

Research report

# A year like no other:

Youth homelessness during  
the COVID pandemic



centre  
point

give homeless  
young people  
a future

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## **A year in review**

On 23 March 2020, the first 'Stay at Home' order was announced sending the UK into its first national lockdown. Twelve months on, Centrepont has conducted a review of the impact of the many challenges that this year has created for homeless young people.

The report draws on a variety of different sources of data and insight. This includes government statistics on homelessness and unemployment, internal Centrepont monitoring data, as well as qualitative groups with Centrepont staff and interviews with young people conducted throughout the year.

This process has revealed how the past 12 months, which have been incredibly challenging for everyone, have had an even more acute impact on homeless young people, who now face even greater challenges on their journey out of homelessness.

## **About Centrepont**

Centrepont 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.

Centrepont's aim to end youth homelessness can only be achieved if we work not just to address their housing situation, but also their wider problems that hold them back. Centrepont's in-house health team provides specialist multi-disciplinary support to help young people address their mental health problems, and help prepare them for a brighter future.

## **Government measures to tackle homelessness**

### ***Longstanding problems***

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK going into lockdown in March 2020, the UK was already facing a considerable housing and homelessness crisis. In the decade leading up to 2020 all recorded forms of homelessness had seen sharp increases.

The numbers of people recorded as sleeping rough in England increased by 141 per cent between 2010 and 2019, with the number reaching a high of 4,751 people in 2017 before starting to fall over the following two years.

Some key reasons for increases in homelessness over the decade have been identified as a rise in tenancies ending in the private rented sector, a lack of genuinely affordable housing, particularly a lack of social rented housing, and welfare reforms that have reduced the value of financial support for peoples' housing costs.<sup>1</sup>

In 2018 the Government published the Rough Sleeping Strategy, providing funding and support to local authorities with the highest numbers of people sleeping rough. The Strategy set out a vision to end rough sleeping by 2027, and the Conservative government brought this forward in 2019 with a manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024.

Another key step in tackling homelessness was the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018. This legislation expanded English local authorities' duties to all those seeking assistance, particularly to those who would have previously received little support due to a lack of priority need or being assessed as intentionally homeless.

Nevertheless, while these measures were beginning to have a positive effect on overall levels of homelessness, thousands of young people across the country were facing homelessness and housing insecurity even before the pandemic hit.

**Centrepoin't's Youth Homelessness Databank showed that in the financial year 2019/20, more than 121,000 young people across the UK sought help because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness<sup>2</sup>.**

However, only 72 per cent of those young people received an initial assessment under the Homelessness Reduction Act, and only 40 per cent had their homelessness successfully prevented or relieved.

### ***Steps taken by Government during the pandemic***

Soon after the UK went into lockdown for the first time in March 2020, the Government wrote to all local authorities instructing them to find emergency accommodation for anyone who was sleeping rough, or in accommodation where they would not be able to safely self-isolate. £3.2m of funding was provided to support this process, and by the end of April 2020 over 5,000 people had been accommodated under what became known as the 'Everyone In' scheme.

Throughout the year, the Government brought forward significant funding for emergency accommodation for rough sleepers, as well as move on accommodation and wraparound support, totalling over £700 million in 2020/21 alone. This has been a step-change in the

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<sup>1</sup> National Audit Office (2017) Homelessness. Report by the Auditor and Comptroller General. London: NAO

<sup>2</sup> Centrepoin't Youth Homelessness Databank (2020) Beyond the numbers: The scale of youth homelessness in the UK - <https://centrepoin't.org.uk/media/4598/databank-report-2020.pdf>

level of funding for homelessness and rough sleeping. However, it should be noted that this still falls short of the level of homelessness spending in 2010.

This funding has included:

- **£266m for the Next Steps Accommodation Programme** to provide move-on accommodation for those in emergency accommodation
- **£10m cold weather fund** to support councils to provide emergency accommodation during periods of cold weather
- **£15m for the Protect Programme** to provide additional funding for areas with the highest needs
- **£200m for the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant and £63m for the Homelessness Reduction Grant** to support councils to prevent homelessness and fulfil their duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA)
- **£6m COVID-19 Homelessness Support Fund** to support frontline charities and homelessness services

Alongside specific measures to support rough sleepers, the Government also took action to prevent people losing rented accommodation. In March 2020 a three month suspension of evictions was announced, which was extended several times and is now set to run until at least 31 May 2021. Since the end of August last year, notice periods have been extended for six months, except in certain cases such as serious antisocial behaviour and domestic violence.

Furthermore, to help households on the lowest incomes, the Government temporarily increased Universal Credit (UC) by £20 per week. This was originally planned to end at the end of March 2021, but the Chancellor recently announced in the Budget that the uplift would be extended for a further 6 months.

## Review of government homelessness statistics

### *Statutory homelessness*

In the year ending April 2020, 288,470 households were recorded as being owed a prevention or relief duty after approaching or being referred to their local council. Of these, 139,800 people were owed a relief duty, meaning that they were currently experiencing homelessness and required support<sup>3</sup>.

