Families under pressure:

Preventing family breakdown and youth homelessness

centre
point

give homeless
young people
a future

Contents

Recommendations

The Government should:

1. Make five year protected early intervention minimum spending commitments, providing local authorities with the stability to plan prevention services in the longer term

2. Conduct a national review of mediation services offered by local authorities to better understand the efficacy of different approaches, cost effectiveness and likelihood of achieving improved family relationships in the long term

3. Ensure the Family Test is applied to all policy reform. The results of the test should always be documented and made public and wherever possible, open to public consultation

4. Include parental-child relationship breakdown in the Life Chances Strategy as an indicator of poor outcomes

The Department for Communities and Local Government should:

5. Add 'young person at risk of homelessness' to the 'Children who need help' set of Troubled Families indicators

6. Make clear in guidance that estranged young people should be offered support as part of the Troubled Families team's whole family approach, regardless of the fact they no longer live at home

7. Amend the homelessness data return for prevention and relief statistics so that data can be broken down by age, enabling a clearer picture of how youth homelessness is being prevented by local authorities

The Ministry of Justice should:

8. Expand the current mediation programme for separating couples entering the court system to whole families in crisis at an earlier point, before they enter legal proceedings

Local authorities should:

9. Monitor the quality of information given by their housing options team to those at risk of homelessness, providing evidence that information is regularly updated and accessible

10. Have joint protocols between Housing and Children's Services setting out arrangements for service provision which ensure that a young person on the edge of homelessness is not passed between the two departments without support

Introduction

The problem

Two thirds (59 per cent) of the young people who come to Centrepoint had to leave home because of family relationship breakdown.[1] Wider evidence also indicates that a breakdown in family relationships is the main cause of youth homelessness.

Although relationship breakdown is cited as the central cause of youth homelessness, a plethora of issues may have pushed a family towards this breaking point. It is a complex process not a single event, often drawn out over a long period of time. It can be the result of individual problems and support needs, interpersonal difficulties, manifestations of childhood trauma or structural factors such as poverty.[2] Due to this, it is extremely difficult to evidence the way in which multiple problems interact and escalate to cause family breakdown.

Whilst family breakdown often refers to the breakdown of parental relationships, this report focuses on the breakdown of relationships between parents and young people. This process has an immensely negative impact on all family members. The support of a family network provides a critical safety net for young people who are making the transition to independence. Those young people who experience family relationship breakdown find themselves without this support and, in some cases, homeless.

The aim

In this research we examine the factors leading to family relationship breakdown according to homeless young people and the practitioners who support them. This gives insight into what was going on at home for these young people before they became homeless. The factors which were common across young people's accounts are explored in this report. This report also explores the political context in which local services and family support services are operating.

We then provide a national overview of the services on offer to families at risk of relationship breakdown based on Freedom of Information requests sent to all local authorities in England. This is combined with young people and practitioners' experience of accessing services, which raises questions around 'what works' in preventing family breakdown and youth homelessness.

Defining Prevention

The Government defines homelessness prevention as 'providing people with the ways and means to address their housing and other needs to avoid homelessness'.[3] Based on this definition, government policy has traditionally focussed on the provision of advice and information to those seeking assistance at their local Housing Office in order to explore solutions to their housing problems.[4] As the root of homelessness is not always solely a housing issue – e.g. family breakdown – this approach may not always be the most effective in preventing homelessness.

Access to appropriate early help is essential if family breakdown and youth homelessness is to be prevented. When a young person presents at their local housing office because they are homeless, they are at crisis point.

Homelessness can still be prevented at this point but family relationships are often deeply damaged.

This report focusses on prevention as a means of supporting young people and their families before relationships have completely broken down. This presents challenges both in terms of identifying families early and also encouraging families to seek help early. It also requires the availability of accessible early help services.

For some families, it is not safe or possible for the young person to remain at home. However, by acting early to help families to preserve those vital relationships, more young people may be able to retain the support of their families as they make a more stable transition to independence.

Policy Context: Where We Are Now

Before exploring the factors which caused family breakdown for homeless young people, it is useful to outline the wider political context in which local support services have been operating over recent years.

Both the current Conservative Government and previous Coalition Government emphasise the importance of family stability and have introduced policy change to reflect this. At the same time, welfare reform has had a negative effect on some of the most disadvantaged families.

Family stability

Family stability has been at the heart of social policy since 2010. The Coalition Government were committed to ensuring proactive support for strong parental and family relationships, particularly for those families facing the most significant disadvantages.[5] This stems from evidence that the breakdown of parental relationships, particularly where conflict is taking place, has a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of children within the household.[6]

A series of policies have been introduced which focus on 'healthy parental relationships' as integral to family stability;

- A new Life Chances Strategy to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged children, which will include new measures and indicators of poverty, including family breakdown

- Following a first phase investment of £30 million in marriage preparation, couple counselling and relationship education,[7] a further £35 million has been committed[8]

- A Family Mediation Task Force was convened, which published a report in June 2014. The focus of the Task Force was to prevent separating parents entering court proceedings, instead turning to mediation[9]

- The introduction of the Family Test whereby all government policy makers are asked to anticipate and document the potential impact of policy on families at each stage of the policy making process[10]

Intensive family support

In tandem with the Government's focus on family stability, the Troubled Families programme was launched, which aims to support those families who most need help. The programme was launched in 2011, to 'turn around' the hardest to reach families. Families must be experiencing two problems from a range of six to qualify for support:

1. Parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour

2. Children who have not been attending school regularly

3. Children who need help: children of all ages, who need help, are identified as in need or are subject to a Child Protection Plan

4. Adults out of work or at risk of financial exclusion or young people at risk of worklessness

5. Families affected by domestic violence and abuse

6. Parents or children with a range of health problems[11]

Selected families receive intensive support under a payment-by results (PBR) model; meaning that in order to receive the full funding allocation, local authorities must support families to achieve positive outcomes.

The PBR model was originally developed on the premise that intensive interventions known to work for this group cost £10,000 per family.[12] In 2014-15 the total funding available per family was £4,000 (40 per cent of which was paid upfront).[13] However, from 2015 only £1,800 is available per family (£1,000 paid upfront and £800 paid if the interventions are successful),[14] presenting a financial challenge to local authorities.

Given this, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has questioned whether the reported success rate of 99 per cent is accurate and whether the reported savings are realistic.[15]

Early help for families

As well as intensive family support, the Government has also highlighted the importance of early help for families, following the recommendations of the Allen review in 2011.[16] The potential benefit of delivering support early is that long-term financial costs and pressure on services can be reduced. The focus on early intervention has tended to be on a child's early formative years, but it is essential that early help is available to children of all ages and their families.

