

Research report

Running away and future homelessness – the missing link?

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Scotland

Running away and future homelessness – the missing link?

Summary

This report is about young people, aged under 16, who run away from home or care and how that might be related to future homelessness. Shelter Scotland believes that today's runaways are tomorrow's young homeless people and that if we are serious about preventing homelessness then addressing why children and young people run away is essential.

- Young people who run away before they are 16 are consistently identified as being at high risk of homelessness and having housing problems in later life. Yet there is a lack of Scottish data on the rates of running away among young homeless people.
- We undertook a small scale study to gain a better understanding of the patterns and characteristics of young homeless people in Scotland who also ran away overnight from home or care before they were 16.
- The study highlighted that the vast majority of young homeless people (84 per cent) had also run away before the age of 16. This is considerably higher than the national rate of running away which is estimated at 11 per cent.
- Over half of young homeless people who ran away had been forced to leave home. This group is also likely to repeatedly run away, with one in three running at least ten times and half staying away for more than four weeks.
- For most young people, running away was more than a one-off occurrence and one in five (22 per cent) had run away at least ten times. Young homeless people tend to have run away more often than young people who are not homeless. Young people who are persistent runaways are also at greater risk of homelessness in later life.
- Nearly half of young runaways who subsequently became homeless first ran away when they were 14 or 15 years old, but nearly one in five first ran when they were 11 or younger.
- Almost two thirds (63 per cent) of young homeless people who had run away had also experienced sleeping rough. This rate is far higher than national estimates of rough sleeping among young runaways as a whole.
- Most respondents said that support to sort out problems at home or school might have helped prevent them from running away. Around a quarter of the respondents also said somewhere safe would have helped.
- The report has two core recommendations: making sure that young runaways are supported so that the pattern of running away does not continue; and, for those young people who continue to run away, getting young people's and homelessness services to work better together to flag up young people at high risk of homelessness.

Introduction

Young people who run away before they are 16 are consistently identified as being at high risk of homelessness and having housing problems in later life. There are a few research studies that have found that young runaways are more likely to experience later homelessness or face challenges in securing accommodation, but there is no up to date Scottish data.

We thought it a reasonable assumption that today's runaways are tomorrow's young homeless people and that if we are serious about preventing homelessness then addressing why children and young people run away before they are 16 is essential. It is also important to bear in mind that young runaways and young homeless people are likely to give broadly similar reasons for leaving home. But how we respond to their situation differs because of the change in legislative duties once a young person turns 16. Both groups in effect fall into the category of homeless but the age at which a person leaves home will shape which service is responsible and what they can do to assist. The groups are therefore closely linked. Despite this, services for young runaways (pre-16) and for young homeless people are often located in quite different parts of local authorities and, at least until recently, many homelessness services would have regarded runaways as being outwith their territory.

In order to gain a better understanding of the patterns and characteristics of young homeless people in Scotland who also ran away from home or care before they were 16 we undertook a small scale piece of research over six months.

This brief research report begins with a short summary about young people who run away and youth homelessness, before outlining previous relevant research related to running away and homelessness. After an outline of the research methods the report presents findings and ends with some recommendations. Where possible we have compared our findings about young homeless people who also ran away with estimates that have been made about young runaways in general.

Background

Running away

Running away and youth homelessness are issues of concern in Scotland. The term running away is widely described as children and young people under the age of 16, or up to 18 where they are looked after,¹ who are away from home or care through being forced to leave or 'staying out' without parental or carer permission.

¹ A child becomes looked after by a local authority as a result of either an order from the Children's Panel or another statutory order. Children who are looked after can either be looked after at home

The most recent large scale study into running away in Scotland, involving 3,000 young people, was by Wade in 2002.² His study provided a comprehensive overview of young people's experiences of running away, including the following findings about young people who run away overnight:

