Preventing youth homelessness:

What works?

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Introduction

The provision of effective interventions for young people at risk of homelessness is essential if youth homelessness is to be reduced and prevented. As the political and public interest in the importance of preventing youth homelessness increases, it is imperative that well evidenced, cost-effective solutions are available.

There is a wide range of approaches to youth homelessness prevention across the country, and the quality and availability of services differs between local authorities. However, research on which approaches are evidenced to prevent youth homelessness effectively is scarce. This makes it difficult for decision makers and commissioners to choose which service solution would work best in their area within a context of reducing public sector budgets and increased pressure on services.

This review brings together and examines existing evaluations of a range of interventions which aim to prevent youth homelessness. In addition, 29 charities and service providers submitted written evidence to a call for evidence, adding a crucial front line perspective. The analysis spans primary prevention where families are supported before homelessness occurs; through to tertiary prevention for young people already experiencing homelessness. By examining the available research, the review explores what is evidenced to work effectively, what could work and what is unevidenced. An economic analysis is also presented which demonstrates the cost of youth homelessness to the public purse. While this review highlights key factors which are evidenced to be effective, it demonstrates that robust evidence of effectiveness is urgently needed in order to ensure high quality, cost-effective services are accessible.

Methodology

The evidence review sought to establish the key principles which have been evidenced to work effectively in the prevention of youth homelessness. To achieve this, a review of existing literature was conducted to find evaluations of interventions aiming to prevent youth homelessness.

A public call for evidence was conducted at the same time, seeking any further evidence on prevention programmes. Submissions were received from 29 organisations, including charities, local authorities and providers. Their evidence gives essential insight into front line practice and adds weight to the findings from the review of evaluations.

The review of literature was undertaken using online academic search engines as well as Google Scholar and was based on pre-defined search terms. These search terms were purposely wide ranging, in order to generate a comprehensive list of potential evidence. 36 studies were gathered through this process, which were then evaluated against pre-defined inclusion criteria to produce a final shortlist of relevant studies. The inclusion criteria were:

- *Type of study*: studies should evaluate the efficacy of preventative interventions and be based on primary data. This could be qualitative or quantitative and could be in the form of peer-reviewed literature, grey literature, service evaluations, economic studies or randomised control trials
- *Population of interest*: studies must relate to young people of secondary school age or above (11 plus), given that the evidence suggests this is the age at which problems develop that can eventually lead to homelessness
- *Geography*: While the initial focus was on evidence from the UK, given the prevalence of robust evidence from abroad, international studies were also included for context
- *Date of publication*: Originally we sought to only include studies published since 2010. However, due to a lack of evidence, the time frame was expanded to include evaluations from 2000 onwards
- *Outcomes of interest*: the intervention must aim to prevent youth homelessness but this will not be limited only to programmes which aim to return the young person home. It could also include studies whereby homelessness prevention is not the only outcome; e.g. increased family stability or entry to employment may be additional aims of the programmes

Only six of the original 36 studies met all of the relevant inclusion criteria. Each service took a very different approach to preventing youth homelessness. A summary of the five included programmes is shown in Table 1.

	The service	Date	Evaluation methods	Geography	Population of interest	Outcomes
1	An evaluation of a Nightstop service where homeless young people stay with a volunteer in the home while family reconciliation work is undertaken and/or more settled accommodation is secured	2011	Questionnaire completed by 18 young people and 23 hosts, telephone interviews with eight young people	Six Nightstop services around the UK	Young people aged 16-25	Tertiary prevention: supporting young people who are already experiencing homelessness; reduce rough sleeping, provide a safe place to stay, rebuild family relationships, and avoid long term/ repeat homelessness
2	An evaluation of the way in which Newcastle City Council and the council's arm's length management organisation, Your Homes Newcastle, work together to prevent homelessness	2011	Reviewed policy documents, 20 stakeholder interviews, focus groups with front-line staff, analysis of DCLG data	Newcastle	All age homelessness, but able to focus on the Young People's Service	Primary prevention: the Family Intervention Project harnessed improved family behaviour and reduced police involvement. Secondary and tertiary prevention: homelessness prevented due to pre-tenancy support, reduced rent arrears.
3	The Safe in the City programme comprising eight schemes across London, delivered by local agencies partnered with local authorities. Schemes included life-skills, family mediation and peer mentoring	2004	Interviews with 41 young people on the programme	Across eight London boroughs	Young people and their families	Primary prevention: tackling homelessness risk factors e.g. reducing social exclusion, improving family relationships
4	A whole family support service for families with a history of homelessness, aiming to prevent young people within the home becoming NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training)and experiencing homelessness themselves	2015	Qualitative interviews with families and stakeholders regarding their use of the whole family support model	Knowsley	Families with children aged 4-16	Primary prevention: increase family stability, recognise and tackle anti-social behaviour, help children understand their circumstance and choices, promote positive engagement with the education system.