Despite the clear need for early intervention, funding has been placed under pressure. The funding allocated to local authorities to be spent on early intervention was cut by 55 per cent between 2010-11 and 2015-16.[17]

This follows numerous funding changes, starting in 2010, when several early intervention funding streams were brought into one Early Intervention Grant. Local authorities could use this grant to fund a range of services from children's centres to advice and information for young people. In 2013-14, this funding was no longer a separate grant allocation, but instead formed part of wider local authority funding. The DCLG indicated that funding should continue to be spent on early intervention.[18] However in the face of funding cuts for local authorities, there is no guarantee that the funding will continue to be spent on early intervention provision, unless it is protected.

Welfare reform

Since 2010 there has been a significant reduction in government spending, which has hit some of the most vulnerable families hardest, pushing many towards homelessness. In the 2016 Homelessness Monitor, two thirds of local authorities in England reported that the 2010-2015 welfare reforms had increased homelessness in their area. This was particularly evident in London, where 93 per cent of local authorities reported an increase in homelessness due to welfare reform.[19]

The benefit cap places an absolute limit on the support a household can receive, which disproportionately affects families with children. Research suggests that insufficient attention has been given to how the cap impacts vulnerable children and families and how these families should be identified and supported.[20] The impact on larger families may place pressure on older siblings to leave home before they are ready.

Furthermore, under current Government plans, 18 to 21 year olds will no longer have automatic entitlement to Housing Support under Universal Credit if they are out of work. This will mean that young people who cannot stay in unsuitable home environments could face homelessness. In addition, the amount of housing benefit that a single person under 35 can receive has been limited to the shared accommodation rate. This is problematic given the shortage of shared accommodation in some parts of the UK and because sharing is inappropriate for some vulnerable young people.[21]

Homelessnessness prevention

The Homelessness Act 2002 places a duty on local authorities to formulate a homelessness strategy. This should be a strategy for preventing homelessness and ensuring that accommodation and support is available for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. It should be reviewed and updated at least every five years.

Local authorities record data on homelessness prevention and relief. Recent research suggests that since 2012, the proportion of young people being accepted as statutory homeless has decreased, whilst the proportion receiving prevention and relief has been increasing.[22] However it is not possible to ascertain the way in which homelessness is being prevented for young people because the data cannot be broken down by age. This is essential if the data is to shed light on the ways in which it is being prevented, particularly at a time when 44 per cent of local authorities report that they find it difficult to help single homeless people aged 18-24.[23]

Our aim for the primary research was to examine the factors leading to family relationship breakdown among homeless young people, given the policy context that we have outlined above. To examine these factors, we used the following methodology.

1. Focus groups and interviews with homeless young people

Twenty five young people aged 16-25 who live in Centrepoint accommodation participated in focus groups and interviews. The young people lived in either supported accommodation or move-through accommodation in London, Bradford and Sunderland. They talked about family life before Centrepoint, focussing on the pressures which led to family relationship breakdown. Young people also discussed the support that was (or was not) available to them and their families, and which support would have been most helpful.

2. Interviews with practitioners

Interviews were conducted with five Centrepoint practitioners across London, Bradford and Sunderland to give a different perspective on the issues faced by families who experience relationship breakdown. The staff interviewed have expertise in a variety of prevention service areas including mediation, mental health and outreach in schools.

3. Freedom of Information requests (FOIs)

Freedom of Information requests were sent to all local authorities across England in July 2015. The request included questions on whether there are services in that area for young people at risk of homelessness due to family breakdown; the types of services on offer including eligibility criteria and outcomes measured; and the funding streams through which these services are financed.

Eighty two per cent of local authorities (291 out of 353) responded with information about the services available to young people and families living in their area. There was a response rate of 82 per cent from single tier local authorities, 89 per cent of upper tier and 82 per cent of lower tier.
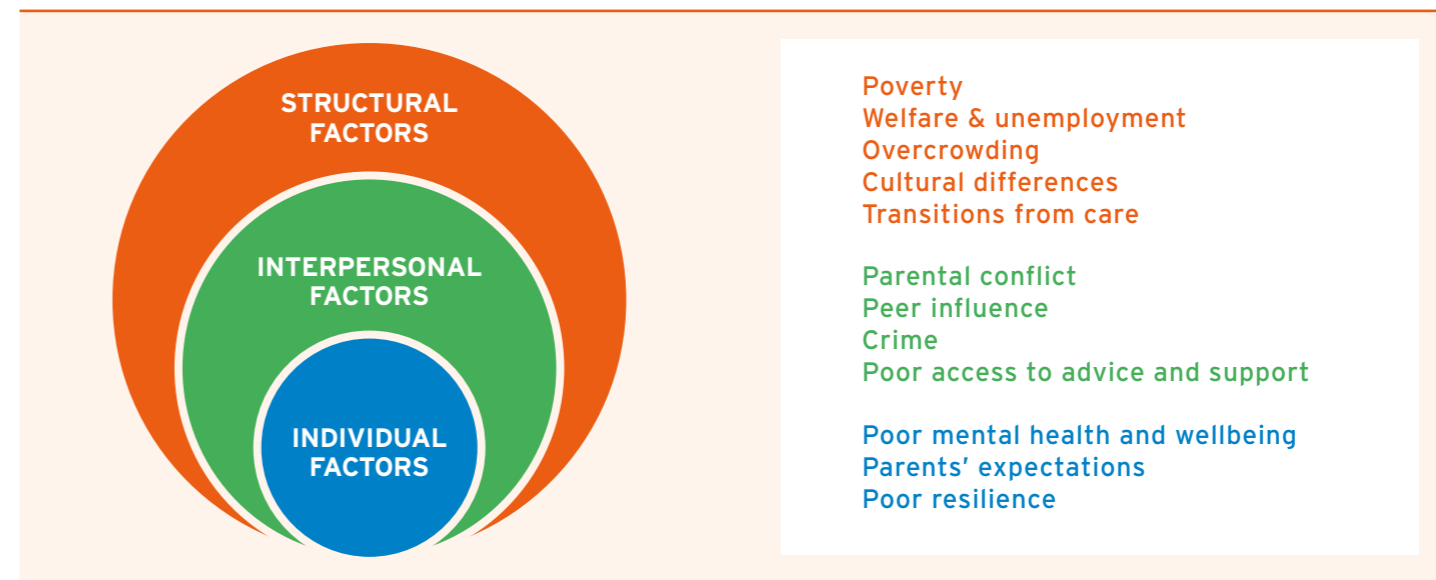
Housing services sits at the lower district level and children's services sits at the higher county level within two tier systems of local government. Unitary authorities include both functions. Of district authorities, 42 per cent indicated that they do not directly provide services for young people at risk of homelessness due to family breakdown, but that these services are provided by the higher county level of local government i.e. children's services rather than housing services.