- Approximately 11 per cent of children and young people in Scotland run away overnight one or more times before the age of 16. This is comparable with figures for other parts of the UK. An estimated 6,000 – 7,000 children and young people under the age of 16 in Scotland run away for the first time each year.
- The circumstances and experiences of young people who run away are diverse. Young people run away for a variety of reasons which include family conflict, abuse, other problems at home, difficulties at school, alcohol and substance misuse, mental health issues and peer relationships.
- While, for some, running away may be a one off incident in a relatively safe environment with friends and family, for others, it may become a persistent pattern and involve considerable risks. One in five of young people missing overnight had run away more than three times in the past.
- Two thirds of young runaways first ran between the ages of 12 and 14 (67 per cent) and one fifth first ran away before the age of 11 (20 per cent). This youngest age group also represent more than half of those (52 per cent) who run away three or more times.
- The majority of young runaways stay with friends (38 per cent), or with relatives (24 per cent). However there is also more than a quarter (28 per cent) who sleep rough. Unsurprisingly, those that stay away longer or sleep rough are more likely to adopt risky survival strategies with one in six children and young people who stay out overnight being physically or sexually abused. Children and young people who run away can therefore be very vulnerable.

There are also significant numbers of children and young people who become detached from parents, carers and other formal sources of support for significant periods of time, often spending time living on the streets leading them to be particularly vulnerable and marginalised.³

with their parents or relatives or they can be living away from home in a children's home, residential school or a foster placement.

² Wade, J. (2002) *Missing Out: Young Runaways in Scotland* Stirling, Aberlour Child Care Trust

³ Smeaton, E. (2009) *Off the Radar: Children and Young People on the Streets in the UK*, Railway Children

Youth homelessness

In 2009/10, 15,517 young people, aged 16-24, were assessed as homeless.⁴ Young people are vastly overrepresented in the homeless population. They represent 37 per cent of all households assessed as homeless but only four per cent of all households in Scotland are headed by a young person under 25 and fewer than 12 per cent of the population in Scotland are 16–24.⁵

Young homeless people are placed in a variety of types of accommodation while they are waiting for an offer of a permanent home; these include supported accommodation, furnished or unfurnished flats, hostels and bed and breakfast hotels. They may move several times before settling in a permanent tenancy and there is huge variation in the type of experiences young people have while homeless.

Half of young homeless people are living with their parents or relatives immediately prior to becoming homeless and a further 16 per cent with friends or a partner.⁶ The most common reason young people become homeless is because they were asked to leave their accommodation (38 per cent) followed by a household dispute or relationship breakdown (20 per cent) and nine per cent due to domestic abuse.⁷

Research into the rates of running away among the young homeless population

While there has been increased interest in the circumstances and experiences of young runaways in recent years there are only a few, relatively small, UK studies into the susceptibility of young runaways to have housing problems later in life and little in terms of Scottish-focused research.

Several studies by Smeaton highlight the rates of running away among young homeless people. Smeaton and Rees found that, of a sample of 44 homeless young people in South Yorkshire, over half (26 young people or 59 per cent) had also run away under the age of 16.⁸ Smeaton also found that detached young people - someone under the age of 16 who has left or is forced to leave family, care or relatives for four weeks or more – are also

⁴ Data from Scottish Government (2010) *Operation of the homeless persons legislation in Scotland: 2009-10, 31 August 2010*

⁵ Data from Scottish Government (2010); SCROL *Age of Household Reference Person (HRP) by household composition*

⁶ Data from Scottish Government (2010)

⁷ Data from Scottish Government (2010)

⁸ Smeaton, E. and Rees, G. (2004) *Running Away in South Yorkshire: research into the incidence and nature of the problem in Sheffield, Rotherham, Barnsley and Doncaster*, Safe@Last / The Children's Society

likely to become homeless.⁹ After the age of 16, 14 of the 23 detached young people had experienced periods of homelessness.¹⁰

Centrepoin, a charity that provides emergency accommodation, information and advice to homeless young people in London, asked all new entrants in 2005/06 about their immediate reasons for leaving home. The research found that 20 per cent of the 858 young people accommodated by Centrepoin and involved in the survey had run away for more than one night before they were 16.¹¹ This is nearly twice the rate of running away estimated by research in 2005 which concluded that 11 per cent of young people in England ran away before the age of 16.¹²

This research is backed up by a US study which found that about half of the homeless population interviewed (266 respondents) had also run away as a child. The average age of respondents was early thirties rather than a sample predominantly made up of young people.¹³

Quilgars et al's analysis of Communities and Local Government statistics in England, found that nearly half of young people accepted as homeless, aged 16-17 years olds, had also run away for more than one night before the age of 16. Alongside running away the study concludes that young homeless people are likely to experience family disruption, difficulty getting on with parents, witnessing or experiencing violence within the home, spending time in care and having education severely disrupted.¹⁴

Although the rates of running away vary, the limited research to date shows a strong connection between running away and homelessness. Will the same be true in Scotland?