5	The Safe Moves programme aimed to produce greater housing stability through a package of support including life-skills training, family mediation and support, peer mentoring and support to move into supported or independent accommodation where needed	2005	Interviews with young people, staff, peer mentors and parents alongside an analysis of monitoring data	Four local authorities: Rydale, Suffolk Coastal, Birmingham, Wolverhampton	Young people aged 13-19 and where appropriate, their families	Primary prevention: helping young people to remain at home, improved family stability Secondary prevention: reduced number of young people in insecure accommodation
6	The Safe and Sound project aims to tackle the challenges faced by young people resulting from housing instability and family breakdown. The project operated in Fife, Scotland.	2014	31 interviews with young people, parents, staff and referral and related agencies alongside a review of records and three workshops with staff and young people	Fife, Scotland.	Young people and their families	Primary prevention: Removing the risk of homelessness by working with young people and families to resolve disputes

These studies were evaluated to draw out the key factors presented in this report. They fall into the categories of *what works, what could work and what is unexplored*. These studies will be referred to throughout the report by their corresponding number as shown in the grid above.

In addition, contextual evidence is included throughout which illuminates the key factors identified by the evaluations. This includes evidence submitted by 29 organisations as part of a Centrepoint call for evidence launched in April 2016. Evidence was received from a range of organisations including charities, local authorities and providers. Their evidence gives essential insight into front line practice and adds weight to the findings from the review of evaluations.

This review may not include all service models with the capacity to prevent youth homelessness, but it does represent those services for which robust evidence on effectiveness is available. Based on the available evidence, this review summarises the key factors which have been evidenced to work effectively in preventing youth homelessness. It will also highlight types of intervention where less is known about their effectiveness.

Prevention: the current context

Legislative framework

It is estimated that around 83,000 young people receive help from homelessness services each year[1] and that as many as 150,000 ask their local authorities for help because they are homeless or at risk of homelessness.[2] By the time a young person presents as homeless to their local authority, they are often at a crisis point where their family relationships have broken down.

Homelessness legislation in England is centred on priority need as a means of establishing who is owed the main rehousing duty by the local authority. The criteria for being statutorily homeless - and therefore owed a duty by the local authority – is set out in the Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002 and includes:

- Young people aged 16/17 not owed a duty as a looked-after child or care leaver under the Children Act 1989
- Care leavers aged 18-21 who were in care between the ages of 16-18
- Over 21 and is vulnerable as a result of being in care, being in the armed forces, being in prison or who is fleeing violence or threats of violence

Local authorities record information on the discharge of duties under homelessness legislation. This data shows that since 2011/12, the number of 16-24 year old homeless applicants in England accepted as in priority need by their local authority has decreased from 17,380 to 13,270.[3]

Homelessness prevention in England is currently outside the statutory legal framework. Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local housing authorities have a duty to carry out a homelessness review and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results. While this is the responsibility of the local housing authority, the Act stipulates that social services should give reasonable assistance as required. Local authorities are also duty bound to record all cases where positive action succeeded or did not succeed in preventing or relieving homelessness.[4] However this data cannot be broken down by age, meaning the picture is less clear for youth homelessness. Research conducted in 2015, based on freedom of information requests, suggests that prevention and relief among young people is almost three times higher than in the official all-age data. 9.5 per 1000 16-24 year olds were offered prevention and relief support, compared with 3.7 per 1000 for all ages within the same local authorities.[5]

While prevention and relief may be valuable for many young people, it is not the same as ongoing support provided through a statutory duty. Local authorities are much less accountable for the support provided

via non-statutory channels and very little is known about the ways in which homelessness has been prevented or relieved, beyond top line statistics. Furthermore, there is evidence that homelessness prevention is sometimes being used as 'gatekeeping' to prevent people from making a homelessness application and that some applicants do not know whether they have been helped via the prevention route or the homelessness application route as their options have not been fully explained.[6]

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 also places a duty on local authorities to provide advice and appropriate assistance, even if the person is not in priority need. Worryingly however, an estimated 30,000 young people are turned away from their local authority every year in England and Wales.[7] In Wales, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 brought forward a strengthened prevention and relief duty. Welsh local authorities now have a duty to prevent homelessness for all eligible households threatened with homelessness within 56 days, irrespective of priority need, intentionality or local connection status.[8] For those who become or are already homeless, the local authority has a duty to relieve homelessness by helping to secure accommodation. The Homelessness Reduction bill proposes a similar legislative framework to be introduced in England to strengthen the statutory safety net.[9] This would ensure essential support is provided not just to those currently owed a statutory duty and would bring prevention onto a statutory footing.

