

Preventing Youth Homelessness in Hertfordshire



Research Report



September 2025

Preventing Youth Homelessness in Hertfordshire - learning from the lived-experience of young people

Herts Young Homeless (hyh) has a vision that every young person has a safe home from which they can grow and thrive. Our mission is to prevent youth homelessness in Hertfordshire through education, advice and support for young people and their families. Our young service users are aged 10 – 25 years old; they may be experiencing problems at home with their families, are homeless and need somewhere to stay or are living independently at a young age with little or no family support.

Alongside our Youth Advisory Board, we create opportunities for young people to have a safe, inclusive space for their voices and opinions to be heard and influence with the right audience to affect change.

This report is an outline of the responses to hyh's Youth Survey collected in September 2025. This survey was collected as part of the research for hyh's new strategy, due to be launched in March 2026.

Two separate surveys were created: One for hyh's current and previous service users, and another for all young people within Hertfordshire. The only criteria for the completion of these surveys was being aged 10-26.

Approximately
242 young people
completed this survey

(24 were service users, 220 were not service users)



Service User Responses

Understanding Youth Needs and Experiences

The median age of respondents was 16 when the 'issues' within their household began. However, the range was between 1 years old and 24 years old. The most common response to what could have improved their situation at home was leaving the home sooner which was reported five times. Other common responses were having (more) support services or someone to talk to, having more support from parents, and having better communication, including *'more active communication that wasn't anger driven'*.

Building Trust and Communication

91% of respondents reported feeling comfortable reaching out to hyh for support.

When asked what would have made it easier or helped them to feel even more comfortable, responses varied from knowing support services *'have (their) back'*, having confidence in professionals, having a fidget toy to ensure they felt *'more free and confident to explain'*, reducing the stigma surrounding homelessness and being able to find resources easier.

The respondents of this survey gave multiple suggestions to make everyone feel welcome and included, regardless of their background or identity. The recommendations included staff training on equality, diversity and inclusion, use of inclusive language and materials, being understanding of each person's individual situation, and showing representation of diverse

young people in resources and campaigns which would ensure *'everyone feels valued and understood'*.

In response to the question *'What might have helped you contact hyh earlier?'* respondents most commonly stated knowing about hyh and its services. An example quote of this is *'having simple, clear information about what support is available'* which would *'make (contacting hyh) less intimidating'*.

Other responses included, being aware that *'the service was confidential, free, and approachable'*, having confidence, and having safer and easier ways to talk. Responses to this question and the next question regarding how to ensure all young people in Hertfordshire are aware of hyh, highlighted the importance of increased advertising. Suggestions included advertisement and hyh presence in schools, colleges and universities, libraries, leisure centres, GPs and health settings, youth clubs, online spaces, and social media. Responses to the latter question also included sharing real stories and having more availability.

One respondent raised the question of *'I did not have access to internet most of the time – how do you reach homeschooled children like me?'*, which indicates the need for consideration of approaches to reach young people without school or internet access.



Service Design and Strategy

When asked 'What did hyh do that made the biggest difference in your situation?' most respondents stated having somebody to talk to and get advice from, including someone who *'really listened and understood without judgment'*, help with accommodation, or consistent support. Other notable responses include, working around the young person's schedule and reminding them of appointments, support with mental health, and advocacy.

The most common responses regarding how to stop young people from becoming homeless included, more familial support or reconciliation, education surrounding *'housing rights, conflict resolution at home, and where to get help before a crisis'* and *'what you can do to help improve your situation'*, and working with the council to speed up the housing processes. Other mentionable responses were working alongside parents and carers to raise awareness of hyh, and *'more drop-in sessions and safe spaces for advice'*.

Youth Voice and Influence

91% of respondents thought that hyh should be guided by the feedback of young people.

The most common response was because feedback from young people gives *'an insight into (our) minds'*. Other quotes relating to this

explanation include *'because we are the ones living what it's like so we know how we would want help and how to help others our age'*, and *'it helps them understand how we would like to be treated and spoken to'*.

