

Meeting disadvantaged young people's needs. The rural Foyer: an integrated approach

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Abstract

The growth of young homelessness throughout the 1980s and 1990s has been a worrying social phenomenon within the UK. Responses to this trend have varied and some have been more effective than others. In the 1990s, the idea of Foyers – initially developed in France – began to emerge in the UK as a potentially effective way of providing a package of integrated services for at risk or homeless young people, including accommodation, support, advice and training for work experience. This report describes the work of one such Foyer. The Foyer in question is sited within a deeply rural context which brings with it additional difficulties to those normally experienced when working with disadvantaged young people. However, the needs assessment shows a high level of support from local agencies, residents and staff for the principle of the Foyer and, despite early difficulties with practice, enthusiasm for it to be continued in a remodelled and better-funded form. Foyers offer a rounded way of supporting vulnerable young people back into the mainstream of society. Without them, it is argued, the problems of homeless young people will be exacerbated.

Introduction

Introducing the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal's *Report of the Policy Action Team on Young People* (PAT 12), the Rt Hon Paul Boateng MP, Minister of State at the Home Office and Deputy Home Secretary, stated:

'As we enter the 21st century there can be no more important task facing us than to ensure that, no matter who they are each young person has the best possible start in life and the opportunity to develop and achieve their full potential. To do so, we must break down the barriers related to gender, ethnic background, disability, or where people live, which too often get in the way'. He continued: 'Exclusion amongst young people has emerged as an issue in every Social Exclusion Unit report to date' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000).

The transition to adulthood and independence is one of the most challenging tasks facing young people. For most, leaving home is a natural process; for others it is a response to intolerable circumstances or when they leave care. It is a time when young people are seeking work or training and somewhere to live and many find themselves trapped in a cycle: if they cannot get a home, they can't get a job, and if they can't get a job they cannot get a home. The Foyer concept recognises that many young people need assistance to make the successful transition between dependence and independence. Foyers provide, under one roof: affordable accommodation; the possibility for social integration; community and peer group support; social and other facilities; vocational

guidance and advice; training and job search; links with employers; work experience opportunities.

As of 1999, there were 89 Foyers in the UK, with an estimated 4000 young people entering them each year (Maxted, 1999). By 2001 that number had risen to 105 (*Community Care*, 2001). A study in 1999 found that 41 per cent of young people entering Foyers were 'roofless'; 24 per cent were 'vulnerable', and were 'dealing with a range of problems, many of which were outside their control'; 21 per cent were 'low achievers', who were not in a special needs category, but who 'failed at school or found that school failed them'; and 14 per cent were 'behaviourally challenged', and had developed a range of behaviour problems, including drug and alcohol misuse and offending (Maxted, 1999). These categories were not mutually exclusive with some young people falling into more than one category.

In June 2000 the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published a Housing Research Summary which outlined the value of Foyers nationally. The report found that:

'Key features which distinguished Foyers from Other Schemes (stet) included a greater emphasis on improving vocational skills and qualifications and delivery of more services in-house and on-site... which suggested that they may take a longer term view of improving their clients' employability'. It also found that those leaving Foyers 'were less likely to be unemployed and more likely to be on a government scheme or in paid work',

and:

'much more likely to be living in independent, rented accommodation'
(Maginn et al, 2000)

The Social Exclusion Unit is currently researching ways to reduce re-offending by ex-prisoners, including youths, and as one unit spokesperson explained:

'We know that those who re-offend are more likely to be homeless, to lack stable family ties or to have drug problems. We also know that one of the surest ways to reduce re-offending is to help someone find a job'
(Community Care, 2001)

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For its part, the Youth Justice Board is demanding that Youth Offending Teams *'be more active in developing supported accommodation for young people'*, pointing out that:

'Foyers are one potential development' as they 'promote a culture of work and attendance'.
(Community Care, 2001)