This section will explore the key causes of family breakdown as identified by Centrepoint young people and practitioners. The causes of family relationship breakdown are numerous and complex. It can be difficult for young people to pinpoint the causes when thinking back to a particularly chaotic time in their lives.

However, the accounts of staff and young people highlight common issues which place families under pressure, ranging from macro structural factors to individual factors [figure 1]. These factors are often mutually reinforcing. For example, unemployment can cause poverty but can also be the result of living in poverty. This complexity makes it very difficult to work out cause and effect.

Figure 1: Key causes of family breakdown

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

INTERPERSONAL FACTORS

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Poverty
Welfare & unemployment
Overcrowding
Cultural differences
Transitions from care

Parental conflict
Peer influence
Crime
Poor access to advice and support

Poor mental health and wellbeing
Parents' expectations
Poor resilience

Financial pressure

Central to the accounts of staff and young people was the strain that living on a low income, whether through low paid work or benefits, places on family relationships.

Poverty was said to have a detrimental effect on young people's aspirations, the quality of local amenities, the quality of housing and safety within communities.

> **Most of the young people come from disadvantaged communities. Unemployment, or maybe employed but on low pay.**
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Parental unemployment was common amongst many of the families who had experienced family breakdown. These parents were reliant on the safety net of the welfare state to support their families, but young people were open about how difficult this was for children within the household. One young person said "money is hard. Benefits, you can do nowt on that."

For some families who are struggling financially, debt also became a normal part of life. Young people reported getting into debt to pay for everyday things; "people use credit cards to just buy life stuff". Almost 1.4 million UK families with dependent children are currently in problem debt.[24] Previous Centrepoint research found that the most common reason for borrowing money was to pay for food (22 per cent), rent (15 per cent) and transport costs (10 per cent).[25]

The difficulties faced by families living on a low income meant that some young people were under pressure to leave home if they were unable to contribute financially, sometimes because they were in further education or were struggling to find employment. This was particularly evident for those young people who were the eldest in their family or where a family was experiencing overcrowding. A recent poll found that homeless young people are more likely to come from larger families; 30 per cent of homeless young people interviewed have five or more siblings compared to just 7 per cent of young people across the UK. Homeless young people are also more likely to have shared a room permanently or for extended periods of time with another person (37 per cent compared to 27 per cent of young people more broadly).[26]

> **They [parents] think 'oh you're 16-17 now, you just need to move on, be independent. You're not going to be staying at home. Go find a job, pay rent'.**
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

One member of Centrepoint staff described how some of the most vulnerable young people have suffered financial abuse. If a young person begins earning money or receives some kind of financial support (e.g. from social services), a family member may take control of their bank account and manage their personal finances. This has caused the young person to leave, rather than be subject to this abuse and control.

The reform of working age benefits was of great concern to both young people and staff. One young person worried about the impact of the proposed reduction of Employment and Support Allowance. Additional financial pressure may place further strain on fragile family relationships.

> **If you look at some of the things that the government has brought out, it's a lot harder on people like us. A lot harder.**
>
> **- George**

Given the detrimental impact of unemployment and growing concerns about levels of benefits, it is essential that both unemployed young people and parents are supported to enter and sustain education, employment or training. Centrepoint research shows that the young people we support often need additional upfront help and support to enable them to be ready for work. Parents may require a similar approach, particularly if there are other challenges at home.[27]

Parental conflict

The negative impact of living on a low income also had an effect on parental relationships. Poverty, a reliance on benefits and parental unemployment were said to increase conflict between parents, which also affected the stability of relationships with young people.

The reported effect of parental conflict on young people included poor attendance and behaviour at school and anti-social behaviour leading to trouble with the police. Some homeless young people had witnessed domestic violence and this was a key reason for leaving home. A recent poll for Centrepoint found that 21 per cent of homeless young people had to leave home for their own safety because of violence at home.[28] There are an estimated 130,000 children and young people living with high risk domestic abuse.[29] Practitioners reported that some of those young people who had witnessed violence at home exhibited violent behaviour themselves.

> **Sometimes father isn't in the equation. Or sometimes he is but he's drinking, there's domestic violence in the house, which adds to the troubles and problems in the house.**
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

The Government has recognised that some parents need support to resolve problems by investing in couples counselling. However, for some families experiencing high levels of conflict, the negative impact is greater when parents stay together.[30] The Government's investment in family mediation for couples going through court proceedings can help those who need legal support to separate amicably.[31]

> **It's the relationship that my Mom and Dad got, they should not be together 110%, but obviously you can't keep them apart.**
>
> **- Becky**

Practitioners highlighted that parents must maintain good communication with their children when parental conflict is taking place. By failing to talk to about the situation, the young person is left confused, upset and alienated. Some parents may need support to communicate effectively with young people at these high pressure times.

However, the current focus of Government has been on relationship support for parents at crisis point i.e. the court system, rather than relationship support for parents and children. More early support is needed for those families struggling to communicate their feelings and wishes effectively.

Cultural differences

As well as issues around finance, welfare and employment, culture was also said to play a key role in the breakdown of relationships in some families.

> **I think it's a culture thing. I've seen it with my friends. Especially African households, their families are quite strict.**
>
> **- Jack**

The research highlighted the impact of cultural differences, particularly within families where the young person is the first generation to be born in Britain. Some young people struggled to balance the culture of their family heritage and the culture of being a teenager in Britain. If a young person acted in a way that went against the expectations of their parent's culture, this could lead to relationship breakdown.

> **Culture and traditional plays a part... there's a lot of pressure and expectations. Its pressures on how they should behave. I've had a lot of young people speak to me about it. The best thing to do is communicate, but the cultural pressures can make communication more difficult.**
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Communication was difficult between parents and young people in this situation. Sometimes another relative, perhaps a sibling, would mediate between a parent and young person when cultural differences arose. Cultural issues were also noted as a barrier to accessing professional support beyond the family unit.

