

Research report

# What does a good professional relationship look like for homeless young people?



centre  
point

give homeless  
young people  
a future

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## About the research

This report is based on a participatory action research (PAR) project that has been carried out alongside Centrepoint in the United Kingdom. PAR is a collaborative approach to research that involves working together towards positive change. The research involved dropping in to a Centrepoint service regularly over the course of six months to get to know, listen and work with, young people, staff and volunteers. The methods used include interviews, diagramming and ethnography.

Centrepoint provides housing and support for homeless young people (16-25) in London, Manchester, Yorkshire and the North East. They also provide support through partnerships across the UK.

This reports brings together the voices of members of staff and young people to evaluate what a positive professional looks like for young people. The report offers some ideas for others to take forward in order to build and maintain positive professional relationships with young people, in order to ensure young people engage with and get the best support possible.

## About the researcher

Philip is a PhD candidate in the department of Geography at Newcastle University. If you have any questions about the research or want to find out more you can contact him via: [p.mullen1@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:p.mullen1@newcastle.ac.uk)

## Key messages from young people

Young people felt that the **caring and respectful attitudes that staff had** for them were the most important part of being supported by Centrepoint. Young people appreciated that members of staff had a joke with them, made them feel at home, and took the time to meet them 'where they were at', with respect and with an open mind. These positive relationships meant that young people felt comfortable talking through difficult topics with members of staff, which they might not otherwise have done if members of staff didn't take the time to get to know them.

Young people said that they really appreciate **the chance to try and do something new** and different. They suggested that having activities in the calendar gives them something to look forward to, helps to release some of the stress and boredom they face, and helps them to build positive relationships with both staff and other young people. While motivating young people to attend might be a challenge, young people said they would be willing to attend. Some young people even suggested that they would be willing to pay a 'deposit' or contribute a small amount towards an activity (e.g. cycling or cooking a group meal).

Young people were **very aware of negative attitudes and stigma** from others. The positive experiences they have had with members of staff from Centrepoint contrast with the way they felt judged and let down by other supported accommodation providers. Young people also suggested that they felt judged by members of the local community who neighboured the Centrepoint service, and sometimes by visitors from other organisations who came to see them. Young people have really useful ideas about how to minimize and reduce this stigma, and it is really important to work together with young people to reduce this stigma as it can have really harmful effects on self-esteem and can be a barrier for forming positive relationships.

Young people felt that **open and honest communication** was really important for building consistent and positive relationships with staff. They also felt that this honesty reduced the potential for conflict as they had a better understanding of why certain rules or procedures were in place.

Young people also really valued having **regular opportunities to speak openly and give constructive feedback** about how services can work best for them, e.g. through residents meetings and this research. As engaging young people can be a long and slow process, it is really important young people have regular opportunities to raise their concerns and have these listened and responded to.

Young people said that the support they wanted, and received, from Centrepoint was more than just being provided with somewhere to stay. They appreciated that they were **supported in many different areas of their lives**, ranging from education, to work, to managing relationships and help with practical things (e.g. how to use different websites). They also appreciated when other organisations provided support within their accommodation, as this helped them to feel safe and comfortable. As the biggest worry they had was around their mental health, young people really wanted and needed mental health providers to offer drop-in support to them in their accommodation. While they felt that members of staff from Centrepoint were there for them when they wanted someone to talk to, they really wanted this to be supplemented by opportunities to speak to trained professionals before things got too much for them.

## Key messages from staff

Staff found that the key to success when supporting homeless young people is **young people's level of engagement**, and the way that they perceive their relationships with staff to be. The more that members of staff 'meet them where they are at' in environments where they feel safe and comfortable, the better that support will be received and taken on board.

Members of staff found that **getting to know young people by doing activities** with them (for example by drinking tea/coffee together, going for a walk, or playing football) can be really useful ways of building positive relationships. Service providers could consider providing support in different and more 'informal' spaces where young people may feel more relaxed and more willing to open up.

Staff found that it is really important that young people have a **safe space from which they can take positive lessons from their mistakes**. Members of staff also suggested that it is important that young people are made to feel comfortable and at home, and that they meet young people with a caring personality and without judgment.

Members of staff suggested that the **strong team-ethic** they had was really important for providing consistent support to young people. As members of staff worked on rotation, sharing information within the team (both verbally and through written notes) was seen as crucial in order to keep up-to-date with what was happening in the lives of the young people they supported. The detailed notes recorded using the 'in-form' platform also meant that information could be shared with other agencies/organizations in order to protect young people from harm.



# What did young people think?

## Caring and respectful attitudes

The most positive feature that young people repeatedly identified about Centrepoint was that members of staff and volunteers really cared. Many young people said that they had been much happier while they were staying at Centrepoint compared to other services they had been supported by. Young people also respected and appreciated a volunteer telling them that they wanted to volunteer to show them 'that not all people are bad'.