The second most common reason to be guided by the feedback of young people was the importance of considering the thoughts and opinions of those we support, *'I think it is good to take into consideration the ideas of people they are helping or will help'*. One respondent explained that feedback from young people *'makes sure the services stay relevant, accessible, and genuinely helpful'* and that *'listening to young people also builds trust and shows that their voices matter'*.

Respondents provided a range of methods in which hyh could be guided by young people, including, allowing time to listen and understand what young people are saying, the use of anonymous surveys *'to reach more voices'*, and through *'interactions in educational environments that include active activities and feedback forms'*. One response reinforced our current actions, explaining that the creation of youth advisory panels or focus groups, having co-design spaces, and content creation opportunities *'would make the service more youth led'*. One compelling response stated that services should *'consider the different types of young people, not just their age'*, identifying the importance of a fair representation of young people within Hertfordshire.





General Population Responses

Service Design and Strategy

Six percent of respondents, totalling 14 people, had used a support service before, with most having received mental health support.

Respondents reported the most helpful parts of the support that they received were *'patience, understanding'*, receiving help *'to calm down when needed'*, having reassurance and knowing that *'there was somebody who recognised what was happening'*, and having a *'safe place for young adults'*.

Responses varied when respondents were asked how the support they received could have been better. Many respondents reported that sessions felt too formal and structured, *'I always felt as if I were going for a job interview instead of trying to receive help'*, so they suggested more relaxed approaches to sessions. Other respondents reported wanting more frequent but shorter check-ins, wanting more engaging activities in sessions, and to receive clear and honest communication. The importance of learning how to manage independently, rather than relying on support in the moment was highlighted, as well as the need for there being a greater balance between structure and flow in sessions, *'sometimes I just want to be a passenger rather than the pilot'*. Outside of the sessions themselves, respondents

also identified that the waiting lists to receive help are *'very long'*, indicating the need for systemic change.

Understanding Young People's Needs

Findings from this survey show that the most well-known services for young people who do not have a safe space to live were hyh, Childline, NSPCC, and The Samaritans. Other responses included, Centrepont, Social Services, Youth Services, the Police, The Red Cross, and homeless shelters.

The most common theme identified in the responses to the question relating to **how to prevent problems at home from escalating** was to have better communication, coping strategies, and emotional support, **with over 60 responses** in this respect. Other frequently mentioned strategies included early intervention and awareness, access to professional help, including counselling and family mediation, financial support and housing, mental health support, and education and prevention, including education relating to *'relationships, emotional intelligence, life skills, and budgeting'*.



96% of respondents thought that young people should be taught how to manage anger and conflict and 70% thought this education should start before secondary school. The average age to start teaching this was suggested as 8.5 years old, with the common rationale that young people are emotionally developing and need guidance to understand and regulate their feelings before habits become ingrained, *'learning from a young age helps people to become a person who can control their emotions better'*.

Some respondents explained that the transition into secondary school is a 'big step' and that learning conflict resolution skills ahead of this can be beneficial to young people experiencing this change. Similarly, some noted that at this age young people gain responsibility for their own behaviour *'because you have started maturing and are making more of your own decisions'*, identifying the need to learn to manage conflict healthily rather than relying on caregivers to do this. Notably, three respondents made link to the lowering age of young people with access to the internet and social media, suggesting that

increased exposure to online interactions adds new challenges and potential anger triggers, *'as they are at that age getting independent online and social life so this could increase the impacts of anger if not dealt with properly'*.