However, there has been some criticism of the Government's positive approach to Foyer provision. According to Chris Allen, Lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Bradford, *'there is no credible evidence to support the claims that are being made for foyers'*. His own research into Foyers revealed that *'Young people found them to be repressive places to live'*, staff stereotyping them as *'troublesome'* from the moment they entered the Foyer. Residents were subjected to *'zero tolerance policing'* which created a *'them-and-us culture'* in which Foyer staff were *'the police'*, who would *'intrude into every aspect of the young people's lives so they could be socially controlled'*. As such, residents *'resented the staff'*. His thesis was that research of Foyers producing critical findings was being deliberately stifled by *'vested interests'* and that other social researchers had had *'similar foyer experiences'*. (1)

What follows are the findings of a needs assessment conducted into a rural Foyer in the summer of 2000. (2) These findings reflect the

activities of one Foyer, and therefore cannot be offered as evaluation of the Foyer movement in its entirety. They do, nonetheless, provide a different perspective on the workings of Foyers, a perspective which runs closer to conventional wisdom of government commentary and homeless organisations such as Shelter, who paint Foyers in an extremely positive light. (3)

The Market Rasen Foyer was established in 1996 by a Housing Association in the rural market town of Market Rasen in the West Lindsey district of North Lincolnshire. It had 20 bedspaces for single young people aged 16-25. The Foyer had been in revenue deficit throughout its existence, a cost the Housing Association was no longer prepared to bear. However, it had agreed not to withdraw services pending the outcome of the needs assessment.

Methodology

The study was undertaken between June and August 2000. It was based on semi-structured interviews with statutory providers and voluntary agencies plus a range of other concerned parties, from key financiers of the project to members of the general public residing in the locality. Interviews were undertaken with residents and ex-residents of the Foyer itself and Foyer staff (and ex-members of staff). A review of relevant policy and contextual documentation was also completed. Contributory factors to potential future need were identified. The researcher elected to live and work in the Foyer for two weeks, in part, to gain first hand experience of the living conditions and the general mood within the facility, and in part to gain the trust of the young residents. He also socialised with some of the residents and attended a meeting of the residents' committee. In total, 6 key stakeholders (from funding agencies), 3 staff members, 21 statutory sector, and 8 voluntary sector providers, 10 interested parties, 10 Foyer residents and 4 national civil servants were interviewed in the course of the study.

Social context and policy context

The Rural Context

Many factors impact adversely on single people's ability to access suitable accommodation in rural areas. Two studies in 1990-91, involving surveys of 4000 households, in sixteen areas of the English

and Welsh countryside, found widespread occurrence of poverty across a range of rural areas - some 20 per cent of households in 13 out of the study areas was living in or on the margins of poverty (Cloke, Goodwin and Milbourne, 1994 and see also Cloke, Milbourne, and Thomas, 1994). Meanwhile, whilst local housing policies continued to render most young people ineligible for social housing (Streich and Greene, 1998), in-migrants were tending to push house prices beyond their reach and recent years had seen increases in prices at the cheaper end of the market (flats and maisonettes) (Barnes and Craig, 1997). The range of employment opportunities is significantly lower in rural areas and average wage levels are also generally lower than in urban areas (Department of the Environment, 1995, see also Community Council of Lincolnshire, 1996). Young people themselves have identified the key barriers to employment in rural areas as a lack of skills and transport (Streich and Greene, 1998). There is growing evidence of the social exclusion of young people on low incomes in rural areas. They are becoming increasingly isolated and disaffected (see also Council for the Protection of Rural England / The Countryside Agency, 1999; The Countryside Agency, 2000). Not surprisingly, therefore, recent research has found substantial evidence for single homelessness, youth homelessness and hidden homelessness in rural localities (Wilkinson and Craig, 1998).

The Local Context

The specific social, economic and geographical context in Lincolnshire was unhelpful in terms of the opportunities it offered young people in particular. A contemporary Shelter (Lincolnshire) report found:

'Employment and training opportunities are limited in the county, which compounds the difficulties for young people finding suitable accommodation'.