**'I've had a happier stay here... it's quite easy to get depressed in supported accommodation services'**  
- Young person

For young people, the most important thing that Centrepoint got right was having the right kind of relationship with them. This 'right' kind is based on mutual respect where staff and volunteers have non-judgmental attitudes towards young people. While one young person spoke very positively about Centrepoint, they suggested that staff in other services had treated young people 'like scum'. A different young person said "if you don't treat staff with respect, they won't treat you with respect". This young person recognized that relationships needed to be positive in both

directions. Many young people also told me that they wanted to become more independent, and that they appreciated staff supporting them and being there for them on their journeys towards independence.

**'You've gotta help yourself to get help back'**  
- Young person

Young people also appreciated that they could be themselves within the service. They really liked that they were able to be humorous with members of staff, even when this humour could sometimes be dark. For example, young people respected that a member of staff played along, and found the funny side, when they did all they could to embarrass the member of staff while out shopping. They called the staff member 'Daddy' at every opportunity they could and tried to sneak embarrassing items into the trolley. Being able to have a laugh with members of staff helped to lighten the mood and meant that young people felt more open and relaxed around staff.



## Opportunities to do something new

Young people said that they were interested in activities both inside and outside of the service. Activities they were interested in inside the service included group meals, game nights, movie nights and more opportunities to relax and enjoy a cup of tea/coffee together. Outside of the service they were interested in activities ranging from going on walks, going cycling, and going to the cinema, to going quad biking. Young people were particularly interested in trying something that was new and different, and something that got them active. Young people said that activities were something that they would look forward to, that they helped them to release stress, and that they provided opportunities to relax, catch up with, and get to know members of staff better. Some young people also suggested that by attending activities they would have space to be able to clear their head, which would help them to deal with their addictions.

### **'For that hour, I'll be sober'**

#### **- Young person**

Young people suggested that they often 'played up' with staff because they didn't have much to do or because their options for doing something were limited by a lack of funds. While motivating young people to attend activities or to do something can be tricky, it is important to keep trying as young people said that they really get a lot out of attending. While the cost of most activities was small when compared to the benefits that young people gained from them, for those activities that did have higher costs young people said that they were prepared to contribute. For example, some young people suggested that they would be willing to contribute a small amount for a group meal or to go and do an activity, and others said that they would be willing to pay a deposit.

## Working together to reduce stigma

All of the young people from the research felt that others from outside the service made negative and false judgments about them. They really felt the stigmas that others placed on them and this affected how they saw themselves, their confidence and the relationships they had with others. One young person said that while others thought of them as a 'scrounger' they didn't want to be on benefits. They said that they just needed a little bit of support for a little while as they recovered and rebuilt themselves from the past traumatic experiences they had faced.

### **'It's nee good when people know you live in a homeless hostel'**

#### **- Young person**

An example of one of the stigmas that young people faced while staying at Centrepoint was around the impressions others had of them when they saw young people smoking at the front of

the building. Young people suggested that they felt residents neighbouring the service, and those from other organizations who visited the service, stigmatized and made judgments about them. Many young people felt that it was difficult to build positive professional relationships with those who they felt made judgements about them when they saw them smoking. One young person also suggested that it could be intimidating for a new resident to see a 'gang' of young people smoking outside the building when they first move in. They were also aware that some young people didn't like to go through smoke on their way into the building. Young people appreciated that through the process of the research, the researcher liaised between young people and members of staff so that we could work together to reduce this sense of feeling stigmatized.

To reduce these negative feelings of being stigmatized, young people suggested to the

researcher and members of staff that a smoking shelter be erected at the back of the building away from public view. Young people also suggested that a cigarette bin should be put in place to reduce mess, which would give visitors and neighbours a better impression of the service, and in turn of young people. While a small amount of funding would have been required to do this, and this funding might have been seen as 'promoting smoking', young people universally said that supporting them to make the choice to smoke away from the view of the public is really important. They suggested that this would improve relationships with those that came into the service, and that they would engage with them more as they would feel that visitors were stigmatizing them less.

**'If they see me smoking they get the wrong impression of who I am'**

**- Young person**

## Open and honest communication

Whilst members of Centrepoint staff were always perceived as caring, sometimes things did go wrong in the eyes of young people and this led to them temporarily falling out with certain members of staff. Often this was because young people didn't understand why certain rules were in place. For example, they didn't realize that a curfew was in place because the local council stated that it had to be, and they often thought that it was members of staff who put the rule in place. Once the rules, and the reasons behind them, were explained young people often engaged productively again with members of staff. Open and honest communication seems to be key to minimizing the potential for conflict between members of staff and young people. On reflection, young people later told me that these temporary fall-outs were often only ever 'small things', and they repeated that they really appreciated staff being there for them through thick and thin.