Building Trust and Access

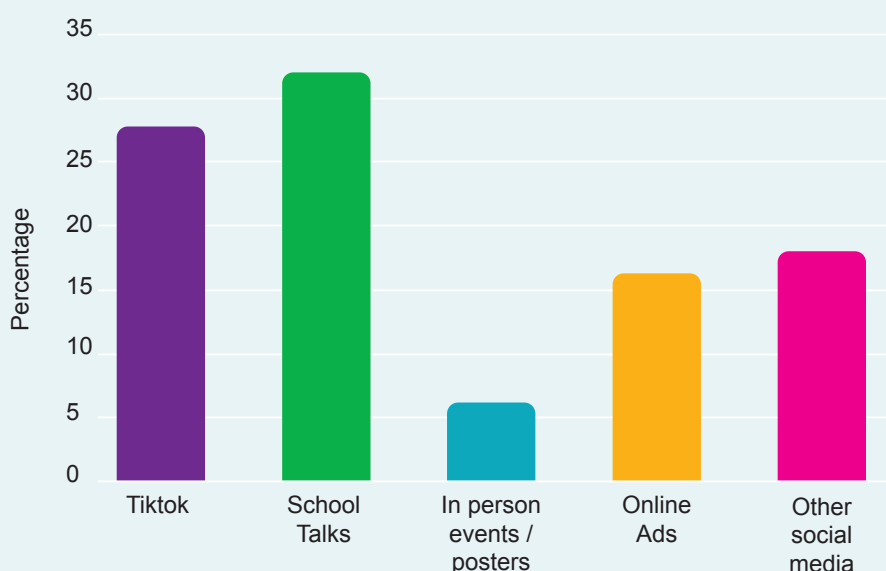
When questioned about what would make it easier or make respondents feel more comfortable to ask for help with problems at home, **one key theme was being assured that their problems would remain private and confidential**. This included suggestions of anonymous support through helplines or online chats, and discretion ensuring that the help-seeking process wouldn't be something that could be easily noticed by others, for example being taken out of class. The opportunity to receive support from someone that they can relate to, who understands their situation or has gone through similar experiences was also mentioned. This included explanations that it is easier to approach someone from the same cultural and/or racial background as themselves.



Another key theme was **reducing the stigma** surrounding problems at home, particularly related to mental health or family difficulties. Respondents mentioned that if the fear of being judged was reduced, they would be more willing to ask for help. **This highlights the importance of normalising seeking help** so that young people feel more comfortable reaching out. Respondents also identified that they would be more likely to reach out if there was easier access to help or more available services, and if they were fully aware of the processes of getting help, for example, being informed of the stages during and potential outcomes of seeking help.

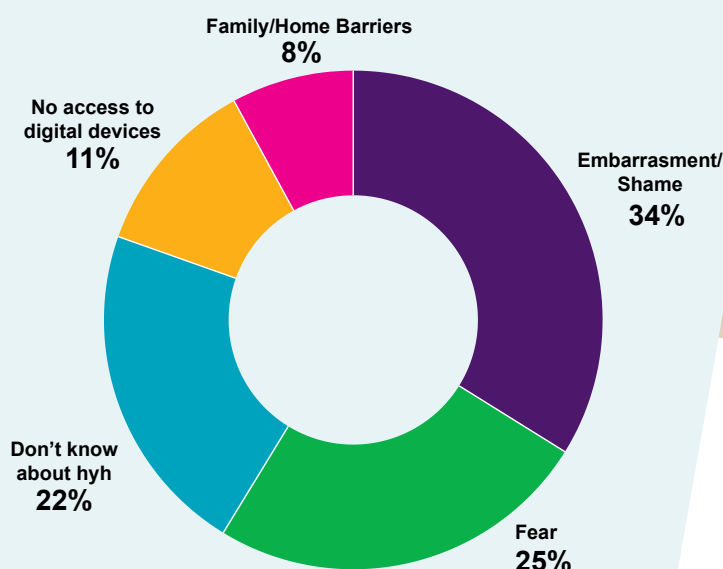
Multiple distinct key themes stood out in response to the question regarding how hyh can ensure that everyone feels welcome and included, regardless of their background or identity. The first relates to the importance of inclusivity and acceptance of everyone, for example, *'treat everyone the same, with the same respect no matter their circumstances'*. Some respondents mentioned that having friendly, approachable, and understanding staff ensures that people feel comfortable interacting with them, *'have inclusive workers, such as special requests for who they feel comfortable talking to (man/woman)'*. The second key