It continued:

'... employment is often insecure, short-term or part-time and usually low paid'
(Shelter (Lincolnshire) 1998a)

The unemployment rate in Market Rasen was 3.8 per cent, which was higher than the rate for Lincolnshire (2.9 per cent) (Lincolnshire TEC, 2000). Some 47 per cent of companies within the district had hard-to-fill vacancies, whilst some 59 per cent indicated that their workforce needed to improve in computer literacy skills (Employer Survey, Lincolnshire TEC, 1998).

In 1997 a report on the housing needs of young people in Lincolnshire found that:

'whilst the external stereotype of Lincolnshire may be one of comparative prosperity, there is adequate evidence of a high degree of deprivation within the county'
(Barnes and Craig, 1997).

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There is a causal link between those levels of deprivation and homelessness. Most of those young people presenting themselves to the Shelter (Lincolnshire) multi-agency monitoring network between November 1997 and April 1998 were on benefits of one form or another, some 69 per cent were in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance or Income Support, and 7 per cent had no income at all when they approached agencies for help, or were on low wages, in casual or part-time work (Shelter (Lincolnshire), 1998b).

Housing provision for young single people was woeful. In 1998 Lincolnshire had a low proportion of flats and bedsits (9 per cent) compared to the national average (21 per cent). Lincoln City contained a disproportionately high number, whilst rural towns in the county had much lower proportions, hence an acute shortage of the kinds of cheaper accommodation which single young people could access (Shelter (Lincolnshire), 1998a). Young single people had little realistic chance of being rehoused through the housing register. There was also a dearth of supported accommodation for young people in the district, with a similar lack of affordable private rented accommodation available to young people in many areas of the county. In 1998 Shelter (Lincolnshire) found that limitations on entitlement to housing benefit had:

'a direct effect on landlords' willingness to let properties to young people and on the ability of young people to pay for accommodation', and 'even where young people manage to get access to private rented housing, many become homeless after losing this accommodation'.

The overwhelming majority of respondents in Shelter's report described the bulk of private sector properties which were available to young people as unsuitable:

'Dickensian-like'; 'pretty grotty, quite frankly and very poor quality'; 'landlords are not willing to spend any money on them and are charging high rents for what they are'.

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This provided a picture in the district and surrounding areas of housing provision far short of that required by young people, in terms of quantity and quality, particularly for vulnerable young people.

In 1997, the seven local district authorities in Lincolnshire commissioned a survey of the housing needs of young people in the county. The report estimated that the number of young people homeless at any one time within the county was likely to fall within the range of 1500-2500. They also noted that this would be likely to be an underestimate because applications from non-priority households were more likely to go unrecorded than applications from priority households (Barnes and Craig, 1997).

The Foyer, Market Rasen

Over the 4 years of its existence 62 per cent of all Foyer residents had come from within the West Lindsey district area, whilst 96 per cent, were from within the county of Lincolnshire. The majority of referrals were self-referrals but the facility had also been accessed by a wide variety of referring agencies: Social Services; the District Council; The Job Bus; ROOF; NACRO; IMPACT; NCH. Two thirds were male and one third female. Ages ranged from 43 per cent between 16-17 years of age, 53 per cent aged 18-26 years, and 4 per cent aged 26+ years. The 'typical client group' comprised young people shouldering a range of social problems: young single homeless; young offenders; care leavers; teenage lone parents;

young unemployed; young abused; drug and alcohol abusers; and young people with mental health problems (Foyer, internal records).

This Foyer provides accommodation for up to 20 vulnerable young people (aged 16-30, though with the occasional older exception) in need of training and job search facilities. One room is set aside for a resident with disabilities or a young single mother. According to its mission statement the Foyer offers residents:

- *affordable good-quality accommodation within a non-institutional framework*
- *vocational training and jobs access support*
- *access to leisure and recreational facilities*
- *a secure and safe environment offering support and stability.*

Facilities include an information and communications technology suite and communal recreation, catering and training rooms. Staff at the Foyer have between them over forty years of experience of working with young people and hold various qualifications in careers guidance, youth work, mentoring young people and counselling. They have also undertaken training in profiling, core skills, computers, drugs and alcohol misuse, equal opportunities, first aid and fire safety. A keyworker system is in place, providing one-to-one counselling, advice and vocational guidance. There is also a mentoring project in operation and several of the residents take advantage of this non-compulsory facility. The Foyer facilitates links to external agencies which have provided experienced advice on drugs and alcohol abuse, smoking and AIDS issues and on healthy lifestyles; on the New Deal; on homelessness law and so on. It also provides links to external training.