The causes of youth homelessness

While the legislation places responsibility for preventing and relieving homelessness as the responsibility of the housing authority, the causes of youth homelessness go beyond housing. The evidence consistently shows that family relationship breakdown is the main driver of youth homelessness in the UK and that many factors escalate to the point at which a young person cannot remain with their family.[10] These reasons include young people thrown out for revealing their sexuality; involvement in offending; poverty; the introduction of a parent's new partner; not being in education, employment or training; poor mental health; and domestic violence.

The multitude of reasons for family relationship breakdown highlights the complexity of the issues faced by homeless young people and their families. This poses a real challenge to policy makers and those developing services to ensure there is a holistic response that can meet a range of needs and tackles multiple problems.

Young people who are forced to leave home face additional barriers which prevent them from successfully living independently due to their age. The

expectation that those under 25 are able to rely on parental support has ensured they are not eligible for support available to older people. Those aged 18 to 21 face the proposed cut to housing support if they are out of work and can only

claim the Shared Accommodation Rate if they are under 35, making the private rented sector unaffordable. The introduction of the Local Housing Allowance cap to social housing extends this inaccessibility to council owned properties.

Furthermore, young people are discriminated against in the job market, as those under 25 have been exempt from the new national living wage and those undertaking their first year as an apprentice are only eligible for an hourly rate of £3.30. Young people therefore face lower wages whilst the cost of bills, rent and council tax remains the same irrespective of age.

The conceptualisation of prevention

'Preventing youth homelessness' is a problematic concept. The logic of prevention requires a definition of what is to be prevented (i.e. homelessness), a specified intervention, and then the establishment of a causal connection between the intervention and the avoidance of homelessness.[11] This is difficult for social issues which are complex and evolve over time, often quickly and unpredictably. It is therefore extremely challenging to predict that an intervention will prevent homelessness before it is actually on the verge of occurring.

It is also important to distinguish between the different stages of homelessness and when an intervention might occur. This can be conceptualised as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention:

- Primary prevention focuses on *preventing new cases* of homelessness by working with the young person and their family well before they might experience homelessness
- Secondary prevention concentrates on the early identification and *treatment of current cases*; e.g. supporting a young person at the point of family breakdown, often when they present to their local authority
- Tertiary prevention is aimed at young people who are already homeless to *prevent entrenched homelessness* and often to reduce rough sleeping and repeat homelessness

Secondary prevention was the more prevalent conceptualisation of prevention across current service provision examined in this review. Examples of evidence on the efficacy of primary prevention were much less common, potentially because their effectiveness is much more difficult to assess. It may also reflect increasing pressure on local authority budgets; particularly funding for early intervention activities.

Is prevention better than cure? The cost of youth homelessness

Many prevention services focus on helping young people when they are in crisis and on the verge of homelessness. Centrepoint has recently completed separate research to explore the potential public savings that could be gained from preventing homelessness before young people reach such a crisis point. If the prevention at an earlier stage could produce significant financial savings for local authorities and central government, then there is a clear incentive to increase the funding for early intervention programmes for young people at risk of homelessness.

The study estimated the net public cost of a young person experiencing homelessness by comparing the public costs of NEET young people to young people who are both NEET and homeless.

There are significant differences between the costs incurred by young people under 18 and over 18, in terms of education and employment. Therefore two cost estimates were produced; one for the net cost of homelessness for 16-17 year olds and one for the net cost of homelessness for 18-24 year olds.

	NEET young person	NEET homeless young person	Cost of homelessness for NEET young person
	(a)	(b)	(b - a)
16/ 17 year olds	£3,300	£12,200	**£8,900**
18-24 year olds	£7,200	£19,400	**£12,200**

The research found that the cost of homelessness to the state is an estimated **£8,900 per year** for 16-17 year olds, which rises to **£12,200 per year** for 18-24 year olds.

It is estimated that 83,000 young people experience homelessness every year.[12] Based on Centrepoint data which shows that 58 per cent of homeless young people are NEET, the annual net public finance cost for all homeless NEET young people is estimated at **£556.5m per year** over and above the cost of NEET young people in general.