In the first quarter of 2020-21, 63,570 households were assessed as being owed a duty as they were homeless or at risk of homelessness. Of these, 38,000 were owed the relief duty<sup>4</sup>. The overall number of assessments was down by 10.5% on the same period in 2019, due in part to the suspension of evictions leading to a reduction in the number of people facing homelessness due to the loss of rented accommodation.

However, those owed a relief duty in April-June (i.e. those currently experiencing homelessness) saw an increase of 13.9% when compared to the same period the previous year.

This can be attributed to a considerable increase in single male applicants.

In the second quarter of 2020/21 (July – September), 68,680 households were assessed as owed a duty, and of these, 37,170 were owed the relief duty. An age breakdown was also provided for this quarter, showing that 16,240 young people aged 16-24 were owed a prevention or relief duty<sup>5</sup>.

While the Homelessness Reduction Act is still in its early stages, these figures suggest that the new legislation is already making a difference in supporting people facing homelessness. Over the last year, thousands of people have had their homelessness successfully prevented or relieved in the face of a global pandemic and national economic crisis.

However, these statistics – particularly the numbers of people in need of homelessness relief – show that tens of thousands of people are still facing housing insecurity during this time in spite of government interventions such as the furlough scheme and suspension of evictions. There is also a lack of data on how many people are presenting in the first instance. As Centrepoin’s Databank shows, there are likely significant numbers of people who do not receive an initial assessment in spite of the ambitions of the HRA.

### *Rough sleeping*

The annual rough sleeping snapshot estimates how many people are sleeping rough in one night (between 31 October and 1 November) across England. It is made up of data collected by local authorities, either by working with local partners and homelessness services to estimate a figure, a physical street count, or a combination of the two.

The rough sleeping snapshot for Autumn 2020 recorded 2,688 people sleeping rough across England, down by more than a third (37 per cent) when compared to the previous year. However, this is up by 920 people or 52 per cent since 2010<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-financial-year-2019-20>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-april-to-june-2020>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-july-to-september-2020>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2020>

139 people aged under 26 were recorded as sleeping rough, again down by a third (33 per cent) on the figure for Autumn 2019. However, there was a slight increase in the number of young people recorded as sleeping rough in London. This increase was driven primarily by an increase in the City of Westminster in central London.

Alongside the annual snapshot figures for Autumn 2020, the Government also published data from local authorities on how many people had accessed emergency accommodation as part of the 'Everyone In' scheme launched in Spring that year. By November, the scheme had supported around 33,000 people who were sleeping rough or at risk of sleeping rough, with the latest figures for January 2021 showing over 11,000 people in emergency accommodation and over 26,000 in longer term move-on accommodation<sup>7</sup>.

The significant reduction in people seen sleeping rough over 2020 suggests that government interventions and investment, such as the Everyone In scheme and Next Steps Accommodation Programme, have had a positive impact – in both accommodating and safeguarding the health of extremely vulnerable groups of people. This illustrates that when the resources, coordination and determination to tackle homelessness are in place, the government can effectively support people off the streets and into safe accommodation.

However, the rough sleeping statistics also show that there is still work to be done. Even with the efforts taken by central and local government to support people into accommodation during the pandemic, thousands of people across England have faced street homelessness and rough sleeping, with the snapshot figure for Autumn 2020 still considerably up on levels seen in 2010.

### ***Rough sleeping in London***

When considering the rough sleeping figures recorded in London, through the year-round Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN), a slightly different picture emerges. In the year up to April 2020, 10,726 people were seen sleeping rough by outreach workers in the capital. 835 of these were young people aged under 26<sup>8</sup>.

From April, as the country moved into lockdown and tighter restrictions were introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the numbers of people recorded sleeping rough through CHAIN increased dramatically. Between April and June, 4,227 people were recorded on the streets, while 3,444 people were seen from July to September and 3,307 between October and December.

Alarmingly, the numbers of young people seen sleeping rough over this period also rose significantly.

**Between April and June, 449 under-26s were seen sleeping rough, up by over 80 per cent compared to the same period in 2019. During this period, young people made up more than one in ten recorded rough sleepers in the capital, a historically high proportion.**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-emergency-accommodation-survey-data-january-2021>

<sup>8</sup> All CHAIN reports used in this section are available at <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>

By December this number had fallen to 300, suggesting that measures to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping were having an effect. Still, hundreds of young people were sleeping rough during a national lockdown, in spite of the various measures and interventions put in place.



## Huge increase in youth unemployment

During the pandemic, unemployment has risen across all age groups, as national and local lockdowns have closed down large parts of the economy. However, young people have been particularly badly hit.

Before the pandemic, youth unemployment rates remained consistently higher than the national average, with an estimated 771,000 young people not in employment, education or training between January and March 2020.

The pandemic has already led to massive increases in youth unemployment: 582,000 young people aged 16-24 were unemployed in November 2020-January 2021, an increase of 76,000 (or 15%) from the same period the year before.

