

Policy Briefing

Preventing youth homelessness after COVID-19: lessons and opportunities from the crisis



The crisis of inequality and homelessness that young people in England are facing is nothing new. However, the fall-out of COVID-19 has made the emergency even more severe. Decisive cross-governmental action is urgently needed to protect young people and ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind.

National youth homelessness helplines have reported a doubling in calls during the COVID-19 lockdown, many from young people trapped in abusive households. At the same time, the erosion of many supports usually present, along with persistent barriers like the shortage of accommodation options, mean that many are not getting the help they desperately need.

Young people have distinct experiences of, and ways into, homelessness, which have shaped their vulnerabilities during the current crisis. They are frequently in 'hidden' homeless situations –staying with friends, acquaintances and sometimes strangers– and lockdown measures, alongside widespread loss of jobs and income, have seen many of these arrangements break down. Family tensions –always a key driver of youth homelessness– have also been exacerbated, particularly for LGBTQ+ young people, those with mental health needs and those otherwise living in abusive households.

So far, the government response has overwhelmingly focused on adult patterns of rough sleeping and homelessness. Now and in the longer-term, distinct responses are needed to address the major repercussions of COVID-19 on young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.

In this briefing, we outline what we have heard from our members at the frontline of youth homelessness during the COVID-19 crisis and put forward our recommendations for government action.

We are calling for urgent action to support and protect young people experiencing homelessness, now and in future phases of the government response to COVID-19.

Key recommendations for Government

1. Urgently develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness, that recognises the long-term impact COVID-19 on young people.
2. Provide long-term capital and revenue investment to address the severe shortage of suitable supported and move-on options for young people.
3. The taskforce should develop youth specific plans and actions to prevent and end rough sleeping.

Government action so far

Following the '[Everybody In](#)' directive on 26 March, thousands of people across the country have been offered emergency accommodation by local authorities. With a view to the next phase, on 2 May [a rough sleeping taskforce](#) was announced, followed on 24 May by a £433 million commitment for [6,000 new supported accommodation units](#) for rough sleepers.

While the emergency measures taken have undoubtedly been invaluable to many young people who were rough sleeping or in inappropriate accommodation, the response so far has lacked a focus on the specific needs of young people experiencing homelessness or the increased risk of young people becoming homeless.

In addition, the temporary relaxation of statutory duties towards young people in care announced in [new legislation](#) on 26 April, undermines essential safeguards for a group already at high risk of homelessness later in life. The new laws reduce social worker contact, remove plans, reviews and assessments relating to care placements, and expand powers to deprive children of liberty in residential settings.¹ While the [associated guidance](#) clarified that duties to care leavers must be maintained and the Department for Education is making [£700,000 available for councils](#) to support care leavers at risk of homelessness, concerns about the impact on them remain. It has been widely reported by supported accommodation providers that care leavers have increasingly high support needs, partly as a result of their experiences of the care system. These new measures will exacerbate the needs of this already vulnerable group and increase their risk, both now and in the future.

Digital inequality has been a key concern during the lockdown and the Department for Education's [digital package](#) announced on 19 April provided free laptops and 4G access for vulnerable young people to tackle the attainment gap. However, there are concerns that it is not far-reaching enough in the groups of young people targeted - while many young people who are homeless stand to benefit, those given accommodation under housing legislation who do not have social workers or are not care leavers will miss out. Indeed, young people who are homeless are not explicitly listed in any government guidance targeting children and young people who are vulnerable, creating a real risk that young people who aren't 'looked after' are yet again falling through the cracks.

What we know so far: impact of COVID-19 on young people

Exacerbation of common drivers of homelessness

Many of our members have reported increasing concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on existing key drivers of youth homelessness, namely relationship breakdown, economic insecurity and mental health.

Family breakdown is the main cause of homelessness reported by young people in supported accommodation and for many, lockdown restrictions have increased pre-existing family tensions or abuse. The Centrepoin and Llamau youth homelessness helplines have both reported a doubling in call volume, many of which were from young people concerned about issues at home. AKT, the LGBTQ+ youth homelessness charity, also reported an increase in demand for services as young people face isolation with hostile families who do not accept them.²

Beyond the family home, young people are often in 'hidden homeless' situations, staying with friends or strangers without accessing homelessness support.³ Our members have told us that many of these arrangements have now broken down, with those providing housing

¹ Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020. The legislation removes 65 legal protections across 10 separate acts.

