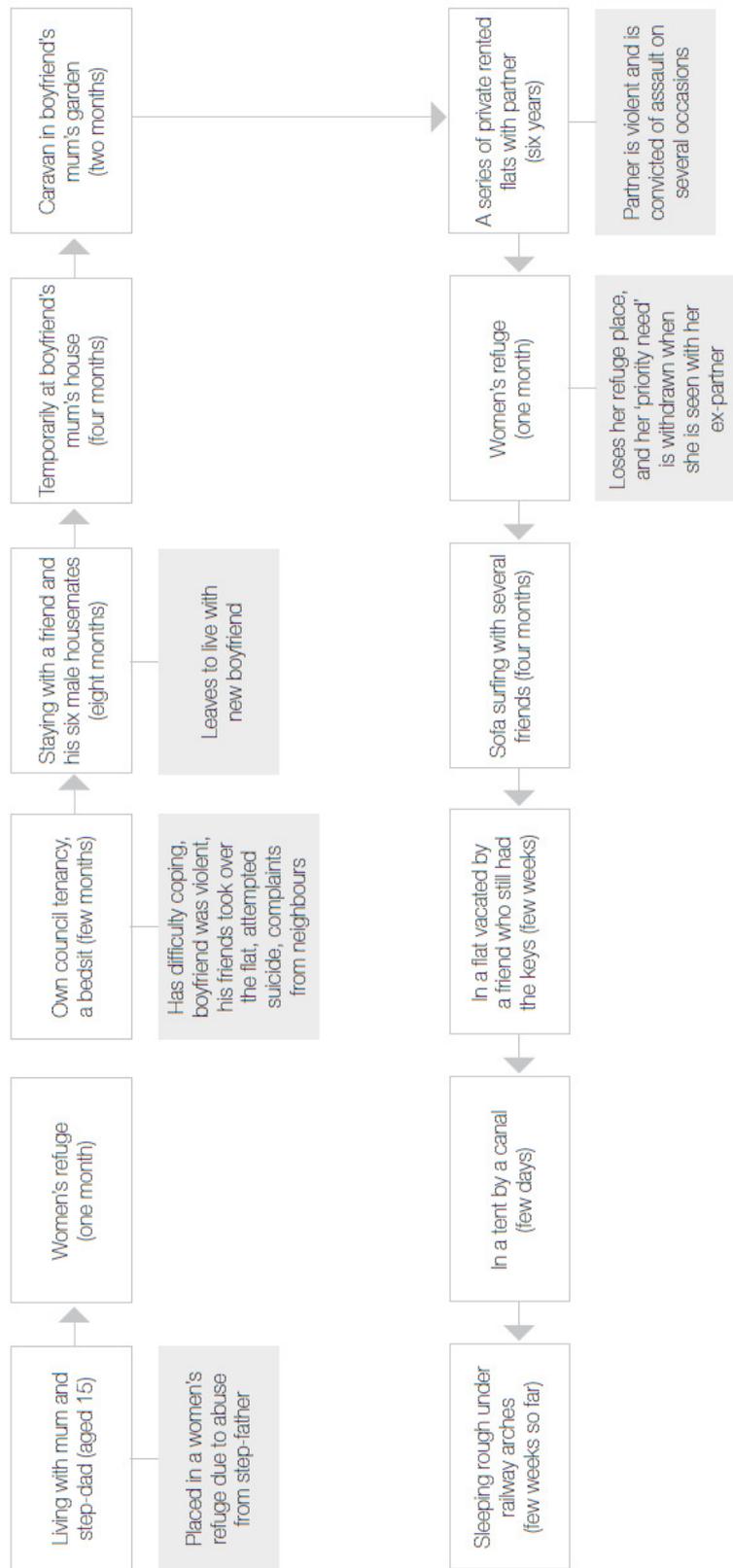
Particularly shocking is the fact that 40% of homeless young people surveyed have experienced violence or abuse at home. Given that more than 1 in 10 (12%) became homeless as a direct result of fleeing abuse from a family member, it is clear that some young victims of abuse are not receiving the right help and instead going on to experience homelessness.