> **Families aren't good at accepting help. Not Asian families. If someone tries to tell them what to do they think 'what are you doing?! Nobody should be telling us how we should change what we're doing'. They're quite strict on their beliefs so they think what they're doing is the correct way and nobody else matters.**
>
> **- Priya**

Peer influence

> *They'll do certain things just because their mates do it... Parents don't see the struggle, they just see that you're doing something you shouldn't be doing. It gets to a point where they can't communicate anymore.*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Friends and peers are vital sources of support, but can influence in both positive and negative ways. Young people would often confide in their friends about problems at home and were likely to listen to their advice. For some, this may be the only source of support they are comfortable accessing. Friends would advocate for them when they needed help; "sometimes if you tell your friends at school, they tell teachers if they think it's all getting too much. That's good."

> *Parents get stressed. I used to go out to town when I was 16 so I would tell my mom and there was that risk of me getting really drunk and people taking advantage who are a lot older. It causes arguments.*
>
> **- Sophie**

Young people said their desire for independence often meant they would push boundaries set by parents. There were situations where they had put themselves at risk because of boredom, such as underage drinking. Parents were worried about where their children were and who they were with, which was a key source of conflict. A poll for Centrepoint found that 39 per cent of homeless young people who had arguments at home say these were because they were doing things that their family didn't like.[32] On the other hand, some described how their parents didn't know or really care what they were doing.

Young people reported that many of the local facilities they had once used had closed. Government spending on young people's services, including youth work and activities for young people, has reportedly reduced by almost 20 per cent during since 2010-11.[33] Young people had seen the impact of this in their communities.

> *Those places were good because people got together. Your friends were there. There were things to do instead of just roaming the streets. Now parents just worry. They're fretting that you're going to get stabbed.*
>
> **- Jamal**

Crime

Many of the young people recounted how crime was part of everyday life in their communities. Being exposed to drug taking, fighting and robbery were particularly common, either through witnessing it or being victims of it. Some had committed petty crimes themselves which had led to problems at home.

> *All my family have committed crime. Everyone in my family is in jail, they're not here. I was under a lot of stress. It's hard; my older brother is in jail. I've got a job but that doesn't make it any easier.*
>
> **- Lewis**

Due to this, it can take families a long time to seek help for fear of legal consequences. Practitioners described how young people's involvement in low level crime had escalated to the point of family relationship breakdown, with parents trying to tackle the behaviour themselves. Many parents will not give up offering support to their children, even if the young person has left home.

> *We had one young person where mum put up with years and years of him stealing from her. Mild drug use caused massive problems in the family home because he was stealing from her to buy drugs... They put up with it for years and years. Even when he was in our accommodation there was still loads of support from mum.*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Poor mental health and wellbeing

Good mental health is essential to maintaining positive relationships with family members, particularly if families are under pressure from other factors.

Parental mental health

Poor parental mental health can place great pressure on young people within the family. It was reported that some young people who go on to experience homelessness have been young carers. Census data suggest there are around 166,360 young carers in England, though this is likely to be a gross underestimate given that many young people do not recognise that they are young carers.[34] This means that many young people struggle to care for a family member without accessing their entitlement to a Carer's Assessment and additional support.

> *The young people are not recognised young carers, it's very unofficial. Most of our young people have been carers to either parents or their younger siblings.*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Parental mental illness increases instability at home and places great responsibility on the young person, especially if they don't have wider support networks to draw on. Some young people begin to struggle at school and in other aspects of their lives, which in turn places greater strain on their relationships at home.

It was suggested by practitioners that young people whose parents have mental health problems do not get the support they need, because they are 'hidden' unofficial carers. There is no expectation that current recording systems ask questions about children, making it difficult to identify children and young people who need support.[35] Mechanisms should be in place to flag when an adult suffering from mental health problems has a child.

Young people's mental health

When young people do not get the necessary support for their own mental health needs it can also lead to the breakdown of family relationships and homelessness.

> *I've had emails from parents who might say they have a son with a mental illness and they can't cope, they want to kick him out. But all I can do is signpost them to services. These are manageable illnesses but they need the support to manage. It's not really a housing issue but then it becomes a housing issue.*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

A quarter of homeless young people arrive at Centrepoint with a formally diagnosed mental health problem, depression being the most common problem suffered by 50 per cent.[36] National data on the mental health of children and young people in the general population is poor. The last national survey of child and adolescent mental health was published in 2005, making it difficult to establish whether mental health problems are higher in the homeless young people population.

Poor transitions from care

Around 20 per cent of the homeless young people who come to Centrepoint have been in care. In comparison, just 0.6 per cent (60 children per 10,000) of the general population in England is looked-after.[37] For some care leavers who come to Centrepoint, this is a planned move. However, some find themselves homeless after a poor transition to independence.

National data show that while the majority of care leavers are living in independent accommodation, some are in more precarious housing situations, with some known to be experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, local authorities increasingly have no information on care leavers as they reach 21, suggesting that many may no longer be in touch with their corporate parent or get the support they are entitled to.

Figure 2: Extract from national table on care leavers' accommodation.[38]

Accommodation outcome	19 year olds (8,600)	20 year olds (8,820)	21 year olds (8,910)
No fixed abode/ homeless	1%	1%	1%
No information [39]	9%	11%	16%
Semi-independent, transition accommodation	12%	10%	7%
Support lodgings	8%	5%	3%
Independent living	32%	41%	45%

One young person who took part in our research described how her relationship with her social worker broke down because she did not feel listened to. The relationship with the local authority as corporate parent is vital given the lack of family support networks.

