

Left Out:

Supporting homeless young people during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic



About Centrepoint

Centrepoint is the leading national charity working with homeless young people aged 16 to 25. We are a registered social housing provider, a charity enterprise and a company limited by guarantee. Established 50 years ago, we provide accommodation and support to help homeless young people get their lives back on track.

Every year, alongside our partner organisations, we work with over 15,000 young people, providing tailored support to help them address their support needs, with a particular focus on health, learning, and move on to independent accommodation in both the social and private rented sectors. We also run a national helpline for young people at risk of homelessness.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many of the challenges homeless young people face, from unemployment and difficulties accessing education, to challenges accessing secure and truly affordable accommodation.

Young people have been among the hardest hit by the economic impacts of the pandemic, with many job losses concentrated in the hospitality and retail sectors. Half of all eligible workers aged 16-24 were furloughed in the first three months of the pandemic, and youth unemployment has reached 13.6%, more than three times the figure for all ages.

Alongside this, there is clear evidence that thousands of young people across the country are facing homelessness and housing insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Centrepoint research earlier this year found that young people across the country were finding it harder to access support and find accommodation, as local authorities and other organisations closed physical spaces and moved services online.

As we come into winter, it is critical for the health and wellbeing of young people facing homelessness that there is sufficient, and appropriate, support and accommodation available across the country. However, evidence from our survey of youth homelessness organisations finds that there is significant concern that there is a lack of suitable, age-appropriate accommodation for young people facing homelessness.

This briefing is based on the results of a national survey of youth homelessness organisations conducted by Centrepoint in November 2020. A total of 57 organisations from across the UK responded to the survey.

Recommendations

1. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should ensure that all local authorities have sufficient resources to commission age-specific supported accommodation and housing options for young people facing homelessness.

Many partners raised how a lack of youth-specific housing options made it difficult to respond to youth homelessness and minimise risks to young people during the pandemic. The government should commit to new funding for young people's supported accommodation or ensure that part of the money provided through wider homelessness funding streams, including the Rough Sleeping Initiative, is allocated for this purpose.

2. MHCLG should establish a centralised portal for accessing local authority housing services, and work with authorities to guarantee minimum standards of accessibility and clarity for those seeking support

The Homelessness Reduction Act has been a step change in empowering people to access the support and advice they need. However, the pandemic has exposed just how difficult it can be for young people to find out where to seek support or present as homeless at many local authorities when in crisis.

3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should immediately bring forward the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) exemption for homeless under-25s and care leavers (current planned for 2023) in light of the pandemic and a projected increase in homelessness.

To free up bed spaces in supported accommodation and help move-on beyond the pandemic, the government must ensure that young people who have experienced homelessness can access the financial support they need to access accommodation.

4. The DWP should make the £20 a week Universal Credit uplift permanent

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic will still be felt long beyond next April, with young people already facing increased unemployment and loss of income. By maintaining this increased rate, the Government can provide critical breathing space to vulnerable young people.

5. The DWP should commit to maintaining the Local Housing Allowance at the thirtieth percentile of local market rents beyond 2020/21

There is clear evidence that the previous freeze of LHA rates fed into increased homelessness and made it harder for young people especially to access rented accommodation. In the face of increased levels of homelessness and housing insecurity, the Government must commit to linking state support to real market rents over the longer-term.

Policy context

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the UK government has taken a series of key decisions to limit the spread of the virus and protect public health, alongside measures to protect employment, strengthen the social security system and reduce the risk of people becoming homeless.

In March, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government wrote to all local authorities instructing them to find emergency accommodation for all people sleeping rough or without access to accommodation where they could safely self-isolate.

Through joint working between councils, charities, community groups and the private rented sector, around 15,000 people were supported to access self-contained accommodation. Emerging evidence suggests that the measures were effective in preventing the spread of the virus and safeguarding the health of highly vulnerable communities of people¹.

Another critical measure taken in March was the suspension of possession actions, intended to protect tenants from eviction during the pandemic. Minimum notice periods required by landlords to end residential tenancies in the private rented sector were extended from two to three months, and then extended for six months up until March 2021. Court proceedings were suspended between March and September, and the government has advised bailiffs not to enforce eviction notices over the winter period for areas which remain within Tiers 2 or 3.

These measures have undoubtedly stopped people from losing their homes and have brought temporary security for many people affected by the financial impacts of the pandemic. However, analysis by Shelter suggests that over 320,000 renters have fallen into arrears during the pandemic², and it is unclear if any additional financial support is being made available.