Perceptions of the facility: residents

The Foyer's mission statement asserts:

'The Foyer staff will ensure that all residents have freedom of expression and behaviour within the terms of the licence agreements. As the Foyer is not a hostel residents will be given the respect that befits single people who have freely decided to embrace the Foyer concept. Staff will be available to provide practical

advice and discuss any issues with residents in the mornings, evenings and weekends’.

When taking into consideration both interviews with service users and virtually all other interested parties, together with the on-site observations of the researcher during his fortnight’s residence, this study concluded that there was little doubt that the remit of the mission statement was being met. There existed a very positive rapport between residents and staff, and a sense of mutual respect. For instance, at the time of the study staff were considering altering the term ‘residents’ to ‘students’ in all Foyer literature in recognition that the latter term bestowed an image of customer, whereas the former was too associated with the notion of care recipient. Staff stressed the balance between rights and the responsibilities necessary for independent living, whilst allowing levels of freedom which few of the residents had benefited from in their previous abodes.

A Relaxed and Informal Atmosphere

Residents enthused about the lack of rules and regulations in the foyer:

‘It’s easy to live in. There’s no hassle about what time you come and go or when you go to bed, and what time you eat meals – or if you eat them’;

‘you can do what you want and be what you like’;

‘It’s a lot more laid back than I thought it would be, it is a lot easier to live here than in most of the places I’ve lived in’;

‘They are pretty lenient. They will help you before they’ll have a go at you’

and:

It’s better than the other place I was in. It’s better for people of my age because I’m out for freedom now and you can come and go as you please, eat when you want, they only have one or two rules. In the old place it was you have to do this, you have to do that – whereas here as long as you get on with your training or you have some sort of voluntary work, which I

think is fair, apart from that they are pretty easy going, you can more or less do as you please’;

again:

‘The staff are friendly. I’ve lived all over and most of the other places that I’ve lived in me and the staff haven’t got on – this is one of the few places where I’ve actually got on with staff. Most of the places I’ve lived no more than 6 months, but in total I’ve been here 14 months. It gives you stability’.

Another resident:

‘I like the residents’ committee and the way they allow us to have a say’.

As an illustration, whilst the Foyer generally has a no-pets rule, one recently arrived resident was pleased that he had been allowed to keep his parrot in the lounge after the staff consulted the other residents.

Staff/ Peer Group Support

Residents indicated that the staff provided high levels of support and advice. Whilst the researcher’s initial perception was of a boisterous, almost overwhelming setting, with residents endlessly running in and out of each-others’ rooms and the main staff office, over time it became clear that the Foyer provided a healthy environment in which they could benefit from mixing and communication, and from peer group support in dealing with personal problems. One resident was gay, another bi-sexual, they had both felt comfortable in revealing this to members of staff and to other residents. Both had suffered homophobic abuse in virtually all of their other living spaces. The Foyer provided a welcome relief from this:

‘I expected a lot of crap about it which is why it took me a while to tell anybody, but everyone’s been ok about it, it’s not really an issue. The staff have been supportive’.

The general ambience was summed up by one resident:

'It's pretty cool in here – everyone is friendly'.

Other comments included:

'The staff are kind. They are helpful to you. If I have got a relationship problem with my girlfriend they help me get around the situation in a different way';

'They helped me with my housing benefit forms';

'They're helping me with budgeting. I had a problem with money – now I haven't';

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'They sometimes put up with a lot of grief from the odd one or two in here but they always come out of the office smiling. They never stop giving you support'.

The keyworker system was very much appreciated:

'My keyworker is really helpful, but you can talk to any member of staff about your problems';

and again:

'My key worker is great. She is helpful with my personal stuff and she's polite'.