⁹ Smeaton, E. (2005) *Living on the Edge: the experiences of detached young runaways*, The Children's Society

¹⁰ Smeaton, E (2005)

¹¹ Smith, J. and Ravenhill, M. (2006) *What is Homelessness?: A report on the attitudes of young people and parents on risks of running away and homelessness in London*, Centre for Housing and Community Research, Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University

¹² Rees, G. and Lee, J. (2005) *Still Running II: Findings from the Second National Survey of Young Runaways*, The Children's Society

¹³ Simons, L. and Whitbeck, L. B. (1991) *Running Away during Adolescence as a Precursor to Adult Homelessness*, *Social Services Review*, 65:2, June: 224 - 247

¹⁴ Quilgars, D., Johnsen, S. and Pleave, N. (2008) *Youth Homelessness in the UK: A decade of progress? An evaluation of the progress being made to address youth homelessness in the UK*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Research methods

We undertook a survey among young homeless people (aged 16-24) across Scotland to ask about their experiences of running away before they were 16. We worked with 11 projects that provide accommodation to young homeless people who asked all new entrants if they would like to take part in the survey.¹⁵ The survey ran for a six month period from July 2010 to January 2011. We received 145 survey responses from young people. This was a return rate of about 40 per cent from all residents who stayed at the projects over the six months.

Prior to the survey commencing each project was given a guidance sheet for staff and an information sheet was produced for young people, both of which explained the reasons for the survey and a definition of running away. The survey was optional for young people and anonymous. It could be completed online or on paper. It was deliberately short to make sure it was not too onerous, with young people being asked to answer a maximum of nine questions – fewer if they had not run away when they were under 16. In order to capture all types of running away the survey asked young people if, when they were under 16, they had ever run away, been thrown out, stayed away from home or care for at least one night without permission or for four weeks or more.

We asked projects to provide support for young people who wanted assistance with completing the survey.

Findings and analysis

Runaway experiences

A total of 84 per cent of survey respondents said they had run away before the age of 16. This is considerably higher than the national rate of running away for all children and young people which is estimated at 11 per cent. It is also higher than rates of running away recorded by similar studies with young homeless people discussed above. A high rate of running away can in part be explained by the fact that young people who had run away in the past may have been more likely to take part in the survey than those with no history of running. However this potential bias would not fully account for the high rates recorded and does not take away from the fact that a large proportion of young homeless people also ran away.

¹⁵ Initially each project was asked to include all young people aged 16 - 24 and then only new entrants to the project thereafter. We originally invited 19 projects to be involved in the study and 11 of these actively participated. A list of the participating projects is in the appendix.

So young homeless people are very likely to have run away before they were 16. Put another way, young people who have run away are over-represented in the young homeless population and are therefore at particular risk of homelessness compared to those who have not run away. There seems to be no difference in the rate of running away between young males who are homeless and young females (the rates are 85 per cent and 83 per cent respectively).

Young people give a number of reasons for running away but just over half (53 per cent) describe it as being “thrown out”. Young people who were thrown out, described here as forced to leave, were also more likely to have stayed away longer than other young homeless people who had run away – half of those who were forced to leave stayed away for four weeks or more compared to an average of 37 per cent. Staying away for long periods was particularly common among males with three quarters of males saying they had run away for four weeks or more.

Most of the young people had run away from home (72 per cent) and 16 per cent of young people had run away from care. Due to the nature of the survey it is possible that a respondent had run away from both home and care.

Why do young people run away?

'When you run away from home it is usually for a good reason – your parents and you don't get along, you're having problems with feeling left out or being abused by someone and you don't feel as if you can tell anyone about it. When the police turn up looking for you, you feel really guilty and sometimes they give you a lecture when sometimes that's what you have ran away from.'

'I was mixing with much older (late teens) people, drinking and smoking hash.'

'Fed up with being in care so I just ran away. Just wanted to be with my family and friends. I was too stressed out as my Gran died when I was in care which made me worse and it went on to offending, fighting, taking drugs and drinking alcohol from 9 years old.'

'Cause I got took into a children's home since I was 6 years old and went through a lot in my past plus been abused by my dad.'

