

Roland Lovatt & Christine Whitehead **The British Foyer Experiment – 10 Years On**

Background

The theory of Foyers is that they should help young people make a successful transition from youth to adulthood by providing secure, affordable and long-term accommodation (Anderson, 1999; Quilgars & Pleace, 1999). Although they have existed in France for some time, in Britain Foyers are a relatively recent development, with the first having only being launched in the early 1990s. In France a network of *Foyers pour jeunes travailleurs* ('hostels for young workers') had provided young people with cheap accommodation plus some additional support provision to help them in their transition to adulthood for many years. By the early 1990s, though, their role had expanded to help young people find training and employment – and in Britain they became seen as a possible model for tackling the British problems of youth homelessness and unemployment (Anderson & Quilgars, 1995).

The early 1990s in Britain saw three distinct pressures coming together. Increasing housing costs, together with growing constraints on housing benefit made it increasingly difficult for young people to find adequate accommodation. Rapidly rising unemployment was having a particularly heavy impact on young entrants to the labour market. Further, there were growing concerns about the basic level of skills of large numbers of young people leaving education. These pressures were encouraging policy makers to develop schemes that provided holistic solutions and the Foyer approach was the result. The theory behind the application of the UK Foyer model is that unemployment and homelessness are linked and that it is necessary to break a perceived cycle of, "No home, no job, no home." (The Foyer Federation, 2001). The extent of the problem was noted in the Foyer Federation's Annual Review (2001), where it was noted that between 150,000 and 200,000 young people aged 16 to 25 were estimated to be homeless in the sense that they had no settled address. The problem was also seen to be widely spread throughout the UK, with high numbers of young people also experiencing homelessness in rural areas and affluent market towns.

Anderson & Quilgars (1995, p.2) examined the UK Foyers in the context of the three pressures of accommodation, unemployment and skills. They saw Foyers as providing an integrated approach to meeting the needs of young people (aged between 16 and 25), by offering: affordable, good quality accommodation within a non-institutional framework; vocational training and jobs access support to residents; access to leisure and recreational facilities; and a safe and secure environment, coupled with support and stability. A further important element was seen to be the need for mutual support between Foyer projects, thus each individual Foyer was to make up an element of a larger UK and European network.

The early British experience of Foyers was through a number of pilot projects, based in Nottingham, Norwich, Wimbledon, St. Helens and Romford. In reviewing these Anderson & Quilgars (1995) noted that they were primarily based at existing YMCA

hostels and therefore represented an expansion of existing accommodation services to include training and employment support. The YMCAs already had a long tradition of working with young people and providing youth support and experienced staff were already in place. Further, the YMCAs already had considerable numbers of bed spaces available (Nottingham, for example, had 79 bed spaces prior to taking on additional Foyer responsibilities). The YMCAs also had many Foyer-style services in place, which allowed them to meet the Anderson & Quilgars (1995) definition vis-à-vis cafes, counselling, sports halls, psychotherapy, crèches and educational and arts programmes. Therefore, expansion into Foyer provision required only limited additional employment links and training support for residents. As a result, it could be argued that the subsequent Anderson & Quilgars report (1995), which emphasised that the pilot schemes had made a positive contribution to relieving youth homelessness and unemployment and in supporting the transition to adulthood, illustrated the effectiveness of the YMCA movement as much as it did the pilot Foyer schemes. In this instance, it could also be argued that any evaluation needed to focus upon 'added value' rather than emphasising the effectiveness of the extended YMCAs, as a whole. Further, Anderson & Quilgars (1995) also noted that in a time of high unemployment the success of the employment schemes was limited and that future schemes would need to be carefully developed in response to the needs of the young people they aimed to assist.

The overall success of the YMCA-based Foyers meant that Foyers became seen as a practical reality in the UK and throughout the 1990s there was a dramatic increase in the number of Foyers. By July 2000 The Foyer Federation noted that there were officially some 100 Foyer schemes in existence (The Foyer Federation, 2001). Most of these were totally new developments and not therefore based upon existing YMCA provision. Funding of the schemes was provided through diverse methods. For example, 30% of Foyers were delivering some element of the New Deal for 18-24 year olds and most Foyers had close links with one or more FE colleges (The Foyer Federation, 2001). Beyond the basic attributes of providing accommodation, training and employment support, Foyers in the UK tend to vary dramatically in the degree of support they provide. Indeed, the variety of different Foyer schemes is considerable with great variations in size, location and facilities.