Several residents had also appreciated the various forms of advice and counselling brought into the Foyer by outside agencies. They had found them all useful, but in particular sessions on sexual health and on parenting. Mentors were also well-received. The support offered was person-centred and not intrusive:

'they only give it to the ones who need it, they don't give it to those who don't want it'.

General facilities in the Foyer, such as kitchens, bathrooms and study rooms, were described as excellent, safe and secure, and good quality. Residents also felt the rent level was very reasonable. There was, however, general consensus that on-site recreational facilities did not meet needs. There was too little to do in the Foyer, particularly in the evenings. Comments included:

'it can get a bit boring if you're just stuck between the four walls' and: 'If they put more life into this place it would be better – if they had a table-tennis table or a basketball court outside, or they turned the stables or the garage into a gym'.

The failure to provide these facilities was, according to staff at the Foyer, a matter of cost and lack of adequate revenue or capital funding.

A Step Towards Independent Living

All those residents interviewed felt that their time at the Foyer was assisting them to build a better life. Several spoke of having increased confidence since arriving – in part due to staff support, in part due to mixing with other young people in similar circumstances and taking part in various forms of group activity, in part due to taking advantage of training opportunities. Comments included:

'I will get straight and get a new life started, you only live here a while to learn a bit of independence and that and then you get started somewhere else';

'I'm settling down in here and then when I'm ready to move on I'll move on. It's getting me ready for the world outside. Make a fresh start';

'I'm happy here. I see this place as somewhere where you can get your life back on track, you don't have to worry about money and things, you can sort college out and start training and then think about moving';

and:

'I've not been anywhere else with an IT suite and I've never been given the same level of responsibility before. I supervise some of the other residents with the IT and I'm doing some IT work with the police inspector..... It's a stepping stone really'.

Attending the residents' committee meetings, where issues could be addressed and grievances raised, had also instilled both individual and group self-confidence. The researcher's own observation of a committee meeting was of residents who were

far from slow in presenting their opinions and of staff welcoming those opinions, if not always being able to act upon them.

A Clear and Unequivocal Need

Residents at the Foyer were unanimous and unequivocal in their assertion that there was a need for the facility. Most of them, prior to arriving at the Foyer either had nowhere else to go or viewed the alternatives (all-age YMCAs) as daunting. One older resident who had personal experience of hostels in the area asserted that young people 'would get eaten alive' in such settings. Another resident claimed:

'there's some sick people in that one in Lincoln'.

Several residents had applied to the Foyer in order to make 'a clean break' from their previous location and from bad influences, to 'start afresh'. One young man had left his family home after his mother died and he found he couldn't bear to live there anymore. He suffered from depression and went to the Foyer because he needed to have people around him. Another had been thrown out of his parents' house for arguing, he chose the facility 'to get into training' and because all his needs such as electricity and heating would cost him less than £6.00 of his benefits in the Foyer, whereas if he had moved to private rented Lincoln he didn't think he would have coped financially.

One young woman related: *'I had nowhere else to go and I had no money'*. She had been found her previous private rented accommodation by her foster parents and it was *'a load of crap costing three hundred pounds a month'*. Upon leaving it:

'My proper mum didn't have enough room for me and my grandma wouldn't take me back'.

And another:

'My mum has moved to (a town some distance away) with a new boyfriend. My mum's ex lives in (other, nearby town), he abused me and beat her up so I don't want to go back to (there)',

whilst a male resident with learning disabilities explained:

'I had problems in (nearby town) and I wanted to get away from them. There were lads throwing stones at me and my grandad's house. I was also getting sexual harassment from groups of young lads – calling me names'.

One resident explained:

'I wanted to live in this area and do training anyway, but if I hadn't come here there were no other options'; and another: *'I moved in here last January because my parents live in the middle of nowhere..... and there's no transport, no work and no training there. There wasn't anywhere else I could have gone'*.

Other needs were relevant:

'I had got a job in (another county) but the landlord of the pub and three or four of the other staff were very homophobic and it became impossible to work under those conditions. I left because of it. I couldn't go back to my mum's'.