'Felt that when I came back from running away I got more attention from my mother.'

'Mum was an alcoholic and would not accept responsibility for her children even after she stopped drinking and became a Christian.'

'Went through a stage where I thought I knew it all.'

'My sister moved out and when she was drunk she used to shout at me and blame me for everything as if I was a mistake. Also when I was 13 my Dad and Mum was drunk and they started arguing then it went quiet I knew then something was wrong so I got out of my bed and burst into their room and saw my Dad choking my Mum and he released her when he saw me and I started hitting him and 10 minutes later the police arrived and dragged me off him.'

Source: Quotes from survey respondents

Age and frequency of running away

Nearly half (49 per cent) of young runaways who subsequently became homeless first ran away when they were 14 or 15 years old (see chart 1). Nearly one in five (19 per cent) first ran when they were 11 or younger.

Chart 1: How old were you when you first ran away?

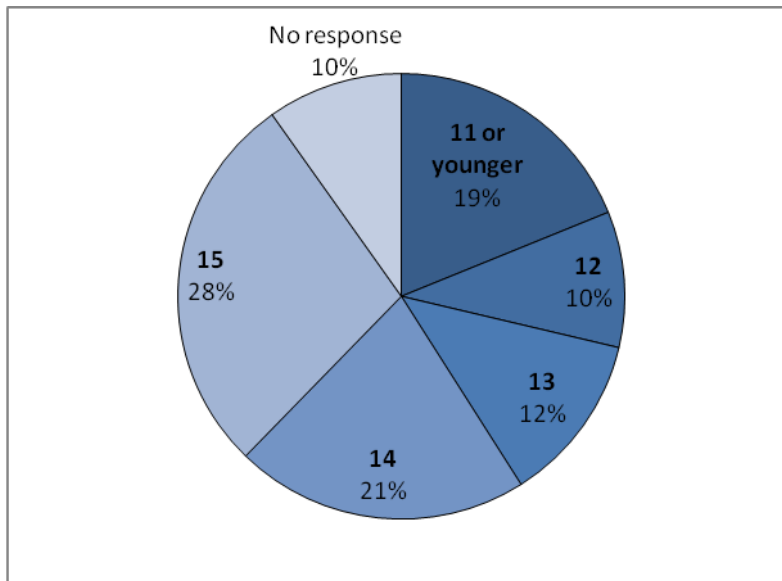
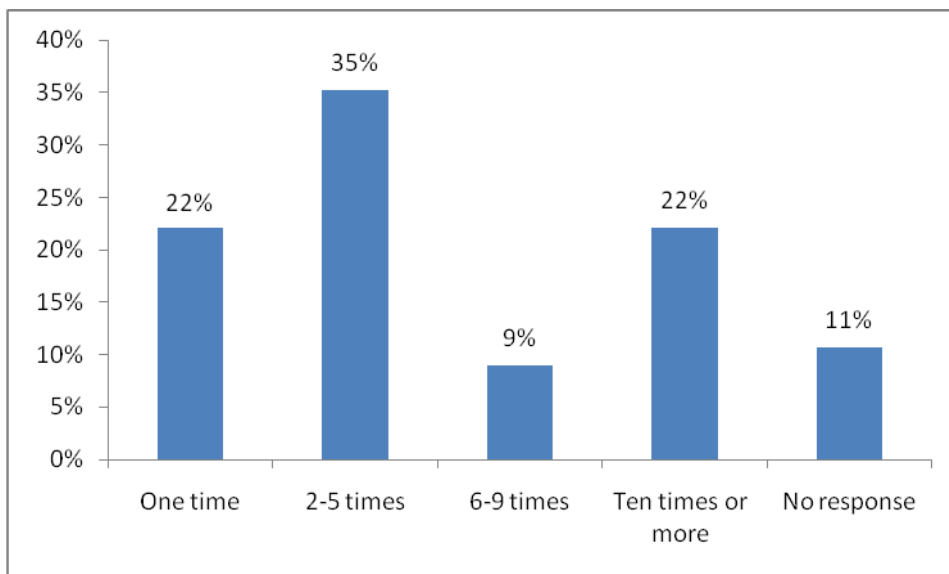


Chart 2: How often did you run away before the age of 16?