The unemployment rate (the proportion of the economically active population who are unemployed) for 16-24 year olds was 14.3% in November 2020-January 2021, up from 11.7% at the same time in the previous year.

### **Unemployment levels (in thousands) and rates in the UK**

	Unemployment (16-24 year olds)	
	Level	Rate
Nov 2019- Jan 2021	506	11.7%
Feb-Apr 2020	535	12.5%
May-July 2020	567	13.6%
Aug-Oct 2020	596	14.5%
Nov 2020- Jan 2021	582	14.3%

Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>9</sup>

Many of the sectors that are disproportionately staffed by young people have been the hardest hit. The number of unemployed who were previously employed in the accommodation and food services sector increased by 78,000 to 176,000 in November 2020-January 2021 – up from 98,000 in the same quarter the year before. This is an increase from 5.3% to 10.9% in the percentage of those economically active in this industry<sup>10</sup>.

*During the height of the pandemic, I was literally getting nothing back when I applied for jobs. It was really hard. I did end up getting a job, but I didn't have any photo ID and there were long waits to get passports and provisional licences over the lockdown period. Because of that I lost the position.*

Young Person, 23, North East

Over the last year, youth unemployment has increased across the UK, but some regions have been particularly badly hit. In London, one in four young people (25.2 per cent) were unemployed in August-October 2020, while in the South West, the rate of youth

<sup>9</sup>16-24 levels taken from:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgvf/lms>; 16-24 rates taken from:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgwy/lms>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/unemploymentbypreviousindustrialsectorunem03>

unemployment at its peak (16.4 per cent in May-Jul) was nearly twice that of pre-pandemic levels.

**Youth unemployment (16-24 years) – level and rate, by region**

	North east		North West		Yorkshire and Humber		East Midlands		West Midlands	
	level	rate	level	rate	level	rate	level	rate	level	rate
Nov 19-Jan 20	33,903	18.4%	70,447	14.0%	44,732	12.1%	42,058	12.1%	54,955	14.1%
Feb-Apr 2020	30,853	15.9%	57,293	11.8%	35,877	9.4%	38,930	11.6%	55,153	15.5%
May-July 2020	31,785	16.4%	47,778	10.1%	43,318	11.3%	49,187	15.3%	59,834	16.6%
Aug-Oct 2020	33,644	17.2%	66,210	14.0%	49,008	13.1%	61,113	18.5%	61,590	15.6%
Oct 20-Feb 21	29,779	16.6%	66,824	14.5%	45,871	12.6%	45,803	13.7%	69,433	18.0%

	East of England		London		South East		South West	
	level	rate	level	rate	level	rate	level	rate
Nov 19-Jan 20	36,675	9.7%	67,550	13.7%	57,409	9.2%	31,858	8.4%
Feb-Apr 2020	42,265	11.0%	56,963	12.1%	53,944	9.5%	39,019	10.9%
May-July 2020	48,914	13.3%	95,028	20.1%	70,554	12.1%	59,794	16.4%
Aug-Oct 2020	63,617	16.7%	115,995	25.2%	72,844	12.8%	55,084	14.9%
Oct 20-Feb 21	40,009	11.2%	92,449	19.7%	54,404	9.9%	46,465	13.3%

	Wales		Scotland		Northern Ireland	
	Level	Rate	level	rate	level	rate
Nov 19-Jan 20	13,812	6.8%	25,605	7.4%	5,918	5.0%
Feb-Apr 2020	13,211	6.8%	45,270	13.2%	6,210	5.6%
May-July 2020	25,689	13.8%	51,053	14.5%	8,634	8.0%
Aug-Oct 2020	28,098	14.8%	35,567	10.0%	12,054	11.7%
Oct 20-Feb 21	27,679	14.2%	29,273	8.6%	10,205	10.7%

Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>11</sup>

The pandemic has also seen levels of long-term unemployment rise for young people. Between November 2020 and January 2021, 98,705 16-24s had been unemployed for

<sup>11</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/regionalunemploymentbyage02>

longer than 12 months. The impacts of long-term unemployment can be extremely damaging to a young persons' health, wellbeing and development, and can continue to affect work and earnings opportunities throughout their life.<sup>12</sup>

*"With lockdown... there's just nothing to do. I have no motive, which is why I just want a job. I'll get up some days and just want to go back to bed because my day is taking so long to go. I want to get up and feel happy that I'm going to work not just sat about at home thinking about nothing."*

Young person, 19, Yorkshire

### **Youth unemployment (16-24s) by duration**

	<b>Up to 6 months</b>	<b>Over 6 and up to 12 months</b>	<b>All over 12 months</b>
Nov 2019 – Jan 2020	341,919	72,150	70,853
Feb – Apr 2020	321,453	86,729	66,807
May – July 2020	453,947	78,382	54,819
Aug – Oct 2020	474,902	79,547	100,375
Nov 2020 – Jan 2021	347,201	112,287	98,705

Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>13</sup>

The Government has put in place some significant programmes and taken steps to reduce youth unemployment during the pandemic. These include the increase in the number of work coaches, helping to develop new apprenticeships and traineeships, and investing more than £2 billion to create the Kickstart scheme for young people at risk of long term unemployment.