The YMCA's study (2000) of one large Foyer scheme in London noted that many of the young people there were from disrupted families, had experienced difficulties at school or had run away from home. The implication was that many of the young people in Foyers would require additional support to that initially set out in the Foyer definition of Anderson and Quilgars (1995). It was further suggested that staffing numbers would need to reflect such needs in the future.

As well as large urban Foyers, such as the one described, there have been developments of small rural schemes and medium-sized town-based foyers. The rural schemes are less common than those based in towns and cities, generally having between 4 and 12 bed spaces and facilities spread between a local network of such schemes. Medium-sized town-based schemes typically have around 30 bedrooms and are very common (The Foyer Federation, 1999). The variety of Foyer schemes is therefore considerable and

expectations have been generally high. The DoE Report (2000), for example, saw Foyers as providing holistic solutions to the housing, training and employment problems of young people. This fitted into a climate where funding regimes governing the setting up and running of schemes were extremely complex – often working against the projects themselves (Maginn et al, 2000). Other general concerns raised in the Maginn et al (2000) study centred around capital being easier to raise than revenue, which meant that some physically impressive schemes had been developed without the funds to run the training or job search elements properly. Further, it was pointed out that there had been problems associated with monitoring Foyer schemes, partly because of the nature of record keeping and also partly because of difficulties experienced in staying in touch with former tenants. Other concerns related to an imbalance where Foyers were often providing accommodation at the transitional end of the spectrum – whilst there was still a shortage of permanent or emergency accommodation.

The Cambridge Research Method

In order to provide a rounded study of the Foyer movement the research emphasis was primarily focused upon a wide selection of different Foyer schemes. Case studies were therefore carried out on 11 small rural schemes, a large city-based scheme and three town-based schemes. These were preceded by a desk-top study of existing UK research into Foyers and also the connected issues of youth support, funding, education and supported housing. Each case-study commenced with an examination of the specific case Foyer data, in order to ascertain the history of the schemes, past issues, management and staffing structures, the changing financial framework and the nature of the relationship between accommodation, training and employment.

Following the examination of data, a number of interviews were carried out with tenants and/or staff. These took the form of short semi-structured interviews to assess experiences and opinions, concerning the schemes. Following this representatives from a number of key referral agencies were interviewed to get a wider picture of demand, the referral process and opinions on the schemes. Management were also interviewed, including immediate managers, chairmen and members of relevant boards. This allowed for the development of a more in-depth knowledge of management and the broader strategic issues affecting each scheme.

More broadly, research also focused upon demographics, Foyer usage, attitudes, staffing and other evidence from sources outside the Foyer schemes. For example, in some cases former staff members and residents were also consulted. This was accompanied by reviews of a number of other Foyer schemes in the UK and interviews with representatives for the National Foyer Federation (UK).

In short, the research method allowed for a broad overview of the UK Foyer experience, coupled with specific case analysis. The key findings were then discussed with relevant people and organisations to get a view on the generality of issues raised. The value of the case-study work was that it allowed for an in-depth analysis of a number of schemes and

for an examination of the kind of detail that would not be forthcoming in a more quantitatively-based study. It is now to these case examples that the paper turns – to consider their development, organisational structure and general performance.

Considering the Schemes – The Rural Foyers

Like many Foyer schemes in Britain the rural schemes that were examined represented an element in the overall management/ownership portfolio of a larger housing association. Indeed, in this instance, they were all owned by a single parent Registered Social Landlord (RSL). The schemes originally commenced following a successful bid for Rural Challenge Funding (RCF) by a partnership of different organisations. This initial funding allowed for the development of 7 such Foyers. Later an additional successful bid was made for the capital funding of a further 4 Foyers. The bulk of the match funding for these bids was met by the parent RSL, with the total capital funding amounting to £2.5 million.

The Foyers were based upon the Anderson and Quilgars (1995) model in that they were intended as a holistic approach to youth employment, training and accommodation. They also focused upon problems specific to the region, which included youth migration away from rural areas and poor public transport. The 11 rural Foyers could thus be seen to be under the aegis of a single organisation, although in many respects they operated as individual schemes.

