

Centrepont briefing: supporting homeless young people through the next phase of the Coronavirus crisis



Coronavirus has been an unprecedented challenge for charities working to support homeless people. Since MHCLG issued the 'Everybody In' directive at the end of March, approximately 5,400 rough sleepers have been placed in emergency accommodation.¹ The instruction was clear - 'focus on people who are, or are at risk of, sleeping rough, and those who are in accommodation where it is difficult to self-isolate, such as shelters and assessment Centres.'²

This initiative has been a momentous success and has undoubtedly safeguarded some of the most vulnerable people in our society. However, accommodating rough sleepers is only part of the story. There are other forms of homelessness, particularly for young people who are more likely to be hidden homeless. The scale and speed of the response to rough sleeping during Coronavirus shows the potential for change if the necessary resources are in place. As we enter the next phase of the pandemic and restrictions begin to ease, we urge the Government to think about homelessness beyond rough sleeping.

Young people facing homelessness are struggling to get the support they need

In 2018/19, 110,000 young people approached their local authority for help because they faced homelessness.³ We expect this to have risen drastically due to Coronavirus. We have seen an increase of around 50% in calls to our Helpline from young people in crisis with nowhere else to turn, compared to call volumes prior to the crisis. On Monday 11th May we received a record call volume when 79 young people contacted us in desperate need of help. The young people who call are facing homelessness for a range of reasons; young people forced to leave because a family member is shielding, sofa surfers needing to move on, or the stresses within a vulnerable family boiling over and becoming unsafe.

Our Helpline callers ensure that young people understand their rights and entitlements when they approach their local authority for help but we have heard that many local authorities are struggling to fulfil their basic obligations under the Homelessness Reduction Act. Young people have been told by housing teams to 'try again tomorrow'. They are unable to get on the very first wrung of local authority support.

With the Government's response focused on accommodating rough sleepers, many young people have missed out on the crucial emergency accommodation offered by local authorities because they are not long-term, entrenched rough sleepers. However, they have also been locked out of usual support services.

We urgently need support for all homeless people, not just those who have previously slept rough

¹ Communities Secretary's statement on coronavirus: 2 May 2020

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/communities-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-2-may-2020-2>

² Letter from minister Luke Hall MP to council leaders

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876466/Letter_from_Minister_Hall_to_Local_Authorities.pdf

³ Centrepont (2020) Caught by the Act: the scale of youth homelessness in the UK

As we transition from lockdown, we urge the Government to look at the needs of homeless people more broadly. There absolutely must be a plan in place to accommodate those rough sleepers now in emergency accommodation in permanent housing. However, alongside this we must also prevent people from becoming homeless for the first time due to Coronavirus. Young people are particularly at risk of this.

1. Changes to the social security system are needed to ensure people can move on from homelessness or avoid it altogether

A decade of welfare reform has uncoupled benefits from actual living and housing costs, leaving thousands facing hardship and the risk of homelessness. Young people are most at risk as they receive significantly reduced rates, making it difficult to meet essential living costs, access and sustain employment, education or training, and move on from homelessness.⁴

During the Coronavirus crisis, the homeless young people living in Centrepoint accommodation have been struggling. Just under 70% of all applications to Centrepoint's Hardship Bursary since January have been received since the beginning of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Their benefits are just not meeting their needs.

To ensure that the social security system can enable people to move on from homelessness beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government must:

- Increase the standard allowance of Universal Credit for young people living independently to match the amount over 25s receive
- Restore work allowances for vulnerable claimants
- Reduce the impact of the five week wait on the most vulnerable, by allowing certain claimants to have their advance payment paid as a grant
- Restore LHA rates to at least the 30th percentile of local rents on a long-term basis

2. An emergency fund is needed for homelessness accommodation providers

The additional funding for supporting homeless people has largely gone towards tackling rough sleeping. Furthermore, the announcement that charities would receive a package of emergency financial support did not come to fruition in the way we had hoped, with a lack of transparency about the flow of that funding and no open application process. Supported accommodation providers have been left out. Many receive limited statutory funding. The sector is highly reliant on voluntary income, which is not sustainable at the present time. Access to funding, particularly to help with additional staffing costs, will help homelessness accommodation providers to continue to deliver services.

3. Due to the increased housing insecurity Coronavirus has brought, access to truly affordable housing is urgently needed

A dysfunctional housing market continues to hit young people especially hard. High house prices and rents mean that over two thirds of young people today are paying

⁴ Centrepoint (2018) Ready to move on

more than 30% of their incomes on housing costs⁵, and there is a critical shortage of homes for social rent. Allocations and lettings policies can put homeless young people at a disadvantage, while the move towards intermediate and 'affordable' rents by many landlords can leave them priced out.

In the private rented sector, a toxic combination of high rents, low benefit entitlements, stigma and 'No DSS' mean that it can be almost impossible for a homeless young person to find a place to rent, while the accommodation that is available can often be of poor quality and offer little security of tenure.

To ensure that people can successfully move on from homelessness beyond the pandemic, the government should:

- Urgently bring forward the government policy to raise the Local Housing Allowance for homeless young people and care leavers, as announced in the Budget 2020
- Commit to the delivery of at least 90,000 thousand social homes per year through direct government investment
- Review allocations and lettings policies to end discrimination against certain groups, such as young people and single homeless people
- Bring forward the ban on no-fault evictions and legislate for longer-term tenancies
- End 'No DSS' discrimination and support landlords to accommodate lower income households through reforms to Universal Credit

4. An effective infrastructure of support and advice is needed to help people move on from homelessness for good

Without the right support in place, formerly homeless people can struggle to sustain accommodation and risk repeat homelessness. This risk is even greater for young people and care leavers, without experience of managing their own household and are vulnerable to cuckooing and exploitation.

To ensure that those moved off the streets and out of temporary accommodation have the support needed to keep a place for good, the Government needs to:

- Provide a fair funding settlement for local authorities to ensure they can offer a range of effective homelessness prevention services, such as tenancy support, family mediation and advice
- Ensure that young people can access independent support and advice through youth services

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⁵ Centrepoin (2019) Talkin' about my generation