" *People automatically take the parents side, without fail. For a good year and a half, no one believed what I said. No-one got it. They thought I was over exaggerating, one of them ones. But no, my social worker even wrote my mum a letter behind my back, I went mad.* "

- Siobhan

A good relationship with practitioners is essential if care leavers are to maintain contact with their local authority and access the information and support they are entitled to. Nationally, only 29 per cent of children in care and 17 per cent of care leavers feel they have all the information they need about their entitlements.[40]

This research indicates that many young people who experienced family breakdown and homelessness were on the edge of the care system. They may have been known to Children's Social Services but may not have met the thresholds for support. In 2014-15, of 635,600 referrals made to children's services in England, 14 per cent required no further action after initial consideration and 23 per cent were assessed and then deemed to require no further action.[41] Practitioners viewed this as an opportunity to identify young people at risk of homelessness at an earlier point.
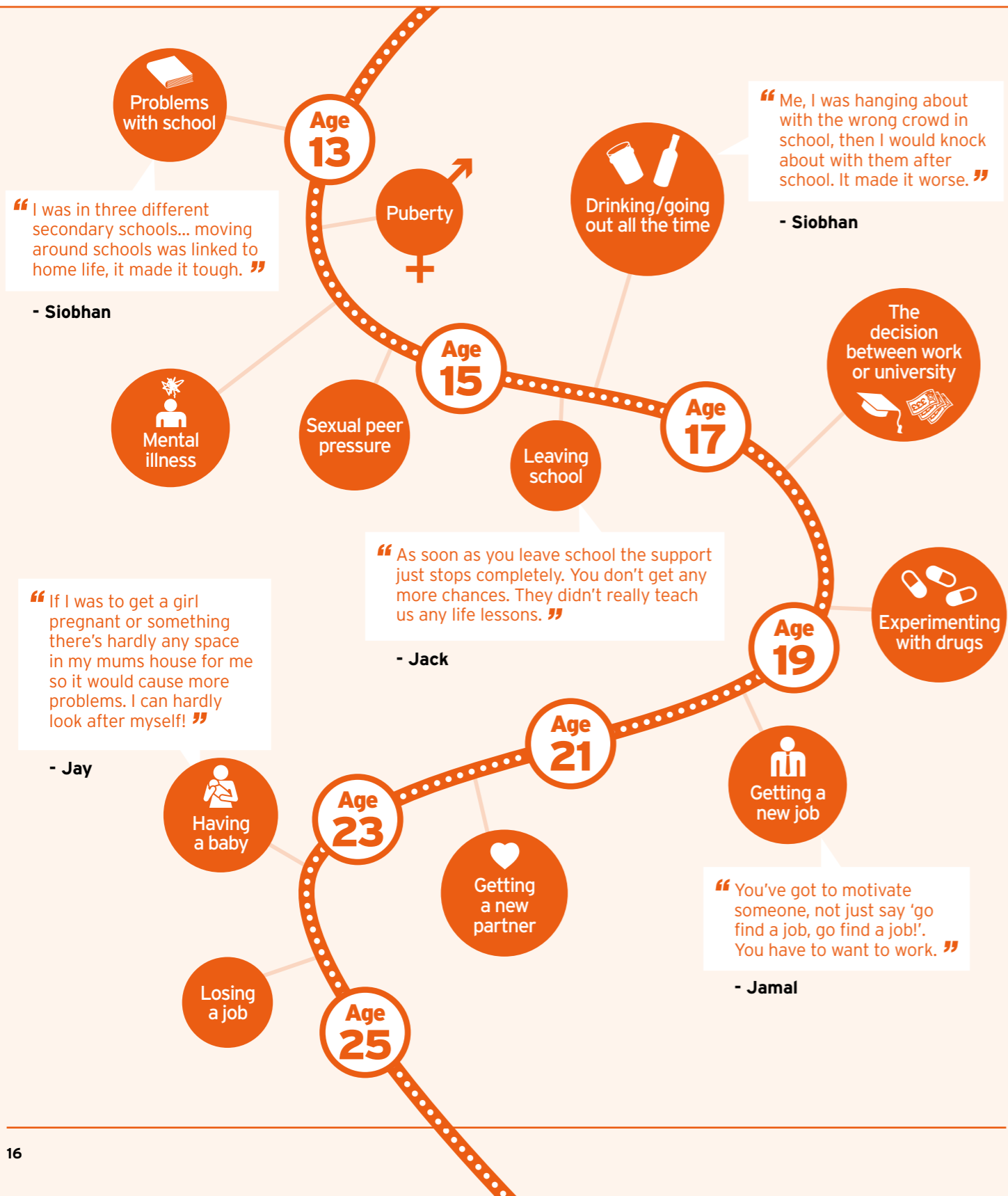
Crisis Points

It is clear that the families of many homeless young people had experienced long-standing, complex problems. We therefore need to understand - given that these issues may have been present for years - the key point at which the relationship breaks down. A better understanding of these 'crisis points' is essential, particularly why they cause some families to breakdown whilst others do not.

We asked young people to think about their relationships with family and the 'crisis points' which had led to an escalation of problems.

The crisis points related to major events in their lives. Some of these events were sudden or unexpected. There was a clear sense that having experienced problems for a long time, these crisis points represented the final straw and meant that young people had to leave home.

The crisis points which young people identified are not unique to homeless young people. We need to understand why, when faced with these events, some families experience relationship breakdown and others do not.

" Some young people don't know different ways of coping because nobody has told them... Sometimes the parents don't have these coping mechanisms themselves which is why they're stuck in certain situations... That's what it's all about, resilience and resources and knowledge. If people knew there is a bit more hope and a different way. "

- Centrepoint practitioner

Resilience is essential if families are to navigate their way through a crisis together. Poor resilience means that when a crisis hits, families are unable to reach a positive solution and relationships break down.
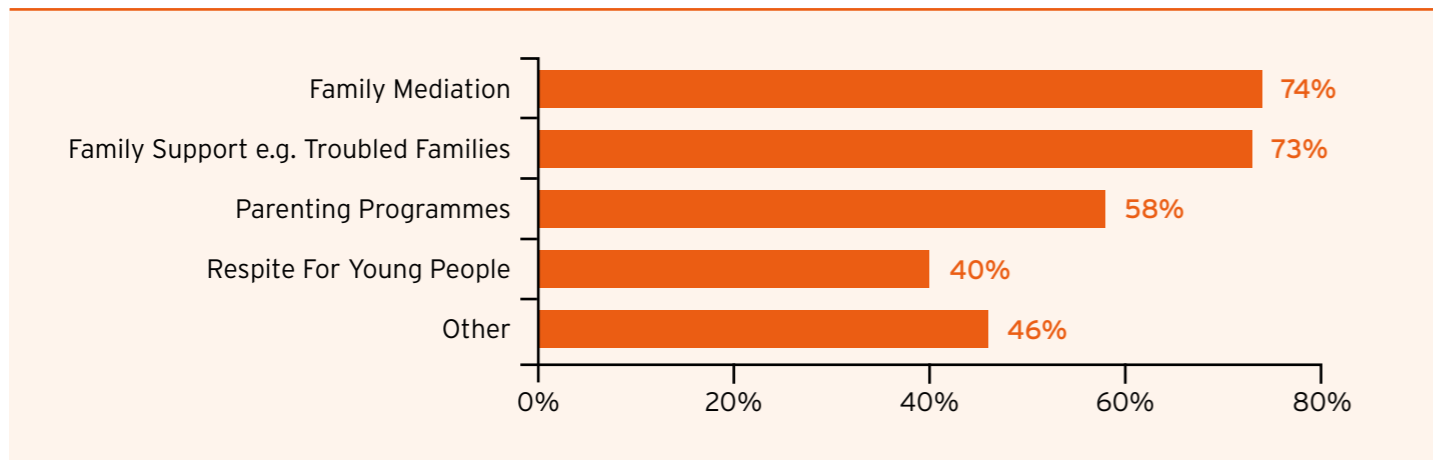
Families need to adapt to stress and adversity, and avoid an escalation of problems. Studies highlight a number of key attributes affecting resilience which were also apparent in our research. These include secure relationships, a sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and access to wider support networks.[42] Security and stability is needed to develop these key attributes. This is undermined by the factors identified in this research including poverty, poor mental health, parental conflict and financial pressures. These factors have been further impacted both positively and negatively, by policy changes.

