

Keeping Each Other Safe in Youth Foyers

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**National Survivor
User Network**

The
FOYER
Federation



About this Resource

The Foyer Federation and the National Survivor User Network (NSUN) spoke to Youth Foyer residents and staff about safeguarding. We wanted to know how the people who live and work in Youth Foyers feel about safeguarding, and what ideas they have for making Youth Foyers safer, more open, more empowering places. This resource shares what we learned from staff and residents about what's important about safeguarding in a Youth Foyer. Then it showcases the case studies we used to spark discussion, and what ideas people had about them. It ends with things that Youth Foyers can try to make their safeguarding more collaborative.

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Why?

When we consulted with young people about this project, we heard that 'safeguarding' meant different things to them, and to their peers. Sometimes it was a reassuring term, and sometimes they felt like it was very misunderstood, or created a sense of anxiety. Some young people associated 'safeguarding' with having decisions made for them, or information being shared without their consent.

Youth Foyers provide supported housing to young people who can't live at home. Rather than viewing young people as defined by the challenges they experience, Youth Foyers use an Advantaged Thinking approach which recognises and builds up people's strengths, skills and aspirations. Good safeguarding which supports and protects young people's decision-making power is a crucial part of this approach.

How?

The Foyer Federation and NSUN worked together with staff and current/former residents from six different Youth Foyers to gather thoughts and perspectives on safeguarding. We started by holding an online consultation session with five young

people to understand what the term ‘safeguarding’ meant to them, and what a safe space to talk about this issue would look like. They advised us on how to develop workshops and interviews. Following this, we held two workshops: one workshop with staff and residents from Verve Place, Coops Foyer and Bridge Foyer, and another workshop with Bath Foyer. 17 young people and eight staff members were involved in these workshops in total, and we used them to talk through people’s understanding of and perspectives on safeguarding, and then worked through case studies together to get ideas on how different issues could be resolved.

Two young people who were involved at the consultation stage, who were previous residents of Youth Foyers, couldn’t join us for the workshops, so we followed up with them in interviews instead.

Who?

The Foyer Federation (foyer.net) is a national charity that supports young people who can’t live at home. We bring together and support a network of youth supported housing projects so that young people can move on with the power and agency to thrive.

NSUN (nsun.org.uk) is a membership organisation creating a mental health justice movement with the power to fight harmful systems and build better alternatives. As the only lived experience-led national mental health charity in England, we build and share knowledge, resource grassroots groups, and disrupt harmful structures, policies, and practices.

Acknowledgements

Thank you first and foremost to the young people we heard from, and whose insights are at the heart of this work. Thank you also to the Foyer staff who contributed their perspectives, and supported young people to do the same.

Workshops were organised and co-facilitated by Ruairi White and Courtney Buckler (NSUN) and Ella Craddock and Claire Prendergast (The Foyer Federation). The case studies were written by Ella Craddock, and the guide was written by Ruairi White.

Safeguarding in Youth Foyers: what makes it different?

Staff and young people told us that Youth Foyers have unique challenges and opportunities around safeguarding, because Youth Foyers are **homes and communities**, and **places for young people to develop new skills and confidence**.

Making a safe home and community



“This isn’t our workplace, we don’t go home at the end of the day...this is our home, we live here.” – Youth Foyer resident

“[Good safeguarding] takes a village.” – Youth Foyer resident

Youth Foyers give young people a safe home where they can make their own decisions. For many residents that’s a change from their previous living situations. For example, one young person pointed out that for “care kids”, too much restriction “feels like they’re back...when you’re leaving care, the ideal would be able to get young people to experience life to the fullest.” Other people we spoke to agreed that sometimes, actions taken in people’s best interest could feel like an unfair restriction.

Staff are there to support young people, but residents also support each other. Lots of the young people we spoke to described intentionally looking out for peers who were newer to the Youth Foyer or less confident asserting themselves, and some expressed that while they felt reasonably confident in understanding safeguarding policies and processes, they worried that other residents didn’t. Some of them had supported other residents to understand those policies.

Night staff, security and other people working around the building are also part of the Youth Foyer community. Young people in one Youth Foyer explained that because there was a high turnover of night staff they didn’t get to know those members of staff well. This meant that they were less confident in reaching out to them for support, and so they felt less safe and supported at nights. They pointed out that a lot of people

particularly struggle with their mental health at night. Their suggestions for helping people get to know each other included having introduction sessions or displays with pictures and names.