Another resident said:

'If it wasn't for places like this I reckon I'd be on the streets or locked up somewhere'.

The high regard of most residents for the Foyer was evidenced by the fact that several continued to maintain contact after they had moved on. Several had heard of the Foyer through positive word of mouth from other residents or ex-residents. It was reported that some young people returned to use the resource more than once before they finally came to terms with independent living.

Training is integral to Foyer provision. Residents at the Foyer were eager to undertake training or work and felt they had come to a point in their lives where they could usefully undertake it. They expressed a wide and varied range of training needs and wants, which they felt could be met by the Foyer should adequate funding be made

available: structured induction into life-skills training; structured support for literacy and numeracy; on-site community IT training; practical / industrial workshops; together with leisure-based courses and job-search activities. There was very little, if any, training for young people in the town, which mirrored the dearth of training opportunities across the district, and indeed, across the county.

On-Site Training

There was, however, a mixture of views with regards to the training provision they had accessed while residing in the Foyer, some very positive, others quite negative. All those who had had life-skills training on-site in the Foyer felt it had been useful to them:

'budgeting, helping you to cook, that sort of thing. Everybody found that useful'.

Word and Number Power with ISIS had also been particularly useful to some, though a little basic for others. Those residents currently on training courses off-site were by and large happy with them – some very much so. However, at the time of the study there was no on-site skills training (though some I.T. training was offered) and very little available in the town itself. Most residents had little choice but to travel to the City of Lincoln for training and were thus dependent on infrequent, unreliable and expensive public transport. All respondents felt that some on-site training should be available. Staff agreed that on-site training facilities were inadequate and had been at times non-existent. Over the years there had been an insufficient diversity of training options and the facility had failed to engender a 'training culture'. Lack of funding and lack of commitment from external training organisations were considered key contributory factors.

Building Relationships with the Local Community

The Foyer had suffered from 'bad press' initially, in part due to the activities of some of the earlier residents, but also, according to one commentator, due to a prospective Councillor who whipped-up local ill-feeling against the Foyer for electoral gain. An on-site trainer at the Foyer explained:

'Everybody assumed that because they lived in a foyer they were vandals or thieves'.

However, several of the residents were enthusiastically involved in a Prince's Trust funded media project to foster a more positive image of the Foyer and several had become actively involved in community affairs. A volunteer worker at the local Methodist Church pointed to their assistance with a twinning event in the town:

'they are very keen to help out if they are given the chance'.

Five residents had been involved in the local community café where they were the major source of volunteers. One had joined the local St John's Ambulance division and had also applied to be a special constable. One had just completed 200 hours as a Millennium volunteer.

The Leader of the majority party on the district council explained:

'The perception has changed. I'm sure there are a number of people in Market Rasen who still see it as a dreadful place, but it is much more positive now. They have had open days and good publicity, the residents have done some good work for charity, fund-raising and things, and they have attended the Mayor's coffee evening and the Christmas Fayre that they always have in the market place. There is no doubt that the perception is improving'.

None of the local people canvassed by the researcher displayed an aggressively anti-Foyer stance. There had been no difficulty in finding volunteer mentors from the local community over the past year. Young people of the town, meanwhile, viewed the Foyer as a place to go to 'hang-out'. Some respondents felt that because residents of the Foyer had found their first form of stability and security there this would encourage them to remain in the community and perhaps make a lifelong contribution to it. One explained:

'people always complain that a lot of young people take their 'A' Levels and then they go away to University and then they get jobs away and they go, whereas these are the types of

youngsters who will remain in the area because they haven't got the abilities or the relevant skills to go and get jobs elsewhere, so they are quite happy to stay where they are'

Several ex-residents were still living in and had found employment in the town.