Domestic violence is also a common experience for young homeless people. Overall, one in five of those surveyed has experienced violence from a partner. For young homeless women though the figure is much higher – 57% have been abused by their partner and in depth interviews carried out by the researchers found that many have stayed in women's refuges at various times during their housing career.

Support needs amongst young homeless people are very high. 41% have mental health problems and 30% sometimes self harm. Around a third are dependent on alcohol and almost 40% dependent on drugs.

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that over half (51%) of young homeless people have been suspended or excluded from school. For this group, problems at school may be caused or exacerbated by underlying needs which are not always picked up on by the education system. The fact that 30% of young homeless people have been in care suggests that the care system too can fail to deal with some of the support needs young people have.

## Emma's story



*'I went to this one high school and it was just after I got back from London ... and they says 'look you're wasting your space in the school' basically so they expelled me from the school'*

**Eric, 23**

**Eric had been in care since the age of 8 and had been sleeping rough in London**

17% of young homeless people have problems with literacy. A significant minority (44%) have been unemployed for most of their adult life. For some this may reflect earlier problems at school.

The table below shows the various support needs and vulnerabilities that young homeless people face. We can see that young people are extremely vulnerable, and on a range of measures far more so than the general homeless population. For example, self harm is almost twice as prevalent amongst young homeless people and rates of abuse in the home are far higher.

<b>Do the following experiences apply to you?</b>	<b>18-25 yr old (%)</b>	<b>Overall (%)</b>
Excluded/suspended from school	51	31
Unemployed for most of adult life	44	39
Mental health problems	41	37
Family violence/abuse	40	25
Drug dependency	39	32
Self-harm	33	17
Alcohol dependency	31	33
Been in LA care	30	25
Violence/abuse from a partner	20	27
Problems reading and writing	17	20

### **Getting by**

Some young homeless people go to desperate measures to put a roof over their head and avoid having to sleep rough.

34% have committed a minor crime, such as shoplifting or antisocial behaviour, in the hope of being taken into custody for the night and 17% have avoided bail or committed an imprisonable offence so that they will receive a custodial sentence and so accommodation. 18% have attempted to admit themselves to A&E so as to be able to spend a night in hospital.

A high number of young people, particularly women, are forced into unwanted sexual encounters. 11% have entered into a sexual partnership in order to get a bed for the night – for young homeless women, this figure is slightly higher, at 14%.

Shockingly, a quarter of young homeless women have engaged in sex work in order to fund accommodation or in the hope of getting a bed for the night.

### **Case study - Harvey**

Harvey ran away from home at the age of 14 to escape abuse. Family friends let him stay but only until he finished school and so at the age of 16 he found himself homeless with no income. Harvey approached the local hostels but was ineligible because of his age. He also went to the local authority for help:

*"I said 'I'm homeless, I need help', [they did] nothing. They said 'fill out a form' and I didn't even hear from them. ...I filled it out there, the woman done it for me cos I can't write...she goes 'we'll get straight in contact with you' and then they never... I went back but still like never helping me."*

Harvey spent the next ten years squatting, sleeping rough, and staying with friends on the odd night. He engaged in sex work on several occasions when he was 16 so he could buy food and pay for a night in a B&B. It was only when he got in touch with a local housing association that he accessed the help and support he needed after nearly 20 years of homelessness.

### **Problems with housing**

There are clear issues around young people being able to access the help that is available. On top of this, many services are facing funding cuts and this is beginning to have an impact on frontline services. Upcoming research by Homeless Link shows that in the last year, 75 homelessness projects have closed and that 58% of projects have seen their budgets cut. There are 2,000 fewer bed spaces than there were 2 years ago.<sup>11</sup>

Even when young people do get help, there are often barriers standing in the way of moving into private rented accommodation. This is in a context of growing pressure on the private rented sector (PRS). Upcoming research from JRF shows that by 2020, we will see a huge decrease in the number of young people living alone or with their families in owner occupied houses or social housing, but that there will be 1.5 million more young people looking for accommodation in the PRS.<sup>12</sup>

In particular, the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) of Housing Benefit is a major barrier to young people accessing accommodation. The SAR is the lowest rate of Housing Benefit intended to cover the cost of a room in a shared house. It previously applied to single people aged under 25, but the age limit has recently been extended to 35. Independent research carried out on behalf of Crisis has found that it can already cause real problems for young people<sup>13</sup>, and that the extension will make the situation even worse. The number of people claiming will be almost doubled, putting greater pressure on a small pool of shared accommodation and making it more difficult for young people to access private rented housing.