Because Youth Foyers are homes and communities, safeguarding approaches should include the whole community, and build on people's strengths. Any approach to safeguarding should respect and acknowledge that Youth Foyers are homes and should be safe places where young people can take risks, make decisions and experience life.

Developing new skills and confidence



“Safeguarding is problem-solving.” – Young person

“Our voices are important and how it affects us is the priority...having knowledge is key, and knowing what it's about.” - Young person

At their core, Youth Foyers are a space to learn and grow. That means that they have to be spaces where young people can make mistakes, try new things, and be supported while they're figuring out challenging situations.

While some young people felt confident with safeguarding policies and processes, others weren't sure what the policies were or where to find them – though by the end of the workshop, they'd suggested a plan to make them more accessible to Youth Foyer residents. Some young people also wanted to be involved in reviewing policies, or contributing to staff training.

As well as access to information, autonomy and decision-making power was important to young people. Some residents named that an action taken to protect them could actually deny them the opportunity to problem solve and develop important skills for managing challenging situations. In their experience, they'd benefited from situations when they were supported to make decisions for themselves, while also not being left to handle challenges alone. However, in situations where other people (staff, teachers,

social workers) did make decisions on their behalf, they felt this was much more acceptable when straightforward reasons were given. In particular, the word 'safeguarding' was often felt to be vague and unhelpful: they wanted to know the risks, and how staff had come to their decisions.

Living in a Youth Foyer should support young people to develop their confidence and skills, and safeguarding processes shouldn't be an exception to that. A Youth Foyer's approach to safeguarding is an opportunity for residents to actively shape their communities, be part of looking out for their peers, and develop their own skills in dealing with challenging situations.

This was shown in our workshops with staff and young people, where we discussed case studies together and encouraged all participants to work together to find solutions.

Reflections on Case Studies

We used two case studies to prompt conversations in our workshops. This helped staff and young people to collaborate and problem solve together. It was also easier to explain safeguarding processes with examples.

Below, you'll find the case studies and a summary of the discussions they sparked. Not everyone agreed, and there's no 'right answer'. These case studies might not be applicable to all Youth Foyers. For both case studies, we used the same set of questions, developed to move discussions towards the Foyer Federation's strengths-based Advantaged Thinking model approach:

- **What's positive in this situation?**
- **What are the risks?**
- **How do you think different people in this situation are feeling?**
- **What do you think would make this situation more safe?**

Case Study 1: TJ

TJ is 21 years old and has been living at Greenside Youth Foyer for the last three months. As part of the referral process, Youth Foyer staff are aware that TJ has a diagnosis of depression and is known to the mental health crisis team for the area. In 1-2-1 meetings with their keyworker, TJ closes down any conversations about their mental health history and appears to not want to talk about their emotions or wellbeing. However, TJ has come to some social events at the Youth Foyer, including a cooking session and a recent film night, though hasn't made any close connections with other residents so far.

TJ is known to smoke weed in their room on a regular basis, something which staff have spoken to them about. One evening night staff can smell cannabis around TJ's room and there is really loud music being played. The member of staff knocks on the door and when TJ answers they look really agitated and have clearly been crying. TJ says, 'I'll turn the music off but just leave me alone,' before slamming the door. The night staff member decides to let TJ's key worker know so they can follow up in the morning.

What's positive?

In conversations with staff and residents, people identified some strong positive elements to this scenario. For example: the staff member knocks and TJ opens the door and engages, and is able to make a compromise. TJ sets a boundary and the night staff member respects it, which could help to build trust for TJ to open up later even if they couldn't talk in the moment. The night staff member also decides to let someone else know about the issue. TJ has been coming to 1-2-1s, even though they haven't wanted to talk about their mental health, and they've also been coming to some social events at the Youth Foyer.

What are the risks?

Participants noted TJ's distress and that it doesn't seem like they have anyone they feel they can easily open up to about how they're feeling. While some participants felt it was good that the member of staff let them be, others felt it was a missed opportunity which could lead to TJ feeling more isolated. We spoke a little about drug use, and identified that TJ's use of weed might be having an impact on their mental health, and they may not feel in control of their use, but also that some people find cannabis has a positive effect on their mental and physical health.

On a practical level, participants identified a risk of loss of license if TJ keeps breaking the conditions of their lease. They also pointed out that TJ smoking and playing loud music in their room probably has an impact on their neighbours.