Statutory and voluntary perspectives

The ongoing need for the Foyer was the view of the overwhelming majority of staff members, key stakeholders and those engaged in statutory and voluntary provision interviewed for this study (only two statutory service providers expressed views to the contrary, and they did so on the basis of the somewhat isolated geographical location of the Foyer rather than on the basis of the service provided). The Foyer was held to be a key rural resource, where such resources were scarce. It provided a holistic approach to meeting the training, employment and accommodation needs of residents, it also provided them with basic literacy, numeracy and socialisation skills and a wealth of advice on a broad range of topics. It provided, in many cases, the last port of call for young people who had bleak personal histories, who were in desperate need both of support and the opportunity to break back into mainstream life. The Foyer was a safe and positive environment for vulnerable young people, a calming location away from the larger towns and the city which had too many temptations particularly in respect of drugs and other young people involved in crime.

Several respondents pointed to specific success stories of young people who had overcome severe problems through residence at the facility and had then gone on to lead stable lifestyles in the local community. There were also few appropriate alternatives available to this particular client group in the district, indeed, precious few in the whole of the county. As one member of staff commented:

'For every young person that comes through the Foyer you have to think if they had not come here what would the options have been for them? I think they would have been pretty dire for a lot of them'.

The Leader of the district council explained:

'It undoubtedly plays a positive role in the lives of the young people there. It offers a haven to some young people when they are in difficult family circumstances. It offers a degree of freedom and independence to others who need that. It offers training to residents which has allowed them to go on to full time work, and it has also offered the soft-skills training in terms of life-skills and social and personal development, which is really important... I think it has undoubtedly offered something extremely invaluable'.

The Regeneration Manager, East Midlands Development Agency, explained that the facility was particularly important given the rural setting:

'Providing services in rural areas is often more costly than in urban areas... the young people here in many respects have needs which are just as great if not greater, and fewer alternative opportunities. They haven't got a range of provision around the corner, down the street, within walking distance in terms of training, leisure and recreation and so on - all of those social exclusion issues.... Those are regeneration issues and sustainable community issues just as much as they are housing issues.'

She concluded:

'It is a rural resource when rural resources are far and few between'.

The response from care professionals was also positive. A Leaving Care Worker commented:

'we desperately need it. There is very little else by way of supported accommodation for young people available.... They have been very supportive to our referrals, it is that first break from being fully looked-after to semi-independent living It is a good source of accommodation for us and they have worked very hard with some quite difficult young people'.

A Children's Access Team worker stated: '

The staff there do above and beyond the call of duty. They care about the children, they treat them as individuals and look after their individual needs, and that is what they need'.

The Learning Disability Team responded:

I have a young man there now.... I didn't imagine that he would stay because he has a history of itchy feet but he seems to have settled in well and got quite comfortable. So it has proved very useful'.

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A Community Psychiatric Nurse said:

'The facility is excellent, the actual unit itself is excellent, the fact that you can offer accommodation, training and support within a single block.... The young people that are going there are incredibly vulnerable, incredibly needy and they really require a lot of support'.

A representative from a local voluntary agency commented:

'It is well run and well managed... The atmosphere when you go in is usually pretty impressive really. Relations between staff and residents on the whole are pretty good – and we have sent them some difficult characters! It provides a standard of accommodation which is probably higher than anything we have got in North Lincolnshire, certainly in terms of having workers on hand to support young people when that is necessary. That is a big factor in why we refer young people there.... It is the level of support that allows them to reverse the roads they've been on'.

Perhaps the final word should be left with an officer in the Youth Offending Team, Lincoln:

'Over the last twenty years there has been a quite marked deterioration in caring for the less fruitful and less productive members of our society. Young people with low attention spans, low achievement levels, low education levels, low skills levels, are not considered a

good bet by society as a whole. So places like the Foyer tend to be worked very hard and are dealing with very disenfranchised sectors of the population'. He continued: 'the young people we deal with tend to be difficult, disaffected, problematic, with a high range of difficulties, previously dislocated lifestyles, they may or may not be alcohol and substance mis-users, they will invariably have a high level of offending. The ones we would send would be estranged from home and have no alternative accommodation available and have difficulties obtaining substantial well-paid work'.