Many of the concerns that young people raised through the research about improvements to the

Throughout the research young people also contrasted the positive experiences they had with Centrepoint with other organisations they had been supported by, and sometimes with their own families. Of other supported accommodation providers, one young person said that "staff could not care much as long as rent is paid and rooms are tidy from what I have seen from every supported accommodation since I was 16 to 18 and from 19-20". Young people said that with other providers, the feeling of 'being let down' or getting the impression that staff treated them like 'scum', led to their disengagement and them putting up a barrier between themselves and staff. Reliable 'parental-like' relationships, such as those offered by members of staff and volunteers at Centrepoint, were really valued by young people as they had learned to expect rejection from adults due to their past experiences.

service were around very practical things. Young people often recognized that most of these things were 'small' in light of the support that they got from Centrepoint and members of staff. This shows just how much members of staff from Centrepoint succeeded in building the right kinds of positive professional relationships with young people. Some of the suggestions young people gave included getting better Wi-Fi, faster computers, and new tumble dryers. As most of these improvements were already planned and were in progress, open communication (perhaps via a noticeboard) about repairs and anticipated timelines would have been useful. A few young people also suggested that they would have appreciated having access to a training flat while they stayed at Centrepoint for a chance to learn and develop new independent living skills. If this is affordable, it could be a really useful opportunity to explore.

Through the process of carrying out the research, some young people said that they had thought of suggestions for the service that they hadn't

thought of before. This underlines that engaging young people is a long and slow process, and that young people may need constant encouragement to build confidence and speak out about concerns they have, or improvements they would recommend. Providing regular opportunities, such as those offered by Centrepoint through residents meetings

and tea/coffee mornings/evenings, are really important to enable young people to feed into services and give constructive feedback about how services can work best for them.

**'I always thought about that [suggestion] but never thought to say'**

**- Young person**

## **More collaboration with mental health services**

From speaking to young people, staff and volunteers, it is clear that youth homelessness is about much more than housing alone. Young people wanted and needed support in many different areas; often areas that youth generally needed and wanted advice and support with. Young people wanted help managing relationships (romantic, with friends, with family, with other members of staff, and with other residents), with work, negotiating the benefit system, with education, and how to use different websites (e.g. Gumtree, iTunes). Perhaps most importantly, young people wanted help relieving the stress and boredom they faced, both of which impacted on their mental health. Young people appreciated that they were offered, and encouraged to take up, activities within and outside of the service to help relieve stress and boredom. They also appreciated that they were able to openly and honestly talk to staff and other residents about their mental health, which points to the success of Centrepoint in creating an open and relaxed atmosphere. However, young people really wanted and needed support from trained mental health professionals. Young people repeatedly said that they wanted mental health professionals to drop into the service regularly, as the service

was a space in which they felt comfortable. Young people wanted to talk regularly with a professional long before they reached a crisis point where they couldn't drown out the voices inside their head any longer. All of the young people from the research wanted to see more joint working between the NHS and Centrepoint, and they saw this as crucial in getting the support they needed.

In order to support young people before they reach a point of crisis and things get too much for them, funding needs to be made available for mental health services to work collaboratively with the services offered by Centrepoint. While staff from Centrepoint do so much to make young people feel at home and to relieve some of the stresses that young people face, having a mental health professional drop into the service for an hour or so each week would make a really big difference in supporting vulnerable young people.

**'NHS and Centrepoint should work with GP notes on how they [young people] get on with day to day stuff and what they struggle with so it helps put stuff at the back of the mind'**

**- Young person**



# What did members of staff think?

## Meeting young people 'where they are at'

Members of staff described a slow, but very necessary, process of building rapport and a positive and trusting relationship with young people. It was clear to staff that trust had to be earned and that a commitment to supporting young people 'where they are at' had to be 'proven'. One member of staff suggested that this relationship building starts with 'the look' that you give a young person when they first enter the service and you first meet them. First impressions really mattered, and members of staff did all that they could to help young people feel welcome and at home.

In order for young people to engage with the help that they were offering once they moved into the service, members of staff suggested that it was crucial that they had the right attitude towards young people. The respectful and open attitudes that members of staff showed to young people really paid off as it meant that young people felt comfortable discussing difficult topics, or topics that some might consider 'risqué' (for example

around sex or sexual health). Young people felt able to 'tell it how it is' and in turn tell staff about different aspects of their lives that they might not otherwise have spoken about if they did not feel as comfortable talking to staff.