Problems with school

Age 13

" I was in three different secondary schools... moving around schools was linked to home life, it made it tough. "

- Siobhan

Puberty

Drinking/going out all the time

" Me, I was hanging about with the wrong crowd in school, then I would knock about with them after school. It made it worse. "

- Siobhan

Mental illness

Age 15

Sexual peer pressure

Leaving school

Age 17

The decision between work or university

" As soon as you leave school the support just stops completely. You don't get any more chances. They didn't really teach us any life lessons. "

- Jack

" If I was to get a girl pregnant or something there's hardly any space in my mums house for me so it would cause more problems. I can hardly look after myself! "

- Jay

Age 19

Experimenting with drugs

Age 21

Getting a new job

Having a baby

Age 23

Getting a new partner

" You've got to motivate someone, not just say 'go find a job, go find a job!'. You have to want to work. "

- Jamal

Losing a job

Age 25

Support For Families At Risk Of Relationship Breakdown

72% of local authorities offer services in their area for young people at risk of homelessness due to family breakdown to prevent them from leaving home.[43]

Local authorities were asked which services they offer for families where a young person is at risk of leaving home due to family breakdown. We consider the efficacy of these different approaches based on the views of young people, practitioners and existing evidence.[46]

Family Mediation — 74%
Family Support e.g. Troubled Families — 73%
Parenting Programmes — 58%
Respite For Young People — 40%
Other — 46%

Family mediation

> *"Family mediation will not come over judgemental; you're a neutral person to listen to both parties. Whatever is in your heart, you can pour it out. It can be the early intervention."*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

Three quarters (74 per cent) of local authorities offer family mediation to young people at risk of leaving home due to family breakdown. Of the local authorities that gave an indication of the eligibility criteria, the majority offer mediation to any young person in their area deemed at risk of homelessness. Some target particularly vulnerable groups including; children in need, young offenders, care leavers or those on the Troubled Families programme.

When asked about their views on mediation, young people had mixed feelings.

> *"When I first met my social worker, she was like 'we can arrange a meeting, we can do family mediation' and she didn't get it. It would not work. My mum and dad aren't them sort of people."*
>
> **- Siobhan**

> *"I didn't get mediation until I'd experienced mental health problems and was having treatment in hospital... If I'd have had that before being homeless, I think it would been a great thing. When I did get mediation it was really good... my mum and dad were able to understand my mental health problems and our relationship grew."*
>
> **- Jay**

Previous Centrepoint research found that 50 per cent of homeless young people did not think mediation would have been useful, but a third (32 per cent) thought it would have been useful for them when they were younger. Only one in seven (14 per cent) thought it would be useful now that they have become homeless.[44]

The FOI data highlighted different perceptions about what mediation actually is. Some local authorities indicated that they commission specialist external providers to deliver a formal programme of mediation to families, delivered by trained mediators. Others suggested that staff mediate with any family needing support as part of their routine work. Further research is needed to evaluate the merits and effectiveness of both formal and informal mediation.

> *"Different providers offer this service. We have an Early Help Hub Youth Mediation Service, criteria simply based on age (under 25). We also have Family support workers who can mediate with 16-17 year olds threatened with homelessness. We also use YMCA Nightstop for young people threatened with homelessness (16-25 year olds) and mediation can be arranged through this also."*
>
> **- Local authority**

The most commonly measured mediation outcome was whether the young person returned home. This return home can be recorded in the homelessness prevention and relief data. However, successful mediation does not always lead to a return home. It may lead to the family resolving their difficulties and the young person moving to alternative accommodation, moving in with other family or friends, or living independently.[45]

> *"I've had to find accommodation to move [the young person] away but then I've been able to work with the young person outside that environment. That space and time apart can help. Some will go back home, others won't but the relationship will have improved."*
>
> **- Centrepoint practitioner**

The Government's focus has been on mediation for separating couples, which is funded by Legal Aid and delivered by qualified mediators. This type of mediation can only be deployed once a family has hit crisis and have entered into a legal dispute.[46] More attention must be given to other types of mediation, beyond the focus of the court system and separating couples. The different types of mediation offered by children's services and housing teams are essential to family stability, but not often monitored for quality or consistency. More evaluation of different approaches to mediation, both formal and informal, is urgently needed to in order to explore its effectiveness.

Family Support: Troubled Families

Almost three quarters (73 per cent) of local authorities offer family support services. This area of service delivery was dominated by the Troubled Families programme; 94 per cent of the 147 local authorities that disclosed their eligibility criteria use the Troubled Families indicators. The Troubled Families programme offers practical 'hands on' support from a single worker dedicated to a family. The worker adopts an assertive and challenging approach, and considers the family as a whole as they work towards agreed actions.[47]

Throughout the research practitioners said how important it is to have the resources and the time to be persistent when supporting vulnerable families, but that this approach is concentrated at the crisis end of the support spectrum. There is concern that those families who are below the eligibility threshold for Troubled Families Support do not have access to the intensive, tailored support which could make such a difference to their lives.

The Troubled Families criterion does not include young people at risk of youth homelessness or families at risk of relationship breakdown. Local authorities can specify a tailored eligibility criterion to reflect need in their area; however only 15 local authorities reported that risk of youth homelessness is a specific eligibility criterion. Many suggested that young people at risk of homelessness were likely to be picked up by services via another criterion.