theme identified that a welcoming and safe environment, both physical and emotional, plays a significant role in making people feel comfortable. Example responses include, *'a bright and cozy place, low lights like lamps'*, *'a happy environment and a welcoming person who is easy to chat with'* and *'make it a youth club-type place where everyone can relate'*. Whilst a number of responses suggested that offering basic resources and services can make people feel supported, such as *'hand(ing) out free food'*, and giving young people a sense of belonging, *'give them a home and treat them the same'*. Several responses highlighted the need for education and awareness about different cultures, and backgrounds, especially among staff and volunteers, *'be educated on different backgrounds and identities'*. Other responses showed that diversity in staff and volunteers is seen to make everyone feel welcome by ensuring they can *'relate'* to someone within the organisation, *'have more diverse volunteers and workers who represent diverse areas'*. Finally, visibility and outreach were identified as important to make sure that the message of inclusivity is clear. This includes using social media and posters, and to *'explicitly say in ads that they are inclusive'*.



How should hyh connect with young people?

What stops a young person asking for help from hyh?



The most frequently identified barrier to contacting hyh was [embarrassment and shame](#), this was tied to pride or a fear of appearing weak. These findings confirm a similar conclusion made earlier from this survey, showing a strong need for campaigns to destigmatise asking for help. Fear of judgment, fear of others finding out, or fear of consequences at home, were also identified regularly as barriers to seeking help. [41 respondents raised an awareness gap](#), suggesting that many young people [simply aren't aware of hyh](#), its services, or how to access them. Whilst others identified a digital divide, with 22 mentions of lacking a phone, internet, or safe online access to get support. The latter shows the importance of continuing traditional offline engagement methods as well, as not all young people will access online engagement approaches. A final key finding from this question related to family and home barriers, specifically abusive home environments actively blocking access to help. This shows a need for discreet, anonymous channels to safely connect.

A wide array of responses was received relating to how hyh can raise awareness of their services among young people in Hertfordshire. The most frequent and overarching suggestion was

to advertise broadly, including online, physical spaces, and general awareness campaigns, *'make it clear and loud'*. There were 27 responses relating to social media advertising, six mentions of TikTok and one mention of Instagram; these suggestions specifically identified [engaging young people through creators and short videos](#). Another common marketing strategy identified was posters, billboards, and leaflets, again suggesting that offline visibility is still highly relevant. There were 16 mentions of school talks, assemblies, and school-based campaigns indicating that schools are a trusted environment to spread information directly to students.

Youth voice and influence

[93% of respondents thought that hyh should be guided by the feedback of young people](#). The most common response to why was that young people are directly affected by the charity's services, so their voices must guide decisions. This can be summarised by the quote *'because they are the ones experiencing it'*. The next most common response was that young people and service users have first-hand understanding of their challenges, making their insights more accurate and relevant, *'if they are listening to the people who have been through homelessness it will help them because the advice comes from experience'*. Similarly, responses explained that young people can help create services that feel approachable, relevant, and trustworthy, *'because young people are the target audience so they would know how to reach more people like them'*. Other notable mentions were that

young people's feedback helps tailor services for better service design and effectiveness, and that young people give adults access to youth needs and behaviour which they may not understand otherwise, *'adults sometimes don't understand how young people think or act'*. Similar to this was the explanation that young people can help organisations keep up with trends and changes in culture, *'times are changing quite a lot with this generation of children'*. Respondents also identified that young people could influence and encourage others in their peer group to engage with hyh and its services, and that involving young people makes them feel empowered and valued in shaping their own support.

Numerous ideas of how hyh can be guided by young people were suggested. Echoing responses from the service user survey, the most common suggestion was through survey and feedback collection, including the option for anonymity. Following this was going into schools

for talks and producing interactive workshops and assemblies. Social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram outreach, was suggested on 20 occasions and the use of youth panels was reaffirmed as beneficial. Similar to the suggestion of youth panels, was the recommendation of offering opportunities for young people to work or volunteer within the charity. Other suggestions included ensuring that agencies take time to listen to young people's voices and make them feel heard, *'just let them talk and listen to their voice either in person or online'*. Peer mentoring was suggested to allow young people to help each other through shared experiences, *'maybe introduce younger staff who had been in situations to come and explain their own story'*. Finally, the simplification of access to services and resources was suggested, as well as hosting events that engage young people and build trust in a fun environment.



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