His support for the Foyer was unequivocal:

'staffing in my experience is of a high level, genuine, caring and pretty thorough, good communications and a good understanding of young people with problems. So generally a pretty high level of tolerance'.

Summary and Conclusions

At the outset of this paper the author made reference to recent criticisms made of Foyer provision and of the suggested role of the Foyer Federation in attempting to stifle such criticisms. It is not the intention of this contribution to discuss the merits of the latter assertion, that debate may be taken up elsewhere, but what is clear from the findings of this study is that they provide a different and contradictory perspective on the workings and value of Foyers. In the first study, young people '*resented the staff*', finding Foyers '*repressive places to live*', in which staff stereotyped them as '*troublesome*' and subjected them to '*zero tolerance policing*' which created a '*them-and-us culture*', intruding '*into every aspect of the young people's lives so they could be socially controlled*'. However, this study found there to be both a very positive rapport and mutual respect between residents and staff in a relaxed and informal atmosphere, where residents could air their views and grievances in both formal and informal settings without being perceived as '*troublesome*'. The rules could be amended to meet individual needs and the high levels of support and advice available were considered to be both person-centred and non-intrusive.

There are a number of possible reasons why the two studies came to such widely divergent conclusions: the heterogeneity of Foyers, different research methodologies, and so on; insufficient data is currently available for direct comparisons to be made. What those disparities clearly highlight, however, are the dangers inherent in attempting to base universal assertions on either single-site studies or single pieces of research.

This particular study found a high level of support from local agencies, residents and staff for the principle of the Foyer and, despite early difficulties with practice, enthusiasm for it to be continued in a remodelled and better-funded form. The Market Rasen Foyer's own financial difficulties, and the knock-on effect on its training and recreational provision, were also reflected in the national picture, as a recent report by the DETR revealed:

'Capital funding was much more readily available than revenue, particularly for Foyer schemes, and this resulted in schemes which were designed, built and fitted out to a high specification. However, obtaining revenue funding, particularly long term stable funding for activities other than housing, was much more difficult, and inhibited the capacity of some schemes to deliver an adequate range of services, particularly in areas like training or job search'
(Maginn et al, 2000)

There have been some recent improvements with regards to revenue funding in some locations. New funding streams have been made available through the Safer Communities Fund and additional resources via the Connexions service. A national pilot involving Learning and Skills Councils, twenty Foyers and six colleges may also lead to accredited Foyers receiving better and more consistent forms of revenue funding for the provision of training / job search packages. Changes to the way that Local Authorities support the costs of people in supported accommodation, due to take place as from 2003, may also improve revenue financing. These developments may well bridge the revenue gap for some Foyers, though perhaps not all. More appropriate would be a Foyer-specific package of revenue funding settlements. As has been outlined, Ministers are

aware of the need to facilitate learning and training for disaffected and socially excluded young people and Government departments are increasingly supporting the Foyer concept. Perhaps it is time for the government to put its money where its mouth is.

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Notes:

1) Allen suggests that his own research, funded by 'a large housing association' into 'young people's views and experiences of foyers' was rejected for publication by the same housing association 'because residents' views were not considered legitimate' (and hence it being available only on the website cited) and that the Foyer Federation 'has been able to use its position on the advisory groups of research projects in order to influence what the research literature says about foyers', and that 'Consequently, there is an absence of official research literature that is even vaguely critical of foyers'. *Criticism of foyers is being stifled*, Guardian Unlimited, <http://society.guardian.co.uk/housing>. Monday June 18, 2001.

2) The needs assessment was funded by stakeholders (and funders) of the Foyer who were concerned that since its inception it had consistently failed to reach full capacity and had been in permanent revenue deficit. The remit of the study was to chart previous and current usage of the facility and gauge potential future demand, whilst at the same time ascertain the opinions of service users, other stakeholders (staff and funders) statutory and voluntary agencies as to the value of the facility.

3) Allen himself referring to the positive assessments made by Sheila McKechnie, former director of Shelter, and of chancellor Gordon Brown, whose intention, Allen cites, is that there will be 'a foyer in every town'.