Cost of homelessness for NEET young people
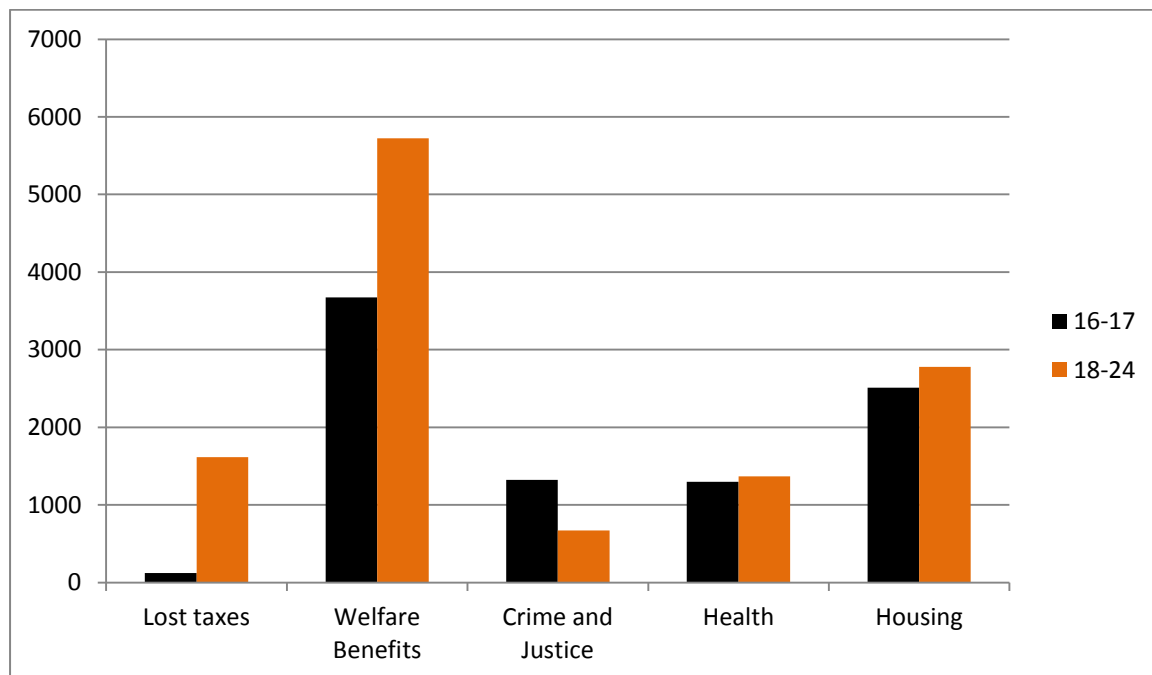
The graph above shows that welfare costs dominate the differential between the two groups, primarily due to the high housing costs for homeless young people. This provides strong evidence that we urgently need to move our focus towards 'primary prevention' to support young people and their families, before they reach a crisis point. Our prevention services need to be far more focussed on solving the environmental and social risk factors of youth homelessness that necessitate more costly crisis intervention if left unresolved.

This research gives a strong indication that preventing children from becoming homeless is likely to be far cheaper than supporting them once they leave the family home. Youth prevention services that help the young person whilst they remain with their family are likely to be cost-beneficial, if they can be delivered for less than £9,000 per child per year.

These estimates also show the rise in additional costs that occur once homeless young people reach 18, primarily due to increased welfare expenditure and loss of tax. Failing to prevent homelessness until young people are over 18 costs the state an estimated **37 per cent extra every year** compared to preventing it when they are 16 or 17.

This study shows that not only is prevention better than cure, but that early prevention is far better than late prevention

What works?

Common factors emerged as increasing the likelihood that an intervention would successfully prevent youth homelessness. These factors are multi-agency working, a single point of access to services, a whole family approach and positive professional relationships. Overall, these factors are based on principles which can be applied to a range of service provision, whether it is primary, secondary or tertiary prevention.

Multi-agency working

Multi-agency models are generally based upon three common principles; information sharing, joint decision making and coordinated intervention.[13] All of the evaluations examined evidence of the importance of multi-agency working, as did much of the supporting evidence. The combination and number of agencies involved varied across different interventions but the local authority housing department was almost always the central agency. This reflects the local housing authority's statutory responsibilities but also its potential to play a key

Working together – North Yorkshire County Council

"Working jointly to prevent homelessness among 16 and 17 year olds in North Yorkshire, a two tier authority, is achieved through joint commissioning and a joint protocol. Ongoing monitoring ensures the partnership remains effective. This is done through integrated homelessness prevention Hub Teams which include the local housing authority, children and young people's services, a voluntary sector support provider along with six supported accommodation providers, coordinated by Housing Options.

The interface is not completely without issue and a specific role troubleshoots and addresses partnership problems quickly, and shares any learning identified to continually improve the service and young people's experience of it."