The overall rural Foyer initiative has a management board, which is made up of a group of volunteers who have knowledge and experience of housing and associated support issues. However, this board's role is unclear, as the parent RSL is ultimately responsible for the Foyers and also has primary control of financing, building maintenance and staffing. The regime is further complicated, because the parent RSL is made up of a number of smaller RSLs – one of which also has responsibility for the Foyers. This arrangement is illustrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Current Organisational Structure

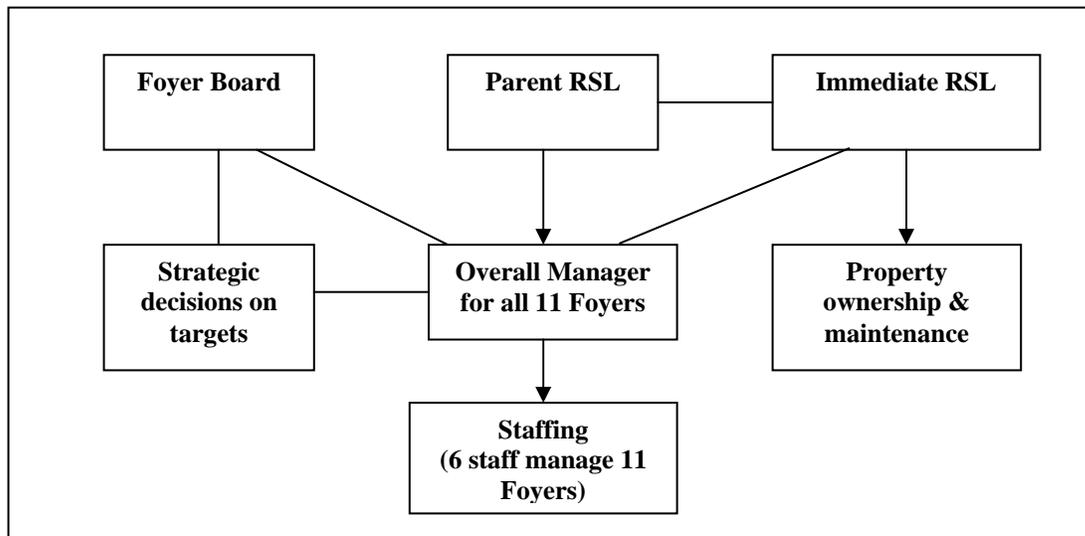


Figure 1 illustrates the complex nature of the management relationship relating to the rural Foyers and also highlights the increasing organisational complexity of many Housing Associations within the UK. The rural case studies highlighted the fact that this arrangement militated against the effectiveness of the schemes.

The sizes of the schemes vary from a 4 bedroom development to an 8 bedroom development. All were new-builds or conversions of buildings that had previously had different uses. Unlike YMCAs the initiative was totally new, so the Foyers could be seen as extensions of a housing portfolio, rather than developments within an existing social support and accommodation network. The parent organisation's specialism was housing and not education or employment. This was reflected in the design of the Foyers, which had excellent accommodation facilities – individual bedrooms and shared kitchens, bathrooms and social areas. Other provision was more limited, however.

The rural nature of the schemes was attempting to address the problem of youth migration away from rural towns and villages, but their location meant that they were often far from the sorts of recreational, training and educational resources that are taken for granted in larger towns and cities. The small sizes of the Foyers, coupled with a lack of proximity of them to one another meant that there was little opportunity to pool resources or develop common facilities. This had a knock-on effect on staffing, which was thinly stretched. Further, the rurality of the Foyers often resulted in the perverse situation whereby tenants with jobs or at college were having to travel distances on poor quality public transport.

The application process for young people to access the Foyers was based upon a 5-point test. Potential residents had to be within a 16-25 age range, have a local connection, agree to an action plan on employment and training, listen to advice on independent living and respect the advice of the staff on the schemes. Potential applicants would approach the Foyers directly or be referred by a local authority or other relevant organisation. There were a number of problems with this process. The first was that it was often ad hoc, resulting in the acceptance of residents who had needs in excess of what the Foyers could manage. There were no official criminal record checks made on potential applicants. Relationships with Social Services had been strained because there were issues over the types of residents the Foyers could accept. Initial problems had also been linked to the granting of assured shorthold tenancies (AST's) for residents, which made it extremely difficult to evict problem tenants. Although this latter problem had been addressed at the time of the study, the other problems linked to resident applications were still very much at the fore.