To date, the scheme has led to the creation of more than 120,000 jobs - although by January 2021 fewer than 2,000 young people had started work on the scheme, for reasons attributed to the ongoing lockdown and lack of economic activity.

These steps are highly welcome and show the Government is committed to supporting young people to access employment and further opportunities. However, for the most vulnerable groups of young people, such as those experiencing homelessness, it is critical that programmes such as Kickstart are flexible and tailored enough to take into account the additional barriers these young people face. Previous Centrepont research suggested that the Youth Obligation, a recent government programme aimed at supporting young people into work, had only limited positive outcomes for those facing the greatest challenges.<sup>14</sup>

In order to ensure that the most vulnerable and excluded young people are able to access these opportunities, Kickstart and other schemes must have a degree of flexibility and support built in. Otherwise, young people living in supported accommodation, such as hostels and foyers will be left at a further disadvantage.

<sup>12</sup> McQuaid, R. (2017) 'Youth unemployment produces multiple scarring effects'

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/02/18/youth-unemployment-scarring-effects/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/unemploymentbyageanddurationnotseasonallyadjustedunem01nsa>

<sup>14</sup> Atfield, G. and Green, A., (2019) 'The Impact of the Youth Obligation on Disadvantaged Young People'.

Warwick: Warwick Institute for Employment Research

## Claimant count

While youth unemployment has increased significantly, the number of young people claiming benefits has risen even more sharply.

Between February 2020 and February 2021, the youth claimant count (the number of young people receiving benefits because they are seeking work) across the UK more than doubled. Every region across the UK saw increases; however, London saw the steepest rise, with the claimant count nearly trebling in size from the previous year.

### Claimant count by country

Country	February 2020	May 2020	August 2020	November 2020	February 2021	Percentage increase between Feb 20 and Feb 21
United Kingdom	236,220	504,185	529,065	508,200	513,265	117%
England	195,635	424,995	442,315	430,980	436,740	123%
Wales	13,000	25,120	26,550	24,375	24,230	86%
Scotland	21,755	40,685	46,015	40,065	40,355	85%
Northern Ireland	5,830	13,380	14,190	12,770	11,935	105%

(NB. the Claimant Count includes both people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and those claiming Universal Credit (UC) who are required to look for work.)

Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>15</sup>

### Claimant count by English region

Region	February 2020	May 2020	August 2020	November 2020	February 2021	Percentage increase between Feb 20 and Feb 21
North East	15,770	25,550	26,135	25,050	24,475	55%
North West	32,040	64,860	65,495	63,405	64,200	100%
Yorkshire and The Humber	23,530	46,990	48,315	46,340	47,285	101%
East Midlands	16,190	34,075	35,020	32,440	32,885	103%
West Midlands	27,385	52,450	54,720	53,430	53,540	96%
East	16,680	40,050	41,380	39,665	40,850	145%
London	27,755	70,420	76,125	80,980	82,300	197%
South East	21,800	55,700	58,905	56,555	57,695	165%
South West	14,485	34,910	36,220	33,115	33,510	131%

Source: Office for National Statistics<sup>16</sup>

DWP data on the numbers starting new Universal Credit claims confirms this worrying trend. 45,638 under 25s started on Universal Credit in January 2021, almost double the 26,315 who started onto the benefit in January 2020.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Data sourced from Nomis web query on 24 March 2021. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/ucjsa>

<sup>16</sup> Data sourced from Nomis web query on 24 March 2021. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/ucjsa>

<sup>17</sup> Data sourced from DWP Stat-Xplore web query on 25 March 2021. <https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>

## **Insight from Centrepoin't's Helpline**

In 2017, Centrepoin't established the Centrepoin't Helpline to offer advice to young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The Helpline continued to operate throughout the pandemic period, including on Christmas Day.

To gain insight into the impact of the pandemic, Centrepoin't reviewed the call data for 2020/21 and compared it to the previous year. We also interviewed Helpline staff about trends that they have seen over the year since the pandemic began.

### ***Record demand***

Since the pandemic hit, Centrepoin't has seen a significant increase in demand for our Helpline suggesting that, despite the significant interventions from government, many young people are still struggling to access the help they need.

April 2020 saw a huge surge in demand as the first few weeks of lockdown began to bite. We received 878 calls, which is a 61% increase compared to the same month in 2019.

Demand continued to rise throughout the year to a peak in September of 1,343 calls – 62% more than September 2019. This was the busiest month in the history of the Centrepoin't Helpline, and coincided with local restrictions taking hold in many areas of Northern England.

The number of calls has dropped very slightly in recent months but remains well above pre-pandemic levels. In February 2021, when the third lockdown was in force, we received 1070 calls, which is 36% higher than February the previous year.