Jill, Young Peoples Pathway Manager

Multi-agency approach reduces duplication and therefore increases the effectiveness of service provision. [14] It brings agencies together, which is essential for struggling families requiring a range of services. To be successful, clear actions must be agreed across the agencies involved to prevent families falling 'between the gaps'. Information sharing was posited

as central to this, as staff reported the importance of maintaining good communication across collaborations. Evidence submitted by Wokingham Council highlighted mechanisms for harnessing effective multi-agency working including

joint working conventions, joint protocols, service level agreements and technological platforms. Joint protocols in particular are commonly used; formal agreements which enable partners to understand their roles and should lead to better communication, increased and more effective joint working and better outcomes for clients.[15] Often the joint protocol relating to youth homelessness will be between housing authorities and children's services, sometimes alongside other key delivery partners. They represent a positive commitment to joint working and transparency with regard to the responsibilities and expectations of each agency.

The evidence highlighted local initiatives which have been developed in order to promote multi-agency working. The Active Inclusion Newcastle (AIN) approach was developed in response to restricting budgets alongside a growth in demand for information, advice and support for financial inclusion and homelessness prevention. The network brings partners together to do more with less and improves the coordination and consistency of information, advice and support in these areas by facilitating partners to help residents' financial inclusion and to prevent homelessness.

Recommendation: Central Government should implement a cross-departmental strategy on homelessness to co-ordinate the necessary action on prevention from multiple departments. This must be reflected at the local authority level

Single front door

The wider supporting evidence highlights that a 'single front door' hub approach is now being utilised by many local authorities as a gateway into the services a young person may require, depending on their situation. Sometimes this is a physical 'hub' building where agencies are co-located and facilitate access to other services within the pathway.

St Basils Youth Hub

St Basils' Youth Hub in Birmingham is a single front door into services for around 4,000 young people per year. Children's services and housing staff work within the Youth Hub on a full time basis, offering statutory services alongside wider services including prevention, health, training and employment, and benefit claims. This single front door provides a consistent approach for all young people, so they are not passed between services; a shared approach to safeguarding; use of a range of prevention tools including family mediation; and easy access for young people through a dedicated phone service and same day appointments for those in crisis. Furthermore, the data collected via the Youth Hub informs planning and the changes which are needed regarding certain groups. The prevention success rate in 2015/16 was 84 per cent, based on a successful resolution of the issue and no return for advice on homelessness within six months.[16].

The single front door approach is important given the often chaotic nature within which this group of young people engage with services. Evidence shows that pathways into homelessness are non-linear and involve continuous interaction between home and homelessness; for example, in one study the majority of young people had entered situations of 'hidden' homelessness, often on multiple occasions, prior to accessing services for the first time.[17] Many young people do not consider themselves as homeless during that transition period and so do not actively seek help. A single front door approach may mean a young person's housing situation is picked up by their local council, even if young people initially engage through another youth service. It also enables a multi-faceted service response, which is essential, given that homelessness is not just a housing problem. Much like multi-agency working, it enables practitioners to co-ordinate a holistic package of support across a range of services and reduces the risk of a young person falling between services.

A whole-family approach

The primary driver of youth homelessness is the breakdown of family relationships, which often stems from complex issues affecting multiple people within the family unit. The evidence highlights the importance of a whole family approach in order to tackle those complex issues. This requires a complex service response which often involves multiple agencies drawing on multiple funding streams. The Troubled Families programme is one attempt at streamlining these complexities by providing a holistic service response co-ordinated by one practitioner. The evidence review included a range of prevention services and a whole-family approach was incorporated to varying degrees; however, it was attributed as a key factor in the success of the interventions where it was an integral feature.

The whole family approach enables families to gain support as a unit, while recognising the importance of working with parents and children on a one-to-one basis. Knowsley Family Support took an entirely family-orientated approach, this work included;

- Advice for parents on finance, housing or employment
- Opportunities for the family to engage in activities together
- Referring children and young people to specialist mental wellbeing services
- Addressing children and young people's education needs through securing new school placements and support with homework
- Improving parents' engagement with their child's school[18]

This led to improved mental health, better family communication, stable housing, increased family resilience and family stability. [19]

The Safe in the City programme comprised family support (alongside employability and personal development solely for the young person). The evaluation of this service found that young people who only engaged with the employability and personal development strands of the programme (and not the family support) reported poorer outcomes; the reduction in levels of social exclusion was small and in some cases did not happen at all. Family support was evidenced to act as a catalyst for change in other areas. [20]