Although the Foyer rent structure attempted to lower rents for those tenants with lower needs (specifically those in work or attending college), high rents were still an issue. This meant that many tenants could not actually afford to work and instead were forced to rely wholly on the benefits system. The fact that those residents over 18 and in work had to pay Council Tax further worsened the situation. Those in work often ended up with debt problems as a result of these factors and the proposed introduction of

‘Supporting People’ meant that rents were increased to take advantage of the proposed new funding regime.

Staffing was a serious issue at the rural Foyers. Primarily this related to a major shortage of staffing, which meant that many referral agencies were not happy with the schemes. This was a contributing factor to very high vacancies at many of the schemes and problems with community relations. Further, many resident problems could be directly attributed to very limited staffing cover at the foyers. As an example, staffing at most of the rural foyers was below 20 hours per week. This put a heavy burden on the staff themselves and had resulted in a high turnover of staff and problems of recruitment. A lack of staffing added to the problems of security at many of the schemes, where there were often high numbers of residents with mental and physical support needs – as well as high levels of drug dependency. All this resulted in major health and safety concerns for staff and tenants and a general feeling that the schemes had major failings.

Considering the Schemes – The Town-Based Foyers

The three town-based schemes that were examined during the research were all essentially under the aegis of a single parent RSL. However, this was complicated, because of the way the RSL was structured. For example, one of the Foyers was essentially run by its own individual RSL board, within the overall organisation. At the same time the other 2 Foyers came under a different RSL board, which was in turn a member of the overall parent RSL. As with the rural Foyers, this highlights the increasingly complex nature of Housing Association organisations. However, the town-based Foyers clearly benefited from their locations, in that they were close to support services and recreational and educational facilities for their residents. All the Foyers were effectively new developments when they opened.

The first of the three Foyers examined was launched in 1995 and was owned and staffed by two completely separate housing associations. One association was responsible for the building, maintenance and some of the staff responsible for training. The other was primarily concerned with employing the Foyer manager, the night staff, the cleaner and the administrative support worker. It had 32 bedrooms available for residents, although there were regularly vacancies. There were also 45 self-catering flats available nearby for ex-residents. This implied that the Foyer was well set-up to cater for the needs of many young people at the transitory and permanent housing ends of the accommodation spectrum. Initially, it had also been provided with extensive facilities for resident training and an IT suite had also been recently developed for the training of residents and other groups within the community. There were, however, a number of problems. The first of these related to a staff shortage and high turnover of staff, linked to relatively low wages for the area and high demands on staff resources. The Foyer was also unable to provide 24 hour staff support on-site, which had knock-on effects on resident support and behaviour. The complexity of ownership and management meant that building

maintenance had been a problem and limited revenue funding had resulted in some training schemes having to close.

The second of the town-based Foyers opened in 1997 and was a 47 bedroom development. Original funding had been provided by a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) grant and support from the original parent housing association. Since then funding had come from a variety of sources, including the original parent housing association, a European Social Fund (ESF) grant and rental income. When fully staffed the Foyer employed 11 members of staff and had 24 hour staffing on site, although this tended to be limited in the early hours of the morning. Similarly to the other two town-based Foyers there was a shortage of staff, related to relatively low-wages and high demands on staff resources. 30 move-on flats were available for ex-residents, although these were also available to people from outside the Foyer.

The third town-based Foyer was opened in 1998 and had 40 bedrooms. Because the Foyer was in a very affluent area there were high demands for move-on accommodation. However, this resulted in a situation where funding was more difficult to access, move-on accommodation was more restricted and staff were difficult to recruit and retain. Further, there were issues linked to limited staffing provision. High rents at the Foyer had resulted in a number of working tenants getting heavily into debt. This was also linked to the poor quality of jobs available locally (the town was described as being in the 'stockbroker belt' of London – i.e. primarily a commuting town).

All three of the town-based Foyers were struggling to meet the Anderson and Quilgars (1995) definition. Whilst they were available to an exclusive group of 16-25 year olds from within and outside their areas, accommodation was often sub-standard as a result of maintenance issues. Although training was provided on and off site, there were issues linked to high rents and generally low-paid jobs available for residents. High staff turnover was a serious problem and there were problems of staff recruitment at all three Foyers. Staff sickness was another problem and only one of the Foyers could provide 24 hour on-site staffing. Staff problems could be partly linked to the nature of night time work, but also to the fact that wages were very poor when compared with other occupations. This was especially the case for workers on the lower pay scales. The original plan to take high need referrals (from Social Services) also had to be abandoned and the Foyers were trying to focus upon young people who wanted training and accommodation and only had needs for basic training and assistance. As well as a lack of stability with staffing, the Foyers have also required a considerable investment in flooring, locking systems, CCTV and other general security. In spite of such developments, at one of the Foyers in particular, there were still sporadic problems with vandalism and groups of non-residents. All three of the Foyers provided some in-house training in general personal management and independent living, as well as job-searching. They also had good links with nearby colleges and many residents were attending part-time college courses (although completion figures were not available).