For the majority of those who had run away, it was more than a one-off occurrence (see chart 2). Two thirds (66 per cent) had run away more than once and one in five (22 per cent) had run away at least ten times.

National figures state that 19 per cent of young runaways run away four times or more.¹⁶ Although we cannot make a direct comparison, our findings are that 31 per cent of young homeless people who ran away have done so at least six times. So those that ran away four or more times will be higher than the national rate. We can therefore conclude that

¹⁶ Wade, J. (2002)

young homeless people tend to have run away more often and that children and young people who are persistent runaways are also at greater risk of homelessness in later life.

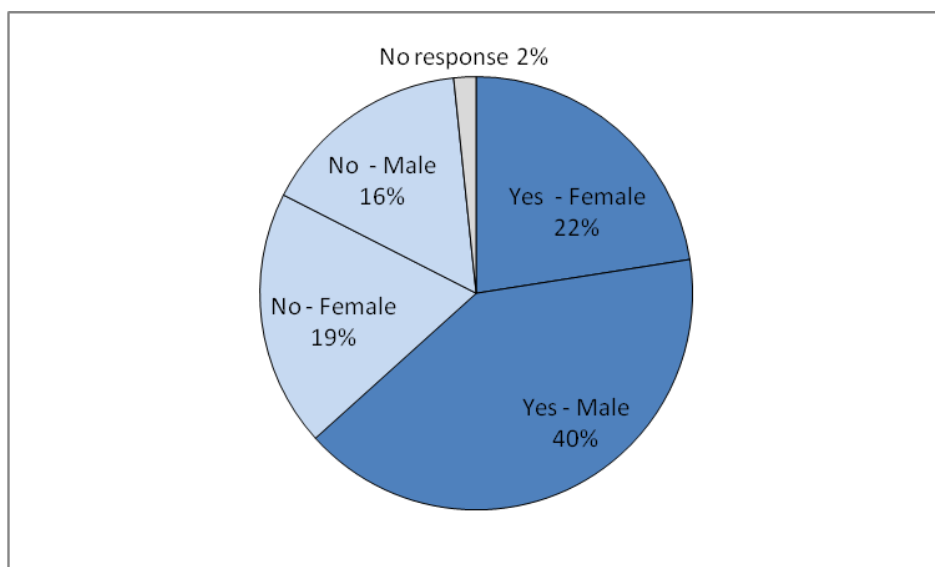
Unsurprisingly the findings suggest that the younger the age at which a person starts to run away, the more likely they are to have repeat episodes of running away. Over half (52 per cent) of young homeless people who first ran away aged 11 or younger had also run away ten times or more. The earlier a young person starts to run away, the more often they will do it.

Those who noted they had been forced to leave – that is, were thrown out on one or more occasions – were also likely to be more persistent runaways, with one in three running away ten times or more.

Rough sleepers

Almost two thirds (63 per cent) of those that had run away said they had experienced sleeping rough or staying out all night on the streets (see chart 3). Males were more likely to have slept rough - 71 per cent of males reported having slept rough compared to 28 per cent of females. Persistent young runaways were also more likely to have slept rough – 88 per cent of those who had run away ten times or more had also experienced rough sleeping.

Chart 3: Did you ever sleep rough/stay out all night on the streets when away from home or care?



The rate of sleeping rough among young runaways who subsequently became homeless appears to be double the national estimate which is 28 per cent.¹⁷ Although an interesting comparison, it needs to be used with caution as Wade's research asked young people

¹⁷ Wade, J. (2002)

about the last occasion they ran away as opposed to ours which asked whether they had slept rough, on the streets or stayed out all night on the streets on any occasion when they had ran away.

Police reporting

Over half (56 per cent) of young people who had run away said that, to their knowledge, they were reported as missing on one or more occasions, 30 per cent were not reported to the police and a further 13 per cent were unsure whether they had been reported or not.

These figures are higher than estimates in England which found that based on young people's knowledge around two thirds (68 per cent) were not reported to the police on the most recent occasion when they ran away.¹⁸ Caution is again required when comparing findings as our research asked young people whether they were reported on any occasion rather than just on the last time they ran away.

Help and support for young runaways

What would help those who run away?

'When I was running away I was ignoring the danger facts just because I wanted to be free I wasn't aware that I was hurting my family / parent / carers - should always make vulnerable young people aware of the dangers of running away.'