Availability of shared accommodation is a big issue, with the report finding that most shared accommodation is in urban areas, with three fifths being found in Southern regions. Additionally, the private rental market in large cities tends to be extremely pressured with a wide range of groups competing for available accommodation. Those on benefits will often lose out through landlord reluctance to let to them.

People who are claiming the SAR are more likely to see shortfalls in their benefits than any other rate of Housing Benefit. The low rate means that young people are

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<sup>11</sup> Homeless Link research (2012) Survey of Needs and Provision

<sup>12</sup> Upcoming JRF research (2012)

<sup>13</sup> University of York (2011) Unfair Shares: A report on the impact of extending the Shared Accommodation Rate of Housing Benefit

only able to access the very lowest end of the market. The research found that this kind of accommodation tends to be insecure, with problems including a high turnover of tenants and unexpected visitors creating a chaotic environment. This causes particular difficulties for more vulnerable young people, such as those who have been homeless or people with mental health problems.

Other Housing Benefit cuts will make it harder for young and vulnerable people to access suitable PRS accommodation. Caps on LHA will make all but the cheapest properties out of reach of benefit recipients in more expensive parts of the country, particularly London. The move to calculate LHA at the 30<sup>th</sup>, rather than the 50<sup>th</sup>, percentile of local rents will restrict benefit recipients to the lower end of the market in all areas. The Welfare Reform Act goes further and breaks the link altogether between Housing Benefit and local rents, instead uprating benefits by CPI. Shelter and CIH report that within 10 years, one third of the country will be unaffordable for those on benefits.<sup>14</sup>

The current system of non-dependent deductions is a big cause of family breakdown and homelessness. Non-dependent deductions are reductions made from Housing Benefit where there is a non-dependent adult, often a grown up child, living in the house who is expected to make a contribution from their own income. They are being increased significantly. If the non-dependent is unable or unwilling to contribute this can cause family dispute and sometimes lead to the young adult being asked to leave.

All of these issues will lead to more young people becoming homeless, either directly or due to the pressure they place on their families which in turn causes them to leave. They will also make it harder for young people in this position to find suitable alternative accommodation.

## **Conclusion**

The research is clear that young people become homeless for a wide range of reasons but that the most common is being asked to leave the family home by their parents.

Other turning points into homelessness are young people fleeing abuse and leaving care – this suggests that some very vulnerable young people not getting the help and support they need and instead becoming homeless. Financial factors can also play a role, with some young people becoming homeless because they are unable to pay their rent.

Young homeless people are likely to have considerable support needs including mental health problems and substance addiction, and can be very vulnerable – on many measures, considerably more vulnerable than the overall homelessness population. A high proportion have experienced abuse at home. Their needs are often not picked up on or adequately responded to by the education or care systems, with a significant number having been excluded from school or been in care before becoming homeless.

Whilst there are duties on local authorities to help 16 and 17 year olds, when young people aged 18-25 approach their local authority for help with housing, they are frequently turned away without the advice or support they need. Many have little contact with formal support services such as hostels or rough sleeper outreach

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<sup>14</sup> Shelter and CIH (2011) The impact of Welfare Reform Bill measures on affordability for low income private renting families

teams – with a large proportion reporting sometimes not being seen by rough sleeper teams at all.

The result is that young homeless people are largely getting by in hidden situations, such as sleeping rough or squatting. A lack of support is leading some to turn to desperate measures including crime and sex work in order to get a bed for the night. It is completely unacceptable that vulnerable young people are unable to access support and are placing themselves in these dangerous situations.