Considering the Schemes – The City-Based Foyer

Unlike the other Foyers examined for this study, the city-based Foyer represented an extension of the existing services provided by a YMCA. It was primarily a 90 bed centre for people between the ages of 18 and 35, although exceptions were sometimes made for people outside this age range. It was one of the original 5 pilot Foyers to be opened in the UK and as such it could be seen that it had been providing a good deal of Foyer-type facilities prior to it becoming involved in the wider national Foyer programme. The Foyer took a very open approach to whom it offered support, with only limited restrictions applying to a small number of people. The target groups included asylum seekers, the unemployed, ex-offenders, people with special needs and those with mental health issues. It also provided accommodation for those people requiring somewhere to stay because of other difficulties, or simply because they'd recently moved to the area. Although bedrooms were single other facilities were shared. 24-hour staffing support was provided on-site and there were a minimum of two staff on duty at any one time.

As well as basic accommodation and food provision the Foyer building housed a number of other services. These included a laundry, sports facilities, social facilities, move-on accommodation services, employment support and job-search support. Further, there was also an extensive training suite available on-site, via application through the local job centre. The interviews carried out implied staff moral was high and that there was an extremely low turnover of staff – even though the demands of residents were often high. The Foyer's central location within a large city was seen as making it more easily accessible for people and also allowed for easy access to other facilities within the City, such as the library, council services and welfare offices. Although a few residents were in some form of work the majority were in receipt of state benefits and high proportions were ex-offenders and long-term sick.

Key issues relating to the Foyer included high vacancy rates, the need to upgrade the building, the changing demands on the services available and relationships with other agencies in the city. Vacancy rates had risen in recent years partly because of old fashioned and cramped accommodation and partly because of faster move-on rates for residents – out of the Foyer and into independent living units. The Foyer was unable to cater for 16-17 year olds as these were considered to have needs in excess of what could be provided in the Foyer's internal environment. However, the Foyer was involved in a good deal of outreach work and this meant that it still worked with many young people across the city.

90 bedrooms was considered overly large by many staff and management and 'too institutional'. There was thus an argument for the Foyer's room capacity to be reduced, whilst improving the overall quality of the accommodation. This was coupled with an issue where the Foyer had only a small core of 'long term' residents (those accommodated for over 1 year). Further, there was an ongoing concern of the volatility of many residents and resident numbers.

Foyers – Reviewing the Studies

The case studies covered some very different Foyer schemes, which operated at different ends of the provision spectrum. In many respects the city-based scheme was not typical of the Foyers examined during the research, as it had been based on an existing accommodation, learning and recreational facility. Further, it was in many respects catering for a different client group of slightly older people – predominantly male – usually with a track-record of past problems. The other Foyer schemes examined tended to focus more on younger people from both sexes. There is also an issue of intention and strategy. Arguably, the city-based Foyer had existing skills, staff and strategies for dealing with an expectedly high-demand client group. The fact that it had changed from purely YMCA provision to Foyer provision arguably placed little extra stress on its existing support network, management and staffing structure. In contrast, the town-based and rural Foyers had been set up to operate purely as Foyer accommodation and their design assumed that they would be dealing with young people with only limited support needs. The upshot of this was that the city-based Foyer had problems that were often different to those of the other Foyer schemes – specifically ageing accommodation. Its vacancy rates also existed for different reasons, specifically relating to speeded up move-on of residents and a tightening up of residential rules.