The total number of calls in 2020/21 was 33% higher than the year before – up from 9,770 in 2019/20 to 13,019 in 2020/21.

### ***Trends in which groups of young people are calling the Helpline***

- As a result of the huge increase in youth unemployment across the country, a greater proportion of Helpline callers were job seekers – 57% in 2020/21 compared to 46% in 2019/20.
- We are being contacted by more young people with a history of care. 27% of those who provided information about their care status in 2020/21 were care leavers, compared to 19% in 2019/20. We cannot be certain of the reason for this, but it may be connected to logistical challenges faced by children's services teams and a reduction in the duties placed on social workers due to COVID.
- There has been an increase in calls from newly homeless people. 78% of callers who provided information on their length of homelessness had been homeless for less than 3 months, compared to 67% in 2019/20.

### ***Causes of homelessness***

During 2020-1, family breakdown remained the biggest cause of homelessness among young people calling the Helpline, accounting for 59% of those who reported their main cause of homelessness. This is in line with previous years - 58% became homeless due to family breakdown in 2019/20.

The emotional impact of the pandemic has put additional strain on family relationships, especially those that were unstable to begin with. Calls to the Centrepoin't Helpline

suggest that more young people have been forced to escape from fractured relationships or family dynamics caused by the emotional toil of the pandemic.

*"I remember having a call where it was a young girl who was saying that the lockdown has just put so much pressure on the relationship between her and her mum. She had lost her job but then there was tension between her mum and her because she wasn't working. She directly attributed that to the pressures of being stuck at home, not being able to go to college, not being able to go to work, not being able to do anything"*

Centrepont Helpline worker

### **Main cause of homelessness among Helpline callers in 2020/21**

	<b>Number reporting this issue</b>	<b>% of total</b>
Family breakdown	1346	58.9%
Relationship breakdown	199	8.7%
Eviction	188	8.2%
Domestic abuse	175	7.7%
Released from an institution with no accommodation to return to	73	3.2%
Harassment, threat of violence	55	2.4%
Surrendered property	43	1.9%
Death of a family member/carer	18	0.8%
LA care come to an end	14	0.6%
Other	174	7.6%
Total who reported their main cause of homelessness	2285	100%

However, there were some small shifts in the prevalence of other causes of homelessness identified by callers. For example, there was a small increase in the proportion of callers who were homeless due to domestic abuse – up to 8% in 2020/21 from 6% in 2019/20. Conversely, there was a drop in the number saying that they were homeless due to being evicted: 8% of those who provided information about their reason for homelessness in 2020/21 stated that this was due to eviction, compared to 12% in 2019/20. This was likely due to the imposition of the eviction ban.

### **Rough sleeping is a growing problem among Helpline callers**

Despite government interventions to tackle rough sleeping, the Centrepont Helpline has continued to receive calls from significant numbers of young people who are sleeping rough.

**17.7% of those who provided information about their housing situation in 2020/21 were rough sleeping at the time of their call.** This is slightly higher than 2019/20 when 15% were rough sleeping.

While this is a fairly modest increase, it is still a very concerning one in the context of the huge investment that has been made by the Government in the Everyone In programme. While the Everyone In programme has certainly had a big impact on overall levels of rough sleeping - recent government rough sleeping data showed a 37%

decrease in the total number of people rough sleeping<sup>18</sup> - the experience of our Helpline suggests that too many young people are continuing to slip through the net.

The largest increases in rough sleeping seen by the Helpline were at the start of the pandemic. Centrepoint research published in July 2020<sup>19</sup> found that the number of young people contacting Centrepoint's Helpline who were sleeping rough doubled during the ten weeks after lockdown had been announced, compared to the ten weeks prior. The fact that this steep increase was not sustained across the year suggests that the measures taken by central and local government did have an effect, but unfortunately the Helpline team have continued to hear from young people who are sleeping rough throughout the year, including into January and February 2021.

We have also heard from more young people who are rough sleeping at a younger age. 28% of callers who were currently rough sleeping were aged under 21 in 2020/21 compared to 19% in 2019/20.

### *Centrepoint Helpline's experience of Everyone In*

During the first lockdown, the Government committed to providing emergency accommodation to all rough sleepers; more than 15,000 people were housed in accommodation such as hotels, student accommodation and B&Bs.

While the Everyone In scheme was a huge achievement for both the Government and the sector involved in delivering it, the experience of our Helpline suggests that there have been limitations to the programme. Helpline staff reported that, following an initial flood of funding and activity at the start of the pandemic, they feel the level of support has begun to wane, meaning in some areas it has become harder for young people sleeping rough to access accommodation.