² <https://www.akt.org.uk/news/an-update-from-our-ceo-april-2020>

³ Centrepoin, *No Place to Stay* (2019) <https://centrepoin.org.uk/media/3776/xmasreport.pdf>, DePaul, Research: Danger Zones part 2 (2018)

no longer willing or able to accommodate due to the young person's loss of income and lockdown measures. Already three times more likely to be insecurely employed and facing unequal access to welfare, the lockdown has served to worsen young people's economic insecurity further.^{4,5} One third of 18-24-year-olds (excluding students) having lost jobs or been furloughed during COVID-19, compared to one-in-six adults.⁶

Mental health difficulties are another important causal factor for homelessness, which have been further strained by COVID-19. The National Youth Agency has found that 84% of young people calling helplines reported worse mental health following school closures and lack of access to mental health support.⁷

Persistent barriers to accessing services and accommodation

Widespread disruption to traditional safeguards provided by the education system, care system and youth services mean that many young people at risk of homelessness will not be identified or be able to access support where they are identified.

While many areas we have spoken to report that all young people known to be experiencing homelessness have been supported, others report that existing barriers to statutory prevention and homelessness support have worsened during the COVID-19 crisis. We have heard that newly homeless young people are often not picked up by outreach teams and, where they present to local authorities, they experience gatekeeping. Similar to the experience of adults, some local authorities are insisting that young people are 'verified' rough sleeping and that they provide evidence of the breakdown of their last 'settled' home before offering support. Members have highlighted particular difficulties when young people fleeing violence or exploitation struggle to prove their vulnerability.⁸ This compounds the barriers to services young people already face, such as a lack of trust, fear of discrimination, and a lack of awareness of rights and the support available to them.

In some areas, the absence or loss of youth-specific emergency accommodation and support means that young people are being placed in hotels with adults without specialist provision. This mirrors the wider lack of emergency accommodation solutions for young people nationally, and particular shortages in young-women-only accommodation, accommodation for people with multiple disadvantage, as Homeless Link research has highlighted.⁹ This leads young people who are already particularly vulnerable to inappropriate adult services and pathways, which puts them at risk of intimidation, exploitation and poor mental health. In addition, the chronic lack of appropriate and affordable long-term accommodation for young people has intensified. This has created blockages within supported accommodation, leaving young people with nowhere to move on to and further reducing the options for the newly homeless.

⁴ D'Arcy, C. (2017) Low Pay Britain 2017, Resolution Foundation Report, Available at: <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2017/10/Low-Pay-Britain-2017.pdf>

⁵ The International Inequalities Institute (2017), Inequalities in the application of welfare sanctions in Britain: www.lse.ac.uk/International-Inequalities/Assets/Documents/Working-Papers/III-Working-Paper-15-Inequalities-in-the-application-of-welfare-sanctions-in-Britain-de-Vries-Reeves-and-Geiger.pdf

⁶ Resolution Foundation (2020), Findings from the Resolution Foundation's coronavirus survey, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis.pdf>

⁷ National Youth Agency. Out of Sight? Vulnerable Young People: COVID-19 Response. April 2020. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/covid-response-report/>

⁸ Centrepoint. 2019. Escaping the Trap: Supporting homeless young people affected by youth violence and criminal exploitation. <https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/3425/escaping-the-trap.pdf>

⁹ Homeless Link (2018) Young and Homeless, Available at: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Young%20and%20Homeless%202018.pdf>

Managing isolation and mental health in supported accommodation

Young people living in supported accommodation will often have experienced multiple traumas, including homelessness itself. We have heard from members that the lockdown measures have increased anxiety levels and are affecting young people's mental health and wellbeing. These concerns have been echoed throughout the children and youth sector.¹⁰

Our members report that they have had to act quickly and at times have struggled to implement government requirements in a trauma-informed way, especially when managing a reported increase in anti-social behaviour and non-compliance with social distancing. This has led to concerns about damage to trust and relationships in the longer term.

However, accommodation providers have also noted that different activities and entertainment arranged for the young people isolating together in their care has alleviated tensions and created a new sense of community within the group.

Next steps: addressing the needs of young people after lockdown

After the lockdown, as before, young people's pathways into - and experiences of - homelessness will differ from those of adults. Local and national plans for transition and recovery post-lockdown must set standards to meet the particular needs of young people and ensure that they are not forced into homelessness in the longer term. It is not acceptable for young people to be directed back to the street or into adult homelessness provision.