The Chancellor announced in March that Universal Credit standard allowances would be increased by roughly £20 a week, and that the Local Housing Allowance, which sets rates of support for housing costs, would be restored to the thirtieth percentile of local rents.

Prior to this, most working-age benefits had been frozen for four years, leading to a significant decoupling of benefit entitlements from real living costs, especially housing costs. There is a clear body of evidence suggesting that this freeze caused significant hardship and has likely been a key driver of increasing levels of homelessness in recent years.³

However, in the recent spending review, the government made no indication that this increased Universal Credit rate would be maintained beyond this financial year and documents suggest that Local Housing Allowance rates will again be frozen beyond next year.

¹ A study by UCL estimated that, during the first wave of the pandemic, “the preventive measures imposed might have avoided 21 092 infections, 266 deaths, 1164 hospital admissions, and 338 ICU admissions among the homeless population” [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30396-9/fulltext#seccesstitle170](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30396-9/fulltext#seccesstitle170)

² https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/230000_renters_at_risk_of_covid-eviction_when_government_ban_lifts

³ National Audit Office (2017) Homelessness: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General. London: NAO

Over the year, the government has committed significant investment to tackling homelessness and rough sleeping, bringing forward over £700m for capital and revenue funding. This has included:

- £266m for the Next Steps Accommodation Programme
- £10m cold weather fund
- £15m protect programme
- £3.2m COVID emergency funding (at the start of the pandemic)
- £112m on the Rough Sleeping Initiative
- £63m for the Homelessness Reduction Grant
- £200m for the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant
- £6m COVID-19 Homelessness Support Fund

This funding has been welcomed by the homelessness sector and will support critical services to operate over the winter months, as well as bringing funding forward to develop much-needed move on accommodation to help people into independence.

However, there are concerns that many of these funding streams and programmes are aimed at the immediate and short-term, leaving providers unable to plan services and support in the longer-term. A lack of specific focus on young people, and on those facing other forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing, similarly risks leaving many people unable to access the specialist support they need.

As our survey findings below show, many organisations are still concerned about levels of funding affecting their ability to meet demand during this time and, without the right support, risk being overwhelmed if levels of homelessness continue increase.

Survey Findings

Growing numbers of young people sleeping rough

For many young people across the country, the coronavirus crisis has increased their exposure to housing insecurity and homelessness. Loss of employment and income has pushed thousands of young people into hardship, while health restrictions and social distancing have made it increasingly difficult for those facing homelessness to stay with extended family or friends.

Homelessness and rough sleeping data have shown a sharp rise in the numbers of young people without any place to stay at all. In London, official rough sleeping figures showed a 47 per cent increase in the number of under-25s sleeping rough from July to September 2020 when compared to the same period last year.⁴ Rough sleeping among young people also appears to be increasing faster than in older age groups, with young people now making up 11% of rough sleepers in London – a historic high.

Charities and support providers who took part in Centrepoin’s research from across the UK have highlighted deep concerns about increases in young people facing homelessness.

More than one in three (36 per cent) thought the number of young people sleeping rough in their area had increased since the start of the pandemic. Almost four in ten respondents (39 per cent) reported working with more young people since the beginning of the pandemic.

Most worryingly, the majority of respondents expected that there was worse to come.

Almost three quarters (73 per cent) of respondents to Centrepoin’s survey expect to see an increase in the numbers of young people sleeping rough in the coming months.

Several respondents highlighted how the economic and employment impacts of the pandemic had led to a rise in young people facing homelessness locally, as casual work in hospitality and retail had become harder to access. Others noted the ongoing pressures from the lockdown and restrictions causing tensions within households:

"We are beginning to see more referrals into our service as conditions worsen in family homes and young people are made homeless due to stress on the family." Supported accommodation provider, South West

Centrepoin’s survey of English local authorities earlier in 2020 similarly found that 78 per cent of councils had seen increases in homelessness between March and June, and that 74 per cent expected to see further increases due to the ongoing pandemic. Similarly, calls to Centrepoin’s Helpline jumped by over 50 per cent during the first lockdown, with calls from young people sleeping rough almost doubling.⁵

⁴ Greater London Assembly (2020) Rough Sleeping in London (CHAIN reports) 2020/21 Q2 reports - <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

⁵ Centrepoin (2020) Locked Out: Youth Homelessness During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic. London: Centrepoin

A lack of suitable provision and support for young people

However, in the face of growing numbers of young people facing homelessness many organisations do not think that there is sufficient accommodation and support available to this group.