> *"Me and my mum have been a lot closer since we started coming down here, I can talk to her now. Once a week we go out shopping together, or go to the pictures or whatever. Just spend a bit more time together, whereas I never used to see much of her."* (Young person)[21]

Those families which engaged in this strand felt more able to cope with difficulties at home, even where things had not changed. Young people also reported that this approach provided insight into the other issues going on at home with their family members. These were issues which they may not have been privy to but that were affecting family dynamics in a negative way. The actions and attitudes of parents also changed, for example being less strict and more willing to compromise with the young person. [22]

Taking a whole-family approach can be challenging, particularly in securing the engagement of the wider family members at a time when relationships are fraught. However, this approach has the potential to address the complexity of problems faced by families leading to homelessness. It rests on a premise that to holistically support a vulnerable young person, attention must be paid to the networks of support available to them.[23]

Family support is most effective when put in place as early as possible, before relationships have reached breaking point and problems have become entrenched. This would be before a young person presents as homeless. The evidence submitted to this review highlighted that many of the young people who present as homeless are already in contact with services or that members of their family are known to services. This suggests that there are opportunities within the system to identify the needs of a young person and their family early, which is essential if family support is to be effective.

Recommendation: Central Government should ensure that holistic early family support, regardless of the child or young person's age, is championed in the government's Life Chances Strategy

Positive professional relationships

Positive professional relationships between staff and service users, both young people and families, were cited as the key ingredient to success. Key workers in at one service were regarded as a friend, counsellor and expert rolled into one.[24] For the young people and families who are the most disengaged and vulnerable, having a positive relationship with a professional enables them to build resilience and self-esteem which is essential to positive engagement. Good practice was evidenced where practitioners successfully supported parents to improve parenting skills, e.g. helping them to create home environments within which school attendance and attainment were valued and homework completed.[25] [26] [27]

> *"I think coming here must have changed me, because the way things were going before that, I don't know what I would have done. Things were just getting so bad; I might have turned to drugs or something … but she [keyworker] showed me that there's hope. She tried to help me and she gave me hope and something to live for, something to work towards"* (Young person) [28]

These evaluations also flagged situations in which relationships with professionals do not flourish. This included high staff turnover and service fatigue, whereby young people and their families had engaged with multiple services over a long period of time and were frustrated with having to build trust with yet another worker. It also included young people feeling as though staff had taken their parents' side. Staff must also be mindful of young people's pre-existing perceptions of services which may pose a barrier.

Positive professional relationships are critical regardless of the service model, and staff should be supported and encouraged to proactively develop these relationships carefully. Training is crucial and certain skills and qualities should be harnessed including trust, respect, acceptance and understanding, stability and consistency, good communication and proactive problem solving.[29] By fostering positive professional relationships, young people will be at the centre of a network of people that they trust and can turn to for help. This is especially important for those homeless young people who have experienced family breakdown and no longer have the support of that network.

Recommendation: Local authorities should assess levels of staff turnover in teams working directly with vulnerable families. A strategy must be implemented to address the causes of staff turnover and to put tangible solutions in place

What could work

While some approaches showed promising signs, the evidence base was patchy. Further research is needed to establish the best ways of implementing these approaches and their effectiveness in different contexts.

The different forms of mediation

Various mediation models are used to support young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The evidence highlighted that mediation is widely used by both local authorities and providers. However, there has been a decline in the proportion of local authorities offering mediation services from 92 per cent in 2014 to 77 per cent in 2015.[30]

The evidence covered various forms of mediation, implemented at different points in the young person's pathway into homelessness. Some mediation was offered directly by local authority housing officers, others by externally commissioned independent mediators. Sometimes it may be put in place while the young person is still at home, sometimes it is once they have presented as homeless. Mediation is therefore a diverse service model and different versions will be more effective than others. However, a lack of robust evidence on the different forms of mediation implemented with this client group makes it difficult to draw final conclusions. Though the signs are promising, high quality mediation is costly and a stronger evidence base is needed which demonstrates its effectiveness. Based on current evidence, there are some overarching lessons:

1. Mediation should be impartial and not solely focussed on return home

Previous Centrepoint research found that 74 per cent of local authorities in England would offer mediation as a means of supporting families where a young person is at risk of homelessness.[31] However, this research raised concerns that mediation is sometimes undertaken by housing officers who are not trained family mediators and who cannot be impartial because they work for the local authority which has a vested interest in the outcome.