The town-based and rural Foyer schemes have clear and common problems associated with them. Indeed, the Anderson and Quilgars (1995) definition has key problems linked to it – specifically concerning the application of the Foyer strategy in the current economic and political climate. At the time the ‘Foyer’ idea was introduced to the UK, in the early 1990s, there was a climate of high unemployment, ever growing constraints on access to benefits, problems linked to the skills of school leavers and increasing housing costs. Since 2000 these issues have changed. Firstly, unemployment is less of an issue than it was 10 years ago – although the quality of employment and wage levels are still major issues. This has had a knock-on effect on the type of young people needing Foyers. Specifically, Foyer rents militate against young people in work and those who want to find work – as they are relatively high. The result of this change has been that many Foyer schemes have struggled to attract the sorts of young people they were intended to serve and instead have arguably evolved into supported housing schemes, with some elements of training thrown in. Clearly, high rents are a major problem for any residents wishing to attain employment and the complicated benefits system means that it is very easy for Foyer residents to accrue large debts. All this has the result that Foyers will tend to attract and retain residents with medium and high support needs and repel those with low support needs.

It was clear from all the cases examined that 16 and 17 year olds had relatively high support needs. All the Foyers raised this as a major issue and some had begun to restrict the entry of young people within this age range. This was obviously not a problem that had originally been envisaged in either Foyer strategies or the Anderson & Quilgars (1995) definition of the service Foyers should provide.

There were also issues over training and employment support. None of the case studies had clear connections with employers and one, in particular, would not have been happy referring its residents to an employer anyway. Where training was provided in-house this generally related to life-skills and was not vocationally focused. This largely reflected the types of residents the Foyers were catering for. The theory behind Foyers was that they were to provide support for young people with limited employment, training and social needs – and the original strategies reflected this. However, in the current environment, the Foyers have tended to become geared more towards young people with medium to high support needs. This is not the fault of the Foyer's themselves as they are attempting to respond to the current funding and economic climate. Unfortunately, though, they may not be the best method of supporting many of the young people who are accessing them.

All the Foyers had disabled facilities, but these had not been in demand. It is most likely that this was because disabled people have different funding support streams and options, which mean Foyers may not be a preferred choice. This lack of take-up by people with disabilities may also be linked to a perception of the case-study Foyers as offering an unbalanced environment and only limited management, linked in turn to poor staffing provision.

Staffing at the rural and town-based Foyers was clearly a major problem. It was clear that the original strategy for staffing had been misconceived. In high cost areas many staff wages were very low. Secondly, staff were often thinly stretched and expected to fulfil a very demanding role. High staff turnover, coupled with chronic under-staffing (in many cases) had meant that some Foyers were suffering with major management problems. This was coupled with a general climate of under-funding and a mis-match of residents and provision. Clearly then, the original aim of a 'non-institutional framework' is at odds with the type of clients the Foyers are attempting to deal with.

Access to leisure and recreational facilities was no better at the majority of Foyers than it would have been at a general needs hostel. Indeed, at the rural Foyers, it was questionable if there was any access to such facilities at all. It was also clear that the rural and town-based Foyers were struggling to provide 'a safe and secure environment, offering support and stability'. Finally, there are questions over the nature of the national and European Foyer Network. Whilst the UK National Foyer Federation are able to provide some support to Foyers it is also clear that many of the problems raised here are not simply linked to the cases examined in this research.

Conclusions

The broad question posed by the results of this research is whether the Foyer concept makes any sense in a different environment than for the one in which it originated and whether there are core elements which provide long-term viability. Firstly, it has been shown that the current economic environment is very different. In many parts of the country there are readily available jobs. In these cases what is usually required is hostel

style accommodation, perhaps with some additional skills training. Second, there is a much improved framework of government assistance for young people through New Deal (DTLR, 2002) and broader training programmes. Foyers are no longer the major source of training and information for jobs. Both of these factors mean that the type of young people Foyers can target and help are likely to have additional problems and needs. Some of the examples suggest that there is a growing mismatch between what young people need and what can be provided. Equally concerning is that where sufficient support is provided this pushes up rents and payments, thus making it more difficult for young people to obtain places.

In some ways the system appears to be polarising – some provision is moving towards the traditional hostel model, with a supported housing environment. Other projects are moving in another direction, providing a range of support systems for young people who require training and life-skills, but who are failing to enter the job market. The latter type of project appears to include the majority of Foyers.

Other questions relate to scale – small scale tends to be associated with problems in addressing specific problems, making them more risky. Then there is the issue of funding – capital was quite well funded, but revenue funding is far more difficult to sustain. Demand is a further concern – in some areas there is a concern that the Foyer idea generates demand – i.e. it is not clear that Foyers always provide the accommodation of choice. Young people clearly need housing, training and employment, but what the benefits are of linking the three together in the Foyer approach is unclear.

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