

CENTREPOINT: UPSTREAM ENGLAND PILOT EVALUATION SUMMARY

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**ENDING YOUTH
HOMELESSNESS**





There is increasing interest in the UK and across the Global North in preventing homelessness amongst young people in particular, given that the earlier someone first becomes homeless the more protracted and damaging their experience is likely to be.


The Australian Geelong Project, which has successfully used a school-based survey to identify young people at heightened risk of homelessness and offer them tailored support, has therefore attracted a great deal of international attention. Centrepoint has taken up the mantle of leading the implementation of Upstream in the English context, launching a pilot initiative in six schools located across Manchester and London, surveying children aged 11 to 16. This report captures the first year of learning in a three-year evaluation of the initiative, drawing on interviews with 19 stakeholders and analysis of the first year of Upstream surveys.

The key points to emerge were as follows:

- Upstream was viewed as an innovative and promising model by stakeholders given its notable positive impacts in Australia.
- The early stages of school buy-in and set up of Upstream are labour intensive. Having a key contact in participating schools and early attention to data privacy issues are essential.
- Survey implementation was largely successful in the Upstream pilot, with Centrepoint staff deftly overcoming challenges associated with the rigidity of school timetabling and technical difficulties with the digital platform.
- The sensitivity of homelessness risk as a topic means that the framing of the Upstream initiative both to children and to their parents/carers had to be very carefully handled.
- Overall, the Upstream survey content was viewed positively by key stakeholders as helpful and clear, albeit that there were some concerns about the comprehension of certain items by younger students.
- Survey analysis revealed more than 1 in 10 young people were at risk or experiencing youth homelessness in the pilot schools. Interestingly, there is limited evidence to suggest youth homelessness risk is higher for particular secondary school age/year

groups. Interestingly, nearly three-quarters of those identified as at risk of youth homelessness were not disengaged from school, but they did indicate lowered levels of resilience and wellbeing.

- Homelessness risks were identified using these survey results but also, crucially, drew on follow-up conversations with the young people flagged and input from school staff.
- Centrepoint has been on a journey over the past year as regards the Upstream support offer, moving away from a generic youth support offer and externally-provided mental health support, towards a stronger emphasis on family-centred support.
- Key informants reported positive feedback from those children and families who have actively engaged with Upstream thus far. There are also some promising early indications of improvements in the circumstances of student supported by Upstream.
- Key learning from this first year of the pilot initiative includes the importance of: bedding in this emerging 'whole family' approach in the Upstream pilot; further refinement of data privacy, ethics and consent processes; contributing to the improvement of the survey software and survey tool; and the establishment of a UK-specific 'fidelity' statement on Upstream.



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UPSTREAM SET UP

In setting up the English Upstream pilot, Centrepoint were able to draw upon existing knowledge and learning from Upstream Cymru in Wales.

Based on this learning, and internal thinking within Centrepoint, an early decision was taken that Centrepoint would work with external partners to provide specialist support on family mediation and mental health, rather than deliver all support in-house. Establishing relevant partnerships, as well as onboarding new members of Centrepoint staff, were therefore important early tasks.

Selection of participant schools was initially guided by need-based criteria, such as Pupil Premium Rate, but school willingness and capacity came increasingly to the fore during the recruitment process. Several key lessons emerged as regards encouraging

school interest in Upstream and preparing them for implementation.

First, it was crucial to emphasise the added value of Upstream to the schools and the relatively minimal effort required from them, albeit it was also important to acknowledge that some input from their side was required.

Second, critical to roll-out success was the identification of a key Upstream ‘champion’ within each school to liaise with directly and to serve as an advocate for the model during senior level school discussion.

Third, establishing appropriate data protection arrangements, data sharing agreements, and agreed approaches to consent (for both children and parents/carers), had to be an early priority.

SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION

Centrepoint has successfully rolled out the Upstream survey in five schools (from a target of six), achieving very significant levels of engagement and substantial numbers of returns in four of these

schools. The flexibility, positive approach, and genuine commitment to partnership displayed by Centrepoint management and staff was pivotal to this success.

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Nonetheless, two key challenges presented themselves.

First, the fast-paced nature of the school environment and the rigid timetabling of the school day presented considerable obstacles to survey implementation. This demanded a highly pragmatic approach to be taken on the part of Centrepoint staff.

Second, questions remain around the efficacy of the current digital platform used for Upstream, with substantial technical difficulties experienced during survey implementation which threatened to undermine the pilot. Centrepoint staff deftly navigated around these technical challenges.

A key theme from this first year of the pilot was that very careful consideration has to be given to the framing of the Upstream initiative to children and, especially, to their parents/carers. This challenge arises from the sensitivity of homelessness risk as a topic, with all the potential for stigma and harm that this implies. A balance has to be struck between appropriately informing children and their parents/carers about the nature of Upstream, while minimising any unnecessary anxiety and resistance to engagement with the programme.