What would make this situation more safe?

One of the limits of case studies is that we pick a single moment in time to look at, and we don't have other context. We don't know if this is an escalation or a change, but this definitely seems to be a repeated occurrence.

We wondered why TJ wasn't opening up to their key worker, and what experiences that might be based on. Would they feel more open with someone else? Or is it just a matter of patience and approaching in a different way? Reflecting on her own experiences, a member of staff suggested that in some situations, a note under the door might be helpful – something like 'thanks for turning the music down, sorry you're having a tough time, here's how to reach me if you want to talk'.

Young people also spoke about the role that neighbours might play in both setting their own boundaries (asking TJ to turn down the music or not smoke in their room) and in supporting TJ, and shared stories of their own experiences of managing conflict and building supportive relationships (including from rocky starts).

The biggest and most difficult question which came up in the groups was how to get TJ to open up to their key worker. Young people reflected on the different experiences they'd had building those relationships, and some commented on how it had helped to have key workers who shared aspects of their experience and 'got it'. Others said that the most important aspect was just time and patience (on both people's parts). Ultimately, staff and residents agreed that the thing that would make this situation safer would be building trust, which would be a slow process.

One young person identified, "Everything before the crisis point matters – it builds trusts and helps people feel safe when things do go "wrong". A suggestion for building trust and communication around this issue was for the key worker to ask TJ, 'When you're upset and other people are trying to help, what do you want to happen?' It might not be possible to do everything they want, but asking shows respect for TJ's needs, gives important information about their priorities, and creates the basis for working out a compromise which could help change the situation.

It could also be flipped to, 'What do you really *not* want to happen?' to help TJ set boundaries, calibrate how they like to communicate and open a conversation about safeguarding and Youth Foyer policy in which a key worker can explain the conditions under which staff might have to act against their wishes. For instance, if TJ were to say, 'I don't want to talk to any doctors,' then their key worker can offer both reassurance and clarity by saying, 'I understand. We will call a doctor if we think you're in serious danger or need urgent medical attention, but before that point it will always be your choice if you want to talk to a doctor or not.'

What about TJ's drug use? Different Youth Foyers have different expectations and policies around alcohol and drug use. One young person who was previously resident in a Youth Foyer noted that this would not have played out this way in the Youth Foyer they lived in; they said it was more likely that TJ would be told 'if you want to smoke weed, don't do it here', and be asked to leave the Youth Foyer for a few hours. The problem with this, of course, is that then TJ would be out alone, feeling upset and agitated, under the influence of drugs, and without a safe place to come back to. It's

important to weigh up the impact of TJ's actions on neighbours and the whole Youth Foyer community, and to consider Youth Foyer policies on drugs and alcohol which keep everyone safe, but it's also important to make sure that the immediate safety needs of young people are considered, *especially* if they've been using drugs or alcohol.

Some people suggested that it would be good for TJ to talk to their key worker about how they feel about their cannabis use: is it positive for them, or do they feel out of control? But this discussion probably wouldn't happen if TJ felt like they were going to experience judgment for it. This opens up the question of how to support young people to talk about their use of drugs and alcohol without judgment.

Case Study 2: Tom

Tom is 17 and moved into Eastland Youth Foyer nine months ago. He is outgoing and often gets involved with activities at the Youth Foyer, especially anything to do with sport. Tom has ADHD and struggled at school, meaning he finds reading and writing difficult. Tom would like to find work, but his lack of qualifications has been a barrier, which he's found frustrating. He's a big personality in the Youth Foyer community and has a good relationship with other residents and members of staff.

However, the last few weeks Tom hasn't been as involved with Youth Foyer social activities and has missed a number of his 1-2-1 meetings with his key worker. When staff have tried to do room checks, he is often still asleep in bed or just not in. The local police community support team, who the Youth Foyer has a good relationship with, ring to say they had a 'run in' with a known drug dealer the previous night and think they recognised Tom in the car. There was no follow up to the interaction (no cautions/arrests) but they wanted to let staff at the Youth Foyer know.

What's positive?

Participants agreed that Tom's good relationships with people who live and work in his Youth Foyer were something to celebrate. He's motivated to find work, and has a lot of hobbies. One big positive was 'not getting arrested', but participants had different

opinions on whether police involvement and communication with the Youth Foyer was a good thing. Some staff and young people felt it was positive and meant that issues were being caught early. Others criticised the tendency for community support teams in the police to present a 'friendly face' that they felt was inauthentic or unsafe.