> *"Family support can be offered via the local Troubled Families programme, but it is not targeted at preventing youth homelessness. This is not one of the indicators of a 'Troubled Family', nor is it a programme objective."*
>
> **- Local authority**

Given the multiple complex factors often present within a family's life before relationship breakdown and youth homelessness occurs, a family may be picked up through other indicators. However, introducing an additional early intervention indicator - young person at risk of homelessness - would provide an added safety net for vulnerable young people. This should sit within the 'Children in need of help' group of indicators, and would catch older young people who may not be known to Children's Services but could present via an alternative referral route e.g. a youth service or housing team. This would sit alongside the current indicator relating to children reported missing. In addition, if an eligible family includes an estranged young person, that young person must always be offered support under the Troubled Families programme for any individuals needs as well as support to reconcile with their family, regardless of the fact they no longer live at home.

Parenting programmes

Only 58 per cent of local authorities indicated that they offer parenting programmes specifically for parents of teenagers. Overall, those local authorities who responded to this question indicated that they offer a range of parenting programmes and can refer families depending on level of need. Some local authorities have developed their own programmes whilst others have adopted existing models. Teen Triple P was the most common, mentioned by 11 per cent of councils who responded to this question. Triple P is designed to prevent and treat behavioural and emotional problems in children and teenagers. It is based on social learning, cognitive behavioural and developmental theory and has an extensive evidence base including 100 randomised control trials.[48]

" We have a programme which helps parents to understand their teenagers more and we equip them with strategies to rebuild relationships with their children. We assist parents in establishing boundaries, and look at the young person's emotional needs, brain development, and past experiences that may have impacted on their development. "

- Local authority

Support for parents is an essential component of a holistic, whole family approach. Many parenting programmes are focussed at parents of younger children, particularly through children's centres. Developing positive parenting skills is important at all stages of parenthood and teenage years bring new challenges. More support is needed for those who are parenting adolescents.

" It's really difficult for parents. They don't know how to communicate with their kids. They're like 'whatever we say, it just doesn't work. There's nothing we can say that's right'. I think having that support for parents is what's missing. "

- Centrepoint practitioner

Respite

Respite offers a family time apart for a short, fixed time period. By removing the young person from the family environment, families have the space to resolve problems. This was the service least offered by local authorities; 40 per cent offer respite for young people at risk of family breakdown.

Previous Centrepoint research found that only a third of homeless young people thought that respite would have been useful for them. Reservations centred on a perception that respite was running away from problems at home rather than addressing them, or that the problems would simply reoccur when they returned home.[49]

However, having time apart alongside support from professionals can mean that families are able to address problems, by thinking through the necessary solutions and the support they need to bring about change.

The FOI request also highlighted the different types of respite provision that local authorities have put in place. Where local authorities disclosed the types of emergency accommodation on offer, crash pads, supported lodgings and Nightstop were all noted frequently, crash pads being the most popular.

Case study: Dartford Young Person's Team

The Children's Services and Housing team at Dartford Borough Council has adopted a co-located multi-agency approach to preventing youth homelessness. The primary objective of the Dartford Model is to keep 16/17 year olds living at home with their families unless it is unsafe to do so. A young person at risk of homelessness will be interviewed and an initial assessment completed. Lead professionals work with the family and jointly work out an action plan to resolve issues at home, putting in place the appropriate support.

If a young person is unable to return home immediately, they may be accommodated at the 'crash pad' facility, based at YMCA. This facility is funded by Housing Options through the Homeless Prevention Fund and offers valuable breathing space for the family for up to 14 days, giving time to try and reconcile that young person home. If this is not possible after 14 days, the young person is referred to Children's Services.

Other Services Offered By Local Authorities

Almost half (46 per cent) of local authorities report that they offer services for families at risk of family breakdown and youth homelessness, other those that we listed in the FOI. The most common other types of support highlighted by local authorities were:

- Direct advice and information – as per the local authority's duty to ensure that advice and information are available to anyone regarding housing and homelessness

- Negotiation between family members – this included informal mediation by Housing Officers as well as Family Group Conferencing and home visits

- Outreach in schools – to raise awareness of homelessness and to provide advice and information

These types of services hold the potential to intervene early to avert crisis. Other support on offer to prevent family breakdown and youth homelessness included referrals to youth centres and youth workers, financial assistance, referrals to Youth Offending Teams and CAMHS. The importance of access to advice and information, and outreach in schools were also cited as important in our interviews with young people and staff.

Access to advice and information

Having access to good quality advice and information as early as possible was cited as a key means of preventing family breakdown. Local authorities have a duty to provide families with information, advice or assistance relating to any services, facilities or publications which may benefit them or their children up to their twentieth birthday.[50] Young people do seek help regarding family relationship problems; this is consistently the top reason why young people contact ChildLine.[51]

However, the research found that many vulnerable families have been unable to access advice and information, that it can be poor quality and that sometimes it is refused completely. As young people are unaware of their right to information, they struggle to advocate for themselves.

Many accounts about poor information related to help seeking at the point of crisis. We heard no instances of young people seeking help well before family relationships had broken down. This is likely because we only interviewed young people who were homeless, therefore we do not have evidence of how access to advice and support early may have prevented homelessness.

A family seeking early help may be more likely to access universal information services, for example online services, telephone helplines, drop in information sessions or leaflets in local services such as GP practices. To be empowered to access this information, young people and families must be aware of the causes of family breakdown and homelessness.

" When I was 16 and I was homeless, I presented at the housing department on several occasions. Because I was 16 they said they had to phone my parents to check that I was actually homeless. But my parents would say that I could come home. Then when I got home I wasn't allowed in. So it was a no-win situation. I had to just constantly go back to them and finally they stopped calling my parents and they helped my get into Centrepoint. "

- Jay

" We need to just put homelessness out there. It's not something that's spoken about. You don't see anything advertised as to what to do if you do find yourself homeless, here's where to go. There are many types of homelessness and people don't actually realise that they are. It's about getting that awareness. "

- Luke

Prevention services in schools

The role of schools in identifying problems early was widely discussed and debated throughout the research. Views were split on whether school was an appropriate place to discuss family problems, particularly as school was not a positive place for some. Issues such as poor relationships with staff and truancy were evident.

" Support at school was rubbish... Like a weird therapy session, stupid and boring. I had to do it. Boring. I did it for like, 5 years. It should have been more structured rather than turning up and not having anything planned. "

- Katy

On the other hand, schools offer an opportunity to reach lots of young people before a problem escalates. Many said they would not want to talk about personal problems with their teachers, so activities should be delivered by a neutral person.