*"When it is cold weather prevention maybe more is done, but outside of those times, in this last lockdown for example (Jan-Feb), we have had people call up and they have definitely been rough sleeping and there doesn't seem to be that provision from the council to get them off the streets"*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

*"Personally, in my view the support for rough sleepers is particularly weak. It is such a desperate situation to hear someone in because you are having to say there is a possibility you may be doing that again tonight... It has always been weak but I think it has been worse during the pandemic. It was maybe a little better in the first lockdown as we could at least say ask your council about the fact that they are supposed to be bringing everybody in and ask them where that provision is regardless of their priority... but I don't know whether that Everybody In tapered off or whether it ended officially. I think it has got worse again in second and third with the cold weather"*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

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<sup>18</sup> Data for 2020 Rough Sleeping Snapshot compared to 2019 Rough Sleeping Snapshot –

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rough-sleeping-snapshot-in-england-autumn-2020>

<sup>19</sup> Centrepoint (2020) Locked Out: Youth Homelessness During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic –

[https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-](https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf?utm_campaign=11717042_Bursary+Preamailer+)

[report.pdf?utm\\_campaign=11717042\\_Bursary+Preamailer+](https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf?utm_campaign=11717042_Bursary+Preamailer+)

[+engagement&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=Centrepoint+Soho&dm\\_i=QTC%2C6Z4XE%2CVSH3ID%2CS34IA%2C1](https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/4293/locked-out-report.pdf?utm_campaign=11717042_Bursary+Preamailer++engagement&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Centrepoint+Soho&dm_i=QTC%2C6Z4XE%2CVSH3ID%2CS34IA%2C1)

It is important to note that the Centrepointhelpline has not found this to be the case in all areas. In some areas, local authorities have been much more responsive and had clear access routes in place. Please see page 22 for more details about how Centrepointhelpline's Homelessness Prevention Service in Manchester has responded to the pandemic. However, the experience of the Centrepointhelpline suggests that provision for those experiencing homelessness can vary significantly between different parts of the country.

### **Barriers to making formal homelessness applications**

Throughout the pandemic, services have had to consider new ways of working. The forced closure of offices has resulted in many agencies providing their services remotely rather than in person. Traditional ways of working had to change overnight, resulting in a lot of confusion and misinformation. Many local councils have suspended their face-to-face services, with support now being provided over the phone.

The experience of the Helpline suggests that this upheaval has meant that making a homeless application during the pandemic has been problematic for many young people. Staff reported a lack of information or clear guidance about how to make an application in many areas.

*"A lot of these places needed to close for safety reasons but there wasn't any alternative put in place and it has left a bit of a gap since it all started"*

Centrepointhelpline worker

*"I think [it would have helped if they focused on standardising [their] response...really clear guidance on what you should do if a young person is homeless...plugging those gaps in communication would have been good, the transparency and clarity would be really helpful for charities working in the sector to try and help, because if we know exactly what should be happening, then it's a lot easier for us to hold someone to account"*

Centrepointhelpline worker

Young people without any money to call the council or without access to phones have faced particular barriers in accessing support.

*"A lot of other services have had to close or change the way they function so if before someone didn't have a phone or internet, we could say go to a day centre nearby and there will be people there that will help you do a form or who can charge a phone for you or let you use a phone."*

Centrepointhelpline worker

A particularly concerning trend that the Helpline staff reported was that it had been a common experience in some areas to wait a long time for an assessment. Once the homeless application has been completed, staff reported that it is not abnormal for callers to wait over two weeks for a response from the council.

*"I had a young person call yesterday, he had filled out the initial contact form maybe 2 weeks ago and he still hadn't heard anything, not even a follow up to book an appointment"*

Centrepointhelpline worker



## **Young people in some areas being required to 'prove' they are homeless**

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017 placed new legal duties on local authorities, namely the duties to prevent and relieve homelessness, irrespective of whether the individual has priority need status, as long as they are eligible for assistance. The council must carry out an assessment if an individual approaches them whilst homeless or is facing homelessness. Despite the pandemic and the Everyone In scheme, the experience of young people calling the Centrepoint Helpline suggests that some councils have not been following the guidelines outlined in the HRA.

*"From what I have experienced, I feel like their willingness to take someone on has decreased, it has never been great but their willingness to accept someone as being homeless... they will find any reason to not accept a person as homeless. A good example being the Everyone In scheme at the start of the lockdown, and SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) most recently, [young people are being told] you will have to go and sleep rough tonight so you can be verified as rough sleeping before we will accept that you are homeless."*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

Centrepoint Helpline staff have even seen cases of homeless young people who should be eligible for priority need status being turned away without the support they are eligible for.

*I contacted the council and I told them my situation. They told me there would be nothing they could do for me until I had a written letter from my mum stating that she is kicking me out.*

Pregnant young woman who called the Centrepoint Helpline

*"I had one towards the end of last year, these under 18s fled an abusive home and we had taken it to the children's commissioner as children's services weren't doing anything and they continued to hold the line that they didn't need to provide alternative accommodation for these young people"*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

It should of course be noted that Helpline staff are unlikely to hear from young people who found it easy to access council support, and many young people in priority need will have received the full support they are eligible to from their local authority. However, the cases seen by the Centrepoint Helpline show a concerning lack of consistent support available across local authorities, even for the most vulnerable groups.