What are the risks?

Police involvement was seen as both a risk and a protective factor. One young person pointed out that police community engagement work in Youth Foyers can give police officers informal access to and information on vulnerable young people who are statistically more likely to be negatively profiled, especially if they're Black or people of colour. Others noticed that the officer wasn't entirely sure if they'd seen Tom or not. Worries about getting in trouble with the police could make Tom even less likely to talk about what's going on for him right now.

What could make this situation safer?

It's clear that there needs to be a conversation with Tom to understand what's going on. At 17, Tom is probably one of the youngest people at the Youth Foyer, and a child under UK law. This means that staff have a responsibility to safeguard him against possible criminal exploitation, like being pushed to sell or use drugs. But right now, it's not clear if that's what's happening or not. So the challenge is for staff to create and maintain trust with Tom, encourage him to talk about what is going on, and problem solve with him.

Workshop participants said it was important not to go in with assumptions. They pointed out that the staff aren't sure exactly what happened last night, where Tom was, who he was with and why. Rather than coming in with assumptions, a staff member could say something like, 'This is what I've heard from other people, but I want to hear from you about what's going on, because you know the most about the situation.' It's important to give Tom the space to talk through his perspective, to ask open questions, and to stay curious about different elements of the situation instead of assuming that the accounts offered by older people in positions of power are always accurate.

We also spoke about the bigger picture, and how Tom might be feeling. We felt like he could be frustrated, angry, tired, scared, or bored. It seemed like struggling to find a job

might make him feel overlooked, isolated and worried about money. All of those feelings could make him more at risk of being exploited.

As well as offering practical support around qualifications and job-searching, staff could explore those feelings with him. An important part of safeguarding is helping people deal with feelings that can make it easier for other people to victimise them and harder for them to get help when they need it.

What's Next? Ideas for Youth Foyers...

Youth Foyers have unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to safeguarding in a considered, collaborative way. It was clear from our workshops that for many Youth Foyers, strong collaborative approaches are already embedded. While we've included suggestions for things to try, it's clear that staff and young people in Youth Foyers also have a lot to teach.

Ideas to try

- Talk about safeguarding outside of situations where a safeguarding process has been triggered. This can build confidence and knowledge in the process.
 - One young person suggested that it would be good to add these conversations to another activity, like going for a group walk or having a pamper session.
 - You can use the workshop model set out in the accompanying document, "Keeping Each Other Safe: A Workshop For Youth Foyers", to create a dedicated space for discussion.
- Set up a safeguarding working group that includes young people reviewing policies, contributing to staff training, and identifying areas for improvement.
- Work with young people to create posters raising awareness of safeguarding policies and how to find out more about them.
- Young people want to support each other; what do they need to be able to do that? Some ideas could be:
 - Creating formal volunteer or paid roles for young people who are keen to support others.
 - Making training and learning about mental health, active listening and safeguarding available to residents.
 - Helping young people to set boundaries around taking on supportive roles with friends and peers – ensuring that they have space to be themselves instead of always supporting others.
- Encourage different parts of the Youth Foyer community to get to know each other. Introduction sessions or displays with photographs and names could help build more of a sense of connection and trust.

Checklist

- Do residents know how to find your safeguarding policy?
- Is the policy in a format which is accessible and clear?
- Do residents know who the Designated Safeguarding Lead is?
- Do residents feel confident in raising issues if they have a problem with how a safeguarding issue is handled?
- How do your policies on drugs and alcohol keep young people safe and encourage them to ask for the support they need?
- Are there opportunities for residents to feed into organisational policies?

Further reading

You can find more information and ideas about safety and safeguarding in the following resources:

- [The Shape of Safety: a guide to reimagining safety and safeguarding alongside young people with experience of distress, trauma and mental ill-health](#), by NSUN and Act Build Change.
- [Radical Safeguarding: a social justice workbook for safeguarding practitioners](#), by Maslaha in partnership with Transforming Together.
- [Radical Safeguarding Toolkit – Homelessness: radical safeguarding principles, tools and tactics towards anti-oppressive practice](#), by Research in Practice, part of the National Children's Bureau.

We'd love to hear from you if you use any of the ideas above or run your own workshops. You can email info@nsun.org.uk or inbox@foyer.net with questions, feedback and ideas.