We need additional focus on young people who are on the edge of homelessness, or who have become homeless since the 'Everybody in' directive. Family and relationship breakdown have been compounded by the negative impact of isolation and disruption on mental health. Increased investment in preventative approaches that proactively identify young people at risk and support them to access services, including mental health support, and a safe place to live will be ever more vital in the coming months.

The precarity of young people's economic position will only be exacerbated in the continued fall-out from the pandemic, making them particularly vulnerable to unemployment and evictions. While the Budget 2020 commitment to raise the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for homeless young people and care leavers is welcome, it must urgently be brought forward to address immediate needs. Additionally, raising the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s living independently would mean many more could cover their living costs, as argued by Centrepoin's [Chance to Move On campaign](#).

The national shortage of suitable supported accommodation and move-on options for young people is another core challenge that will need to be addressed.¹¹ Both capital and revenue investment is needed to enable local authorities to plug this accommodation and support gap. Specific attention should be placed on risks of homelessness for young people aged 14-16 who are in care or on the edge of care, as a way to inform planning and predictions of youth-specific housing solutions.

Young people require dedicated pathways and services to successfully engage them and build trust. These should be flexible: young people's needs will change as they go through adolescence and the transition to adulthood is not a linear process. Young people may have periods of greater independence, but need support to fall back on, and these needs should be incorporated in pathway planning.

¹⁰ <https://nva.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Out-of-Sight-COVID-19-report-Web-version.pdf>

¹¹ Centrepoin (2018) Ready to Move On, Available at <https://centrepoin.org.uk/media/3048/ready-to-move-on.pdf>

Homeless Link has published our [advice to national and local government](#) on the post-COVID-19 transition. It is guided by three broad principles, which if applied with consideration of the above, will help to ensure that young people receive the support they need to prevent or end their homelessness now and in the future.

1. **Nobody returns or is new to the street.** Local authorities must be supported by Government to provide suitable emergency accommodation to everyone without alternatives, including those with no recourse to public funds.
2. **Everybody receives the support they need to keep their accommodation.** Government must commit long-term funding for support services, so that an appropriate mix of provision and safe pathways for women and young people, are available.
3. **No return to business as usual.** We must develop truly integrated partnership working in local areas, between homelessness, health, youth, specialist domestic abuse, drug and alcohol and criminal justice services, among others, so that progress made during the crisis is not lost.

Recommendations

The Government should:

- Urgently develop a cross-government strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness, that recognises the long-term impact Covid-19 on young people. This strategy should be funded and include measures to hold government departments and local areas accountable, with a focus on supporting multi-agency interventions that are youth informed.
- Revoke regulations set out in the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.
- Together with the Rough Sleeping Taskforce, set out specific actions and plans for provision of appropriate youth-only accommodation and specialist support in local areas. This should recognise the diversity of young people's needs and experiences, including 'staying put' schemes for care leavers and Housing First for those facing multiple disadvantage.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should:

- Provide long-term capital and revenue investment to address the severe shortage of suitable supported and move-on options for young people. Dedicated pathways out of homelessness are needed for young people to address the disruption to emergency hosting schemes and overall need for supported accommodation and other move-on options for young people. Further invest in housing solutions that recognise the diversity of young peoples' needs.
- Prioritise prevention by supporting partnerships between local authorities, mental health, schools and youth services. Focus on early identification of housing precarity; preventing early school leaving; family mediation and counselling (where appropriate).

- Further address the lack of housing options for young people by revising national allocations guidance to ensure they are not excluded from social housing.
- Work with housing providers to make new shared accommodation available for people on low incomes and for people at risk of homelessness.
- Invest in accredited emergency hosting schemes and dedicated emergency accommodation for young people.
- Fund private rented access schemes targeting young people, working directly with landlords to secure housing and provide support to access and sustain tenancies.
- Issue guidance for accommodation providers on supporting young people in existing provision and for youth organisations and youth homelessness organisations on virtual safeguarding.

The Department for Work and Pensions should:

- Raise the Universal Credit standard allowance for under-25s living independently to match the amount over-25s receive.¹²
- Immediately bring forward government policy to raise the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for homeless young people and care leavers, as announced in the Budget 2020.

The Department for Education should:

- Recognise children with housing precarity as a distinct group within its responsibility for Children in Need and work with MHCLG and DWP to ensure adequate preventative support is offered.

For further information on this briefing, please contact jennie.corbett@homelesslink.org.uk or lauren.page-hammick@homelesslink.org.uk

¹² See Centrepoin't's Chance to Move On campaign: <https://centrepoin't.org.uk/chance-to-move-on>