## **Impact of the eviction ban**

Eviction enforcement is banned until at least 31 May 2021. Landlords are required to give six months' notice to tenants, except in instances of serious anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse. Whilst this has helped to limit homelessness during a period of economic instability, those on license agreements or living in less formal living arrangements continue to be at risk of losing their home during the pandemic.

Calls to the Centrepoint Helpline have also shown that young people with minimal understanding of legislation and their rights are more likely to fall victim to landlords who are ignoring the change in law.

*"Some people will ring us up already having been evicted as they weren't aware of their rights, or they weren't aware of the eviction ban. They hadn't thought to contact the council and by that time they were already homeless"*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

*"If you are 18, you don't know that your landlord has to go through the courts"*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

On a national level, the ban does seem to have had a significant impact on the number of people being evicted, but there are still significant numbers of people losing their homes, particularly in the private rented sector. Between July and September 2020 alone, over 2,000 households were recognised as being owed a relief duty (meaning they were already homeless) while a further 7,000 were at threat of homelessness due to the loss of an assured short-hold tenancy.

## Impact on mental health and wellbeing

For many people across the country, the past year has had an adverse effect on their mental health. The emotional impact has been huge as people faced unemployment, family bereavement, poor health and a significant change to normal life as we knew it before the pandemic. For homeless young people, many of whom have already suffered severe trauma, these emotions have been heightened even more so.

*"We noticed quite quickly from the onset that desperation levels were amplified massively where you get a lot more people at a crisis point, where they are like 'what do I do here?' They just genuinely can't see a way forward as the situation is so dire. You can't draw on the same places as before."*

Centrepoint Helpline worker

*"I think it's sent me into depression to be honest. I can't see a way out when we are in lock down. You just feel helpless like you can't help yourself. There are no jobs, nothing. You're just stuck."*

Young woman, 22, London

*"Mentally being isolated isn't the best thing. You're just trapped in a room looking at the same walls and colours, thoughts running around in your head like an athlete on a race track doing a 100 meter sprint. You have no way to distract yourself."*

Young woman, Manchester

## Increase in demand for mental health support

Mental health needs were a significant challenge for homeless young people even before the pandemic. Over half (54.1%) of young people at Centrepoint were reported to have a mental health need pre-COVID<sup>20</sup>, and the experience of our in-house health teams suggests that these problems are becoming even more prevalent as the challenges of the pandemic have taken hold.

Centrepoint's mental health team has remained a vital lifeline of support during the pandemic, continuing to provide support to young people throughout, though in many cases support had to move online rather than face-to-face.

It has, however, been a period of great strain due to ever increasing levels of demand. Since the first lockdown last March, we have seen a 40% increase in demand for our mental health services, and unfortunately need is outstripping supply. This has meant that, despite the best efforts of the team, wait times have increased – in some cases from two weeks to an average wait of three months.

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<sup>20</sup> Centrepoint (2020). The mental health needs of homeless young people  
<https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/4650/prevalence-of-mental-health-need-report.pdf>

## Food insecurity

Food insecurity has increased for young people during the pandemic. Despite the £20-per-week uplift to Universal Credit in April 2020, Centrepoin't's health team has witnessed a **significant increase in young people needing to access emergency food support** since its introduction. The number of emergency food actions carried out by Centrepoin't's health team across the UK for the 2019/20 financial year totalled 147. During 2020/21, demand shot up and, as of the beginning of March 2021, the total number of emergency food actions had reached 553 - a **276% increase**.

With rising food prices due to inflation and Brexit, young people on a low-income are struggling to budget for food costs. Loss of employment as a result of the pandemic, as well as the wait for benefit payments after moving into new accommodation were contributing factors as to why young people had to rely on vouchers or food parcels as a means of survival.

Levels of debt have increased since March 2020 due to benefit advance payments, fines and owing money to family and friends. This has resulted in young people being forced to cut food from their budget as it is the only part of their budget left to squeeze. Young people who have accessed the emergency food support have stated that they would like to eat more healthily, but they cannot afford to, even with the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.

To respond, Centrepoin't's health team have expanded their support and intervention to combat food insecurity in our services. This has included increasing outreach work, setting up and stocking emergency food cupboards in services, providing electronic food vouchers and increasing food donations to our accommodation services.

The high number of young people experiencing food insecurity even with the £20 Universal Credit uplift shows what a vital lifeline it has been to young people in our services, who are forced to live on extremely limited incomes without any family support. We are therefore extremely concerned about the impact on homeless young people when the uplift expires in six months and their incomes are further reduced by £20 per week.

## Great resilience of services on the frontline

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of great hardship for young people facing homelessness. However, even against the backdrop of such an acute crisis, frontline services have worked tirelessly to ensure that young people can still access the support they desperately need.