With all forms of homelessness rising and predictions that the worst is yet to come<sup>15</sup>, it is essential more than ever that real steps are taken to tackle and prevent youth homelessness. Experience tells us that being homeless is likely to only further exacerbate young people's vulnerabilities and lead to higher support needs developing. There is an urgent need to intervene early and ensure the right support is available to prevent young people falling into a cycle of long term homelessness.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations flow from the findings of the research. Some are specific to young people but others are applicable to the wider homeless population as well.

### **1. Improve the homelessness safety net**

A young single homeless person can approach their local authority for help and be turned away with nowhere to go and little option but to sleep rough. Local authorities should consider how best to use the powers they have to support young people, taking into account the Southwark Judgement. Local authorities should be proactive and flexible in providing support and help. This should involve taking into account age and vulnerability when considering accommodation options, even where there is no statutory duty. To assist this, Crisis believes the law should be changed so that all single homeless people have the right to meaningful written advice and assistance and emergency accommodation when they need it.

### **2. Housing Benefit cuts**

The Government should rethink the Housing Benefit cuts in light of their impact on family breakdown and the ability of young people to find and sustain a home, in particular the SAR and non-dependent deductions. As a minimum, exemptions from the Shared Accommodation Rate for people aged over 25 who have lived in a homelessness hostel or who have been in prison and are deemed to pose a risk to the public should be extended to people aged under 25 as well. Local authorities should consider how to make best use of their DHP budget to support young people and their families who are affected by the cuts. They should also think about ways to support young people into positive shared accommodation situations.

### **3. Employment and skills**

With a very high proportion of young homeless people having been long term unemployed and youth unemployment currently at a record high, urgent action is needed to support young people to develop skills and move into jobs both to prevent homelessness in the first place and enable those who become homeless to move on. Homelessness services should be properly funded to help with this.

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<sup>15</sup> Heriot Watt University and the University of York (2011) *The Homelessness Monitor*, Crisis

#### **4. Tackle abuse**

Schools, youth workers and others who come into contact with young people should be better trained to recognise and report signs of family abuse and to recognise that disruptive behaviour can be a sign of serious personal problems. Domestic violence refuges are currently struggling in the face of funding cuts and some are having to turn people away.<sup>16</sup> Better provision is needed so that anybody who is experiencing abuse at home has somewhere safe to go and it is important that young people are made aware of where they can seek help.

#### **5. Improve access to support services**

The extremely high rates of mental ill health, self harm and substance addiction amongst young homeless people show that there is a real need for more specialist mental health and drug and alcohol services to be provided for young people. Existing services should be made more accessible and better promoted so that young people know where they can go for help.

#### **6. Reform the care system and support other vulnerable young people**

There is clearly more that needs to be done to ensure the care system better supports young people and does not require them to leave before they are ready. The transition to adulthood for vulnerable young people should be better managed so that they do not fall through the gaps between children and adult services and become homeless as a result.

#### **7. Funding for services**

Homelessness services and other services providing support to vulnerable people are experiencing serious funding cuts. The Government and local authorities should consider protecting such services from cuts, or at the very least working to ensure frontline provision is not affected.

### **About the research**

The dataset these findings are based on was collected for Crisis by CRESR for *The hidden truth about homelessness*. The original research was conducted between June 2010 and January 2011 and comprised of a survey of 437 single homeless people conducted during one week in July 2010 in day centres in 11 towns and cities in England. At the time of the survey 17% (72 people) of the sample were aged 18-25 years old and the new analysis looks specifically at their experiences.

Case studies and quotes are taken from face to face interviews conducted by CRESR with single homeless people. The briefing also draws on *The Homelessness Monitor* research carried out on behalf of Crisis by the University of York and Heriot Watt University and *Unfair Shares: A report on the impact of extending the Shared Accommodation Rate of Housing Benefit* carried out by the University of York.

All research is available at Crisis' website <http://www.crisis.org.uk/research>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Refuge warns it could be forced to close', *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2012

### **About Crisis**

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change. Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help people to transform their lives.

As well as delivering services, we are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience. Crisis has ambitious plans for the future and we are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own but we take a lead, collaborate with others and, together, make change happen.

### **To find out more, please contact:**

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