Less than a third (31 per cent) of organisations think that there is sufficient support for rough sleepers in their area, with even fewer agreeing that there was sufficient support for young people.

Only 22 per cent of services report that there is sufficient support available for young people forced to sleep rough in their area.

While recent government investment in the sector was extremely welcome, most agencies stated that it was having a limited impact on the young people they support. Fewer than a quarter (24 per cent) thought that the 'Everyone In' scheme had had a positive impact for young people facing homelessness in their area.

Several respondents highlighted that they did not think government funding programmes were adequate to support young people facing homelessness, and that a lack of age-specific emergency accommodation could put young people at risk:

"Very often young people seem to be left out of the conversation about homelessness and rough sleeping. We attend a number of multi-agency forums on the subjects and young people are not discussed and are skipped over when it comes to finding client groups for pilot projects. It's very frustrating." Youth Homelessness Charity, West Midlands

"The current provision is not set up to accommodate young people with complex needs. This is a huge area of concern... [Our area] also has no specific young persons' emergency accommodation, which is really poor. Young people end up going into B&Bs and hotels with older adults. This is not acceptable and the support offered should be by services that specialise in supporting young people. It isn't at present." Youth Homelessness Charity, North West

One respondent highlighted that where local authorities had established pathway models in place, young people were less likely to be accommodated through the 'Everyone In' scheme or placed into accommodation which was less appropriate to their needs.

Centrepoint's research with local authorities earlier in the year found similar experiences, with only a minority of authorities (23 per cent) thinking that the measures taken by Government went far enough to support young people facing homelessness. In several cases, councils reported having little choice other than accommodating under 25s with older adults due to the lack of any specialist provision locally.⁶

⁶ Centrepoint (2020) Locked Out

New investment not sufficient to meet increased demand

Many services had seen increases in their funding during the pandemic. 42 per cent of services that responded to Centrepoin’s survey had received additional funding from their local authority, while two thirds (66 per cent) said that they had received additional funding from voluntary donations and charitable trusts.

However, over a quarter (26 per cent) had not received any additional funding during this time, and eight per cent reported that their income had seen a drop.

Even those who had seen increases in funding felt that these did not go far enough to meet the sheer scale of the challenge they are facing.

Fewer than a third (30 per cent) of services agreed that their current levels of funding were sufficient to cope with the additional challenges and demands created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

62 per cent of respondents did not think current funding would go far enough to meet demand, including almost one in six (14 per cent) saying this funding was nowhere near enough.

When asked specifically about the £15 million announced in October as part of the government’s ‘Prevent Programme’, only 10 per cent of respondents thought this would have a positive impact on their service.

“...we have not received the funding to provide enough workers to cope with the huge number of young people presenting to our service so we end up having to redirect a number of young people back to [the local authority] where they don’t receive the same quality and level of service. They purely focus on if they have a legal duty to provide accommodation and if they don’t the young person isn’t supported effectively to prevent or relieve homelessness.” Youth Homelessness Charity, North West

Clearly, there are deep concerns by homelessness organisations that current levels of funding may not be enough to respond to increased youth homelessness across the country. While new funding, such as that announced in the November Spending Review, is greatly welcome, the focus on those sleeping rough and lack of specific funding for youth provision risks leaving young people unable to access the services they need.

“Young people are going to be disproportionately affected by this pandemic and we expect demands on our services to remain high for the next few years. Investment should be provided for charities to build capacity and be able to deliver sustainable support over the coming months. We need to look beyond the sticking plaster.” Youth Homelessness Charity, West Midlands

Increasingly difficult to access housing advice

Eight in 10 (80 per cent of) organisations think that it has become more difficult for young people to access housing advice and support since the start of the pandemic, including 22 per cent saying it had become much more difficult.

As highlighted in previous research by Centrepoin, organisations across the country thought that the closure of physical offices and centres meant that many young people were finding it harder to get the help they needed.

Respondents highlighted how a lack of internet access or phone credit was a significant barrier for young people seeking help:

"The local housing team are still working from home most of the time so arranging appointments has been harder to do. When they get an appointment they are told to access the local landlords list which is online and of course they do not have access to the internet as most of them just have a basic phone the job centre has given them to remind them of appointments."
Supported Housing Provider, North West

While many organisations have had to change ways of working and reduce face-to-face services in order to protect public health, this has left young people struggling to access support in too many cases. Centrepoint's research earlier in the year found that even before the pandemic, difficulties accessing statutory services and advice meant that young people were unable to get the help they needed in a time of crisis.⁷

Restricted access to move on accommodation

Organisations also highlighted how difficulties accessing move-on accommodation and supporting young people into independence had been exacerbated by the pandemic, with fewer housing options being available in both the private and social rented sectors.