Members of staff also found that it was important to give young people more space to be themselves at weekends and evenings (for example by relaxing restrictions about language that could be used), and this was really appreciated by young people in helping them to feel more at home. The openness that young people had when discussing their mental health, and the oftentimes intense difficulties they were facing, with staff is testament to just how important the attitudes of staff have been in helping to create an open and positive atmosphere in the service.

**'I didn't come into the job to change young people, I came to meet them where they are at, at their own pace and with their own goals'**

**- Member of staff**



## Activities and informal spaces of support

Members of staff found that they could only get at the 'real' and underlying issues that young people were facing once young people opened up and felt comfortable around them. They suggested that this can take a lot of time, as young people often feel let down by adults due to past experiences they have had with their family, the care system, or sometimes by other housing organisations/charities. Members of staff suggested that the time they had within their roles to get to know young people, especially through doing activities with them or sharing a cup of coffee/tea with them, enabled them to rebuild the young person's sense of trust in adults. This in turn led to better, more open and honest engagement, enabling staff to give support that is both more meaningful to young people, and that is in turn more likely to also be taken up by young people.

A challenge within the service, as is the case across all supported accommodation services, is sustaining this positive engagement with young people. Members of staff found that while young

people wanted to take up opportunities outside of the service, young people were often worried about what the public might think about them. For example, young people were worried that they might be judged for not wearing the latest trainers or football boots. To encourage young people to get involved with these positive activities, members of staff have been active in encouraging other services to provide services in-house, or at least first meet the young people in the service, to reduce the barriers that young people might have for getting involved in different things. Members of staff have also found that regular opportunities throughout the day for staff and young people to come together with tea and coffee have been really valued as opportunities to get to know each other 'informally', leading to better engagement. The key outcome for members of staff in providing activities has been that they help to create an atmosphere where young people feel relaxed and comfortable within the service. This has helped to encourage young people to approach any member of staff to help with any issue at any time.

## A safe space to learn from mistakes

It was recognized by members of staff that they were supporting young people in a process towards independence, and that there could be some mistakes made within this learning process. One member of staff said that they felt they took on a parental or 'big brother/big sister' role in that they were to guide a young person through the challenges they faced, but would be a consistent source of support for them while they learnt from their mistakes and grew as adults. They suggested that it was important to give young people some leeway and a chance to rant and/

or slam doors because of the, oftentimes, intense difficulties that they have faced in the past. They found that punishing minor indiscretions would not be productive and could actually close down opportunities for them to work together with the young person to help them cope/react to the same situation differently in future. Having the right attitude, and creating a safe space from which young people can learn and grow, was seen to foster respect from young people, leading to better engagement and a better friendly working relationship with young people.

## Working as a team

Members of staff consistently said that the positive professional relationships they had within the staff team were really important for providing consistent support to young people. For example, in situations where a member of staff was unsure about the best advice to give to a young person or the best way to respond to a situation, they were able to talk to other members of the team and get their thoughts. In turn, this meant that they were able to present the young person with different options they could choose from- increasing that young person's sense of control over the decisions they take.

Staff members also said that consistency across the staff team in enforcing rules is important. They suggested that inconsistency in applying and enforcing rules can create the potential for conflict, as young people feel it is unfair that other young people get some kind of 'special treatment' and they don't. Members of staff suggested that it is key for the staff team to come together regularly to discuss rules and how they are enforced, in order for the team to have the same approach and give young people a sense of consistency.

For some members of staff the use of the platform 'in-form' was what set Centrepoint apart from other

services they had worked for. Using the platform, they were able to record information about what young people were doing, the progress they had made and any concerns they had. This was particularly useful when a member of staff was on leave, as on their return they could get a thorough update from other members of staff about what has been happening with the young person they are supporting. In turn, this meant they were better able to give more relevant and up-to-date advice and support to that young person. One member of staff said that "we are all doing the same thing so it makes us better, it's not just one of us is really good at recording things, we are all doing the same thing and it's managed". They went on to suggest that because the team was able to record more information, and because this information could be combined with other sources of data (e.g. from the Police) through the 'in-form' platform, they were better able to protect young people from harm or exploitation.

**'We are all doing the same thing so it makes us better'**

**- Member of staff**

### Want to find out more?

Centrepoint is a national youth homelessness charity that provides housing and support for homeless young people. You can find out more about them via [www.centrepoin.org.uk](http://www.centrepoin.org.uk)

Centrepoint regularly carries out research about youth homelessness and you can access more information about these research projects via [www.centrepoin.org.uk/centrepoinresearch](http://www.centrepoin.org.uk/centrepoinresearch)

Additional reports from this research on supporting LGBT homeless youth are available by emailing [p.mullen1@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:p.mullen1@newcastle.ac.uk)

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