SURVEY RESULTS

Analysis of the first year pilot Upstream surveys provides new and important insights into the scale and characteristics of young people identified as at risk of experiencing homelessness.



Only 1 in 5 young people at elevated risk of youth homelessness were also at elevated risk of family homelessness.

Crucially, youth homelessness emerges as relatively distinct from family homelessness.



It revealed that 1 in 10 young people were at risk or experiencing youth homelessness in the pilot schools, closely matching the rate in Wales.

Relevant to further roll out of the Upstream intervention, there is limited evidence to suggest youth homelessness risk is higher for particular secondary school age/year groups.

The survey results also offer a new understanding of the associations between youth homelessness risk and educational engagement, resilience and wellbeing.

First, of the pupils identified as high risk of youth homelessness, nearly three quarters were either considered engaged in school, or demonstrated low levels of school disengagement. This indicates that Upstream is delivering on its intent to help identify young people who may not be picked up by schools due to a lack of externalising problems.

Second, pupils experiencing any degree of youth homelessness risk indicated lower levels of resilience and wellbeing.



SURVEY CONTENT AND IDENTIFICATION OF RISK

Overall, the Upstream survey content was viewed positively by key stakeholders as both helpful and clear. However, there were some concerns about its applicability across different age groups, with younger students said to struggle with certain survey items, particularly questions on optimism and feelings of safety at home. While senior Centrepont staff were keen that the survey be tightly focussed on homelessness risks, school staff tending to favour extending this focus to include broader psychosocial indicators, such as wellbeing, reflecting their broad pastoral remit.

Key informants reported a lack of transparency on the embedded algorithm that generated the RAG ratings on homelessness risks generated by the Upstream survey tool, despite this being publicly available.

Importantly, **Centrepont's process around identifying risk extended beyond the RAG rating generated by the survey results, and involved both speaking directly with young people to better understand their survey responses, as well as drawing on input from school staff.** However, it was noted that a balance had to be struck between tapping into the wealth of knowledge that schools have on their students, while also acknowledging the limits of that knowledge and avoiding gatekeeping.

It was encouraging to see schools engaging dynamically with the Upstream survey insights, using them to better understand level of need, triangulating findings with other school surveys, and amending/developing policies in light of findings.

OFFERING SUPPORT

Centrepont has been on a journey over the past year as regards the support offer to children flagged as at risk via Upstream. For example, amendments have been made to parental consent processes, so that a lack of response from parents/carers did not introduce significant delays to starting case work.

More substantively, there has been a growing recognition on the part of senior Centrepont staff that the initial 'child-centred', general mentoring and mental health focus was insufficient to meet the homelessness reduction aims of Upstream. **Forward plans now include a move away from externally-**

provided mental health support towards a stronger emphasis on family-centred support. This pivot embraces the specific mediation and conflict-focussed services provided from the beginning of the initiative by partners Depaul, but also potentially bespoke support for parents with both trauma and issues of material deprivation. This emerging 'whole family' approach is very much in line with existing evidence on the importance of family conflict as the main trigger to youth homelessness, but implies a steep learning curve for Centrepont who have not traditionally worked much with whole families.



EARLY IMPACTS

Later stages of the research will involve speaking directly with young people and their families on their experiences of receiving support from Upstream. However, initial indications from Centrepoint workers, support partners and school staff report overwhelmingly positive feedback from those who have actively engaged. **Also welcomed was the early intervention opportunities afforded by Upstream, enabling family mediation to be applied productively before conflict has reached crisis point and inflicted deep harm on relationships.**

This may be crucial in reducing youth homelessness risks further down the line. With this shift towards prevention comes the opportunity to explore what family mediation looks like when implemented upstream and establish best practice. There are also promising early indications regarding Upstream's ability to identify potential cases of homelessness



risk among students that would otherwise not be on schools' radar, and signs suggestive of improvements in the circumstances of students supported by Upstream.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

Key learning points from this first year of the evaluation of the pilot pertain to:

- **The importance of bedding in the emerging 'whole family' orientation of Upstream**, and the imperative associated with upskilling Centrepoint staff unused to working on family-orientated interventions;
- **The need for further reflection and expert advice on handling data protection** and ethics challenges associated with parental consent for the support work, which are likely to come even further to the fore as the focus on family-based work strengthens;
- **Emerging priorities for improving the Upstream survey software** and survey tool to meet the needs of delivery partners across the UK; and
- **The requirement to develop and finesse a UK-specific 'fidelity' statement on Upstream**, and to ensure that any departures from the approach are fully justified.

NEXT STEPS

The remaining two years of this evaluation will involve the collection and analysis of a more substantial array of both quantitative and qualitative data on the Upstream pilot, including survey outcome data, perspectives from young people and families

assisted through the initiative, as well as comparisons of level of risk across waves of survey data. This will all be supplemented with linked data from local authorities to establish any changes in levels of homelessness from targeted schools.



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