Some local authorities commission their mediation services to independent, trained mediators. However, this is also not without problems. One study found that independent mediators felt that the local authority wanted a 'quick fix solution' to youth homelessness and that mediation was used as a tool to assist young people to return to their parent.[32] Another found that commissioned independent mediators and the local authority have different aims. While the local authority may prioritise 'hard outcomes' i.e. return home, the independent mediator may prioritise 'soft outcomes' i.e. improved relationships.[33] Previous Centrepoint research found that return home was the most commonly measured mediation outcome; an outcome that can be recorded in the homelessness prevention and relief data while other softer outcomes cannot.[34] It is difficult to overcome this difference but not impossible; a clear discussion around priorities

and reasons behind them when a service is commissioned, as well as finding ways to productively bridge gaps is essential.[35] Furthermore, return home should not be the sole outcome counted by mediation programmes. Instead outcomes should reflect the complexity of the issues faced by families and, at the very least, adopt a distance travelled approach. Evidence submitted by Cyrenians demonstrates the use of outcomes relating to improved relationships and increased life skills as well as return home.

2. Mediators should work closely with other delivery agencies to provide a holistic package of support

The main aim of mediation tends to be the resolution of relationship difficulties between the young person and their family, whether they are able to return home or not.[36] However, many of those utilising mediation due to family breakdown are likely to have additional needs which mediators alone cannot address. Furthermore, mediators have a defined role to operate within and if mediators start offering wider support, their role as neutral facilitator may be compromised.[37]

The Safe Moves programme *o*ffered externally commissioned mediation as part of a package of interventions and concluded that take up of mediation was greatest in areas where mediators worked very closely with colleagues at other agencies.[38] This close working relationship between staff meant they could work together to tailor service provision to meet the needs of the family. It was cited as important that mediation services adopt a flexible approach, for example, a bespoke counselling service was developed in one area in response to young people's needs. [39]

> *"They just help you talk and listen to each other…get your way around arguing by talking and hearing each other, and that works really well rather than just being told to stop arguing… Its solving the problem before it starts really"* (Young person)[40]

3. Mediation is most effective when implemented early

By the time a young person presents as homeless, the situation at home is likely to have reached crisis point. One study 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 14 per cent thought it would be useful once they had become homeless.[41]

This is the point at which secondary prevention is needed because primary prevention has been missed. However, the evidence suggests that mediation is most effective if implemented earlier than this point, as primary prevention. This was also iterated in the evidence submitted by local authorities, homelessness charities and mediators alike.

Mediation must be offered before the relationship problems between the young person and their family are too entrenched. Intervening late makes it difficult to secure the consent and engagement of the two parties; this is particularly difficult where the young person has already left the family home.[42] In these cases, 'pre-mediation' work by support workers may need to be done in order to prepare young people for mediation with their families. Evidence submitted by St Mungo's also highlighted that in the experience of mediators, mediation is more likely to fail in cases where a parent has a new partner, where parents or children have problems with drugs or alcohol, or where a lack of parenting skills exposes children and young people to risk.

From a mediator: what is needed for successful mediation

Alison, an Intergenerational Mediator with over 12 years' experience highlights the following components of successful mediation:

- Work with young people and families **before crisis**; that is when people have the time and head space to reflect and make positive changes
- Young people and families need a **willingness** to change things for the better
- Young people and families need the **capacity and readiness to engage**. This may be limited for example by substance misuse or mental health issues or it may just be the 'wrong time' for mediation
- Work with young people and their families for **as long as is needed** and for the sessions not be restricted by time constraints
- To be able to **work with other important adults** in the young person's life if appropriate
- For the mediator to have **as many skills and techniques as possible** to make their work with the young person as effective as possible

Overall mediation has the potential to reconcile family relationships, but quality and provision are patchy. Mediation must not be used as a means of encouraging a quick return home when a family may be experiencing problems which require a more comprehensive service response.

Recommendation: Central Government should conduct a national review of mediation services and the efficacy of different approaches, with a view to ensuring that effective mediation is available in every local authority

Access to advice and information

Timely access to information and advice was cited as a form of primary prevention by signposting families to direct help and support. It is a key feature of the Positive Pathway Framework[43] which is being implemented by increasing numbers of local authorities[44]. The Framework usefully places the information and advice in context with a clear aim of young people and families being

empowered to plan transitions to independent living without support from specialist services, and understanding the link between housing choice and financial/ employment situation.[45]

Local authorities are required to provide information and advice to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and the evidence submitted to the review by local authorities highlighted recognition of the importance of advice and information as well as proactive steps taken. One local authority highlighted that information and advice is central to their positive pathway and is available through housing options but that tailored advice is also available to young people with a holistic assessment of their needs.