" Young people just need someone who is old enough to have been through it all, to have a talk with. They know that if they talk to someone who has been through it all, they know what they're talking about and the young person will be on the straight and narrow again. "

- Shamil

Peer to peer models were popular, talking to another young person who had been through the same situation, particularly for the most marginalised young people. What is difficult however, is effectively evaluating the difference it has made to the young people taking part over the longer term.

Centrepoint Youth Educators Project

The Youth Educators Project trains young people, who have experienced homelessness, in peer education. Once trained, the Youth Educators are supported to plan and then deliver sessions to staff, professionals and other young people about their personal experiences, with the aim of raising awareness of youth homelessness and removing any stereotypes attached to it. The sessions offer Youth Educators the opportunity to explain their experiences in their own way, which will hopefully give them confidence, and inform practice. In 2014-15 Centrepoint youth educators reached 1,091 young people and 324 professionals.

Callum's story

" I got involved in peer educators through my friend. It is a programme where you do your training, then you go out to schools or colleges and you deliver a session on homelessness and what support is out there and what Centrepoint actually does. At the end you give your personal story.

We give the group different scenarios of different people and their background discuss whether or not they are homeless. We show them pictures of real Centrepoint young people. They are quite surprised.

If they do find themselves homeless, it's talking about how they can access services through the housing department at the council and what duty of care they have. They don't know how to access any kind of services or support, so we make them aware of how to access help so they're not left on the streets. "

Conclusion

If we are to end youth homelessness, more must be done to prevent family breakdown. This presents a great challenge to policy makers and service providers given the complex and varied factors which contribute to it.

Fragile family relationships can be pushed to breaking point by multiple factors. Poverty and unemployment push families into dire financial positions, increasing strain on relationships and sometimes driving young people out of the family home. Extra tailored support will be essential to help those furthest from the job market into employment.

Government policy has focussed on family breakdown between two parents. However, a holistic family approach is needed, in line with the Family Test, to ensure that relationship support helps child-parent relationships too. Mediation should be available at the earliest possible point and reviewed to assess the efficacy and availability of different approaches.

Parenting support is needed which focusses on effective communication and behaviour management, specifically designed for parents of adolescents. For those families who have reached crisis point, respite also offers vital breathing space to plan how to move forward together. Troubled Families offers intensive support to families in extreme need however less is available for early help.

Access to good quality information and advice is essential. However, sometimes families receive poor information and advice. Young people should be aware of the causes of homelessness and different types, particularly hidden homelessness. If they have this information, they may be able to access help earlier. Programmes in schools such as Peer Educators are valuable for raising awareness.

Open Access → **Targeted**

Universal Need	Early identified needs	Increasing needs	High needs

- Schools programmes
- Information and advice
- Mediation
- Parenting support
- Respite accommodation
- Intensive family support (Troubled Families)
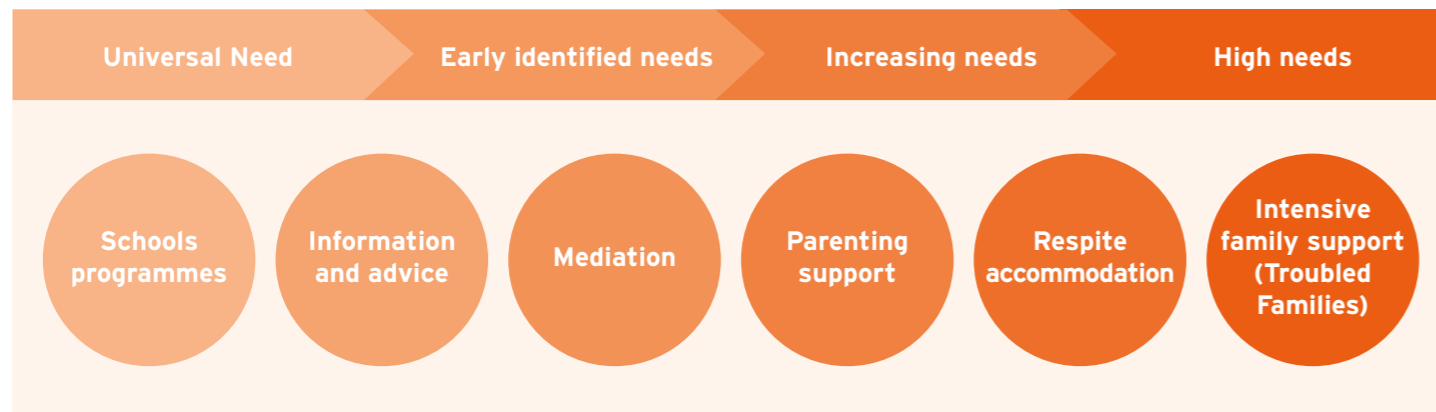
A full spectrum of services is essential to ensure that families and young people have access to timely support. Given the complexity of problems faced by families, signposting to additional areas of support is key, e.g. employability or mental health services. At a time of extreme pressure on local authority budgets it is essential that resources are not only focussed at the targeted end of the spectrum. Access to information, advice and low level universal support has the potential to prevent family relationship breakdown and a need for more intensive family support.

Recommendations

The Government should:

1. Make five year protected early intervention minimum spending commitments, providing local authorities with the stability to plan prevention services in the longer term

2. Conduct a national review of mediation services offered by local authorities to better understand the efficacy of different approaches, cost effectiveness and likelihood of achieving improved family relationships in the long term

3. Ensure the Family Test is applied to all policy reform. The results of the test should always be documented and made public and wherever possible, open to public consultation

4. Include parental-child relationship breakdown in the Life Chances Strategy as an indicator of poor outcomes

The Department for Communities and Local Government should:

5. Add 'young person at risk of homelessness' to the 'Children who need help' set of Troubled Families indicators

6. Make clear in guidance that estranged young people should be offered support as part of the Troubled Families team's whole family approach, regardless of the fact they no longer live at home

7. Amend the homelessness data return for prevention and relief statistics so that data can be broken down by age, enabling a clearer picture of how youth homelessness is being prevented by local authorities

The Ministry of Justice should:

8. Expand the current mediation programme for separating couples entering the court system to whole families in crisis at an earlier point, before they enter legal proceedings

Local authorities should:

9. Monitor the quality of information given by their housing options team to those at risk of homelessness, providing evidence that information is regularly updated and accessible

10. Have joint protocols between Housing and Children's Services setting out arrangements for service provision which ensure that a young person on the edge of homelessness is not passed between the two departments without support

End Notes

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   Methodology note:
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