A significant majority (76 per cent) of respondents said that the pandemic had made it harder for young people to find and access move on accommodation.

Even before the pandemic, supporting young people to move on from supported accommodation and into their own accommodation had become increasingly difficult. Centrepoint research from 2018 found that one in five residents were ready to move on, but could not find accommodation which they could afford⁸.

Councils surveyed earlier in the year emphasised how increased Universal Credit (UC) rates, and especially LHA rates, had made it easier to find accommodation and relieve homelessness for many people during this time. However, the Government's plans to re-freeze LHA rates and a lack of any commitment on UC rates risks undermining these positive steps, and limiting access to accommodation for those on low incomes.

With more than three quarters of youth homelessness organisations foreseeing an increase in young people facing homelessness in the coming months, it is critical that those already in hostels and supported accommodation are able to move on. As well as investing in move on accommodation for homeless young people, the Government should ensure that the benefits system provides the support needed to access and sustain a place to live.

⁷ Centrepoint (2020) Locked Out

⁸ Centrepoint (2018) Ready to Move On: Barriers to homeless young people accessing longer-term accommodation

Impact on frontline service delivery

Being located across the UK, the youth homelessness organisations and providers in this survey have been affected by different levels of restrictions and local measures. 47 per cent of respondents were operating in an area that had remained in Tier 1 before the second national lockdown, 35 per cent had services in an area which had moved into Tier 2, and 18 per cent had services in an area which had been moved into Tier 3.

Respondents reported how the pandemic and health restrictions had impacted their service delivery. 78 per cent had moved to online and remote delivery of services, and over half (54 per cent) had suspended or reduced certain services due to restrictions. 18 per cent had reduced opening hours, and more than a quarter (26 per cent) reported having to turn people away due to not having the capacity to meet increased levels of demand.

Many respondents highlighted how steps they had taken during the first lockdown, such as moving to remote delivery of services and ensuring a supply of PPE, put them in a better position to cope with the second lockdown:

"We put a number of measures in place to make our services COVID-safe during the first lockdown. We are confident that the measures put in place will mean we can deliver services effectively but are nervous about the rises in demand we may see" Youth Homelessness Charity, North West

However several raised concerns about the impact of the second lockdown and further restrictions, particularly on the mental health and wellbeing of the young people they supported. Organisations highlighted how the suspension of certain face-to-face services, as well as drop-ins and social events, had made it harder to provide vulnerable young people with the support they needed.

"We have seen a much more detrimental impact of the second lockdown on our young people as the fears and anxieties called by the first lockdown have escalated. The increase in cases, local lockdowns, and reduced access to face-to-face services has increased young people's need for support." Youth Homelessness Charity, Northern Ireland

Have any positives come out of the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of great difficulty and hardship for millions of people around the world, and the negative impacts on young people facing homelessness have been huge. However, the pandemic has also led to positive changes and new ways of working, allowing young people and organisations to adapt and develop new skills and relationships.

From coordinating the delivery of PPE and essentials across different organisations, to newer and stronger local partnerships, charities and organisations have pulled together to ensure continuing support during this time. Organisations highlighted being able to assist groups of people not normally entitled to support, and access to local and national funding streams to support young people locally and develop new and innovative services:

"Creativity and innovative thinking has been so evident through this pandemic. Our young people continue to receive high quality support but in much more creative ways." Supported accommodation provider, Northern Ireland

"[The positives have included] Many new ways of working both as a team and with young people; new skill development by young people. A clearer shared objective locally has meant everyone working together closer to deliver efficiencies and solutions" Youth Homelessness Charity, South West

"Funding through the Coronavirus Scheme has enabled us to recast our model and reshape our offer and it is being well received. We have been able to address digital and food poverty with our network of support organisations. We have trained young people to be peer mentors who now support our virtual groups and their own communities. We are stronger digitally than we have ever been, developing our social media and recognising the need to have this work embedded in all we do." Youth Homelessness Charity, South East

It is clear that youth homelessness charities and housing providers have risen to the challenge of the pandemic and continued to provide critical support and assistance to vulnerable young people.

Conclusion

The findings from our survey show that organisations across the country have been continuing to provide support to vulnerable young people, in spite of the many challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the results also make clear that there is deep concern that levels of youth homelessness are likely to increase further, and current policies and investment decisions may not be enough to provide young people with the specialist support they need.

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