All Centrepont accommodation services have remained open throughout the pandemic, despite the many logistical challenges required to keep both staff and young people safe. Service staff have continued to deliver direct support to young people in our accommodation to help young people address their needs during this time. We have also continued to offer specialist mental health support and learning services to young people, though some support had to be delivered virtually. To facilitate this, Centrepont accommodation services have been provided with individual tablets to use as required to allow young people and staff to access online sessions.

The pandemic has in some cases 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.

Our recent survey with youth homelessness organisations across the UK<sup>21</sup> highlighted that agencies have been able to assist groups of people not normally entitled to support, and access local and national funding streams to 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.

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<sup>21</sup> Centrepont (2020) Left out: Supporting homeless young people during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic - <https://centrepont.org.uk/media/4623/left-out-centrepont-covid-and-rough-sleeping-report.pdf>

### **Good practice example – Manchester Homelessness Prevention and Relief Service**

Centrepoint works with Manchester City Council to provide a homelessness prevention service for 18 to 25 year-olds. The caseload for this team is high at around 250 young people being supported at any one time.

Our Homelessness Prevention & Relief Service (HPRS) in Manchester has been able to continue to support homeless young people throughout the pandemic, including in periods of lockdown. In total, they have worked with 992 young people on a casework basis, sometimes working with young people for up to a year. 266 of these young people (27%) had reported that they were rough sleeping when they presented to us. During the last year, the team have closed 809 cases, with 594 of these young people being in some form of housing at point of closure.

Due to COVID, the vast majority of homelessness assessments are now carried out over the phone and staff are able to access housing placements for most young people and link them up with support services without having to see them face-to-face. This flexible way of working and adaptability of the team has allowed HPRS to continue to deliver a first class service to young people despite the obstacles presented by the pandemic.

However, the Manchester team has also been able to keep our North Parade building open for most of the pandemic. This allows the entrenched rough sleepers and most vulnerable young people to still be able to access face-to-face support when needed. These young people are often unable to access the support they need over the phone due to their multiple and complex needs.

Centrepoint's Manchester Rough Sleepers Team increased street outreach sessions and worked alongside Manchester City Council's rough sleepers team and the police to support young people to move off the streets as quickly as possible. They have housed a high number of rough sleepers and also successfully housed and supported young people who have a history of failing to engage with services and of placements breaking down.

As well as this, we have also added a Centrepoint Mental Health worker to the Rough Sleepers Team which means young people can access both housing support and mental health support seamlessly.

Manchester City Council and partner organisations increased accommodation provision by using numerous hotels in the city for those who were street homeless or had nowhere to go that night. Through the "Everyone In" campaign during the first lockdown and also the Bed Every Night scheme in Manchester, we have been able to ensure that young people are moved quickly off the streets into emergency accommodation. Our HPRS staff continue to work with these young people whilst they are in emergency accommodation in order to get them moved onto supported housing placements or in some instances their own tenancies with floating support.

In October, Centrepoint Manchester successfully launched our own accommodation unit for the first time. We now have a two-bed property where we can refer those who are sleeping rough or who are facing street homelessness. We move them in and provide them with the essentials and then support them to move on into other accommodation within two months, as well as linking them in with specialist support services when required, such as mental health services.

As well as the above we have been able to provide practical support to homeless young people, including clothing and toiletries, bus passes, taxis to get to accommodation placements, and food vouchers.

## Conclusion

The past 12 months have been an incredibly difficult time for young people facing homelessness. Lockdowns have made it harder for many young people to sofa surf with family and friends, and closure of face-to-face services have made it extremely challenging for some to access the support they need, even in acute crisis. The huge increase in youth unemployment and gloomy economic outlook are also likely to make young people's journeys out of homelessness more challenging, as they are forced to compete for a shrinking number of jobs whilst also dealing with the considerable challenges of finding and sustaining accommodation.

However, even in the face of such adversity, there is much reason for hope. Frontline services have shown incredible determination and innovation, always putting the needs of young people first. Young people too have shown great resilience, continuing to strive despite the many obstacles that have landed in their path. We therefore stand eager to work with government and others across the sector to continue to support homeless young people to build a brighter future.

## Recommendations

1. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government should provide long-term funding for youth specific accommodation across the country, including specialist emergency accommodation for young people at risk of rough sleeping.
2. MHCLG should produce a centralised directory of housing options and homelessness services for each local authority, accessible through Gov.uk. This should include an up to date telephone number, email and physical address which can be easily found and accessed.
3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should ensure that Universal Credit (UC) personal allowance rates cover the real cost of living. In the short-term, this should include making the temporary uplift to UC permanent, extending this increase to legacy benefits, and committing to a long-term linking of benefit levels to real living costs. In the longer-term, DWP should consider raising the personal allowance rates for young people living independently to match the rate that over-25s receive to reflect the fact they face the same living costs.
4. The DWP should remove barriers to employment faced by young people living in supported accommodation, through raising the applicable amount within housing benefit or extending work allowances to vulnerable young people through UC.
5. MHCLG and the DWP should urgently put together a package of support for tenants who have accrued rent arrears due to COVID-19, through grants, loans and the use of existing measures such as Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs).

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