'Someone going to the family or a group setting for several families to go to, to try and encourage talk. More support when a family moves to a new area.'

'Too many young kids are running away from problems at home. There should be more to help them deal with it.'

Source: Quotes from survey respondents

All respondents were asked what kinds of help might have prevented them from running away or helped when they had run. Two thirds of those who had run away thought that support to sort out problems at home would be most useful in terms of preventing them from running away, this was followed by help to sort out problems at school and having somewhere safe to stay (see table 1).

¹⁸ Rees, G. and Lee, J. (2005)

Table 1: What kinds of help might have prevented you from running away or helped when you had run?

Help that might have prevented running away	% of runaways
Support to sort out problems at home	66
Support to sort out problems at school	34
Somewhere safe to stay	24
Support for your parents/carers with their problems	23
Support to sort our problems with friends	19
Support to sort relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend	16
Family mediation	16

It was beyond the scope of this research to explore in greater detail what kind of help would be most useful. Clearly, that would be valuable information to look for in the future, but it has also been covered in some detail by other studies.¹⁹

Conclusion

It is clear from the research that young people who run away are at particular risk of experiencing homelessness as a young person. The rate of running away among young homeless people is 84 per cent compared to 11 per cent for the general population.

Young people who repeatedly run away seem to be more likely to present as homeless later in life. For most, running away was more than a one-off incident with over a third running away two to five times and a fifth at least ten times. Over a third had also run away for four weeks or more. It is perhaps predictable that nearly half first ran when they were 14/15 years old, a time when we expect young people to be facing difficulties at home, however a fifth also first ran away when they were 11 or younger. Those that first ran at this age were also likely to be persistent runaways. Homeless young people who were forced to leave home before they were 16 appear to be at particular risk when they are younger – running away more and for longer periods of time.

The research shows that running away can start at an early age, and can lead to extended lengths of time away from home including periods of time sleeping rough. As soon as these young people turn 16 they are eligible to make a homeless application. If we are to reduce the numbers of young people who subsequently become homeless then there is a clear need to both prevent running away and provide sufficient support for those who do run away.

¹⁹ For example Smeaton, E. (2009) and Wade, J. (2002)

What can be done?

While there is some recognition that young people who run away when they are under 16 are also susceptible to becoming homeless there has been no national effort focusing on how services that work with young homeless people and those that work with young runaways who are under 16 can work better together to prevent young runaways from becoming homeless.

Shelter Scotland believes the following steps need to be taken as a result of this study's findings:

- A new focus on early intervention to address the causes of running away and meeting the needs of young runaways as part of work to prevent youth homelessness. This could include the provision of for example, family mediation and support services, emergency accommodation for young runaways and outreach support. These services also need to focus on support for children as young as 10 since many first run at a young age.
- Improved links between youth homelessness services and services for young runaways so that responding to the needs of young runaways is built into the prevention of youth homelessness.
- Where incidences of running away are reported this information needs to be shared with the housing and homelessness teams, especially when young runaways are 14/15 years old, to help avoid further crises whereby young people need to be placed in emergency and temporary accommodation when they turn 16.
- Ensure young runaways know about their rights to accommodation both pre and post 16 and that those professionals who they come into contact with, such as youth workers or police officers, are also aware of these rights and share these with young people.
- Improve the reporting and recording of incidences of running away so that local authorities know who is at risk of youth homelessness and can plan services accordingly.

This research was carried out by Jessie Crawford and Zoe McGuire at Shelter Scotland For further information please contact Zoe McGuire on 0344 515 2469 or at zoe_mcguire@shelter.org.uk

Supported by:



Appendix

Participating accommodation providers

We would like to thank all those below for their participation and cooperation in the research, as well as the young people who completed the surveys:

- Cumbernauld YMCA – YWCA
- Garry Place, Grangemouth - Loretto Care
- Glenrothes YMCA – YWCA
- Kilmarnock Housing Support Service - Blue Triangle Housing Association
- Number 20, Edinburgh - Four Square
- Oban Housing Support Services - Blue Triangle Housing Association
- Open Door Accommodation Project, West Lothian
- Stopover, Edinburgh – Four Square
- Stopover, Glasgow - Quarriers
- Stravaig Project, Glasgow - Mungo Foundation
- Trinity Court, Aberdeen - Aberdeen Foyer