The wider evidence also highlighted longstanding concerns about the inadequacy and poor quality of advice given to non-statutory homeless households.[46] One study found that 15 per cent of homeless people surveyed regarding seeking advice from a local authority received only general advice and 27 per cent received no advice at all.[47]

> "When I was homeless…I went to the council, and I was under 18 so they told me to go to social services so I went there, and then at first they refused to help me but I kept on going there. I was like 'I'm only 16 and I have nowhere to go', and then they put me into St Mungo's." (St Mungo's young person, evidence submission)

No evidence was found on the effectiveness of different types of homelessness information and advice. Studies refer to 'information and advice' as a singular thing and there is little consideration of the different formats or sources as well as different audiences. This reflects that the Housing Act 1996 does not go into any significant detail about the steps a local authority should take to fulfil their duty to provide advice and information about homelessness.[48]

Specialist advice and information: Stonewall

Funded by London Councils, Stonewall's Advice Team provides specialist housing advice, support and advocacy to the LGBT communities through a telephone helpline open each weekday and a number of drop-in surgeries across London.

The service has retained the Advice Quality Standard for Housing with Casework. In 2014-2015 there were a total of 1,344 Stonewall Housing beneficiaries; an increase from the previous year's 1,175. The service successfully placed 93 rough sleepers from across London in accommodation.

The majority of their advice clients (70 per cent) identify as BME, and 31 per cent have a disability. The percentage of transgender clients is rising (8 per cent), as is the number of over 50s. A quarter were homeless (10 per cent sleeping rough, 15 per cent hidden homeless), 40 per cent had experienced harassment or violence and 33 per cent had experienced domestic abuse. For the majority, their housing problem is directly related to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Advocacy services are also key sources of help for young people who are at risk of homelessness who may not have the support of a trusted adult family member. Having an adult who can advocate for them and support them to navigate the housing system is key. However, the evidence suggests that only one in five young people who seek help because of homelessness have access to dedicated and independent advocacy services.[49] Like mediation, this should be independent of the local authority as the advocate may need to support the young person to challenge local authority decisions as well as to help co-ordinate multiple service responses.

The evidence review highlighted that while some local authorities provide high quality information and advice services, the current legislation and a lack of guidance mean that it is difficult to hold those authorities failing to do this to account.

Recommendation: Central Government should introduce a homelessness prevention duty and a stronger advice and information duty

Recommendation: Local authorities should signpost all young people, irrespective of priority need, intentionality or local connection status, who present at housing services for advice and information or make a homelessness application to an independent advocacy service

Emergency accommodation

Emergency accommodation is often used as a response to homelessness but may be defined as a form of tertiary prevention; supporting those young people who have become homeless as early as possible in order to reduce harm.[50] For some young people, remaining at home is not a safe or viable option and they require an accommodation solution.

Emergency accommodation was often cited across the evidence as a means of preventing homelessness, particularly anecdotally by those organisations working directly with young people. However, there is a lack of robust evidence on the efficacy of emergency accommodation as a means of preventing homelessness in the long term and also improving other outcomes. One study of Nightstop provides some crucial insight.[51] Nightstop is a model of emergency accommodation where young people stay with a volunteer host whilst family reconciliation work is undertaken and/ or more settled accommodation secured. The evaluation found that Nightstop prevented rough sleeping, improved stability and wellbeing, and in some cases hosts helped young people to access education and employment.[52] More widely, emergency accommodation such as Nightstop has been praised for keeping young people out of poor quality accommodation and also out of the homelessness system and wider social influences and networks they would be exposed to within other forms of accommodation.[53] Despite these positive indicators, 49 per cent of areas do not

have a Nightstop or similar scheme.[54] A stronger evidence base is needed to establish a case for increased investment in emergency accommodation, which acts as a lifeline for some young people who might otherwise be forced to sleep rough.

Three quarters of young people using Nightstop had not lived in settled accommodation immediately before they accessed Nightstop, indicating that Nightstop is not the first rung on the 'homelessness ladder'.[55] Given that these young people are further along the pathway into homelessness, it may be much more difficult to support them to return home through measures such as mediation. Data on young people leaving Nightstop services in 2010 showed that the largest proportion (36 per cent) were placed in supported housing or lodgings and that just one fifth (21 per cent) returned to the family home.[56]

For those young people whose homelessness has not been prevented early through primary prevention, emergency accommodation options represent a vital safety net. It is essential that good tertiary prevention options are available in all areas to ensure that young people do not have to sleep in unsafe places.

Recommendation: Local authorities should have youth specific emergency/ temporary accommodation that is suitable for young people requiring respite from the family home while an assessment is undertaken and appropriate support is put in place for the whole family

What's unexplored?

The evidence base on in-school interventions is particularly weak, despite being an approach used by numerous charities and local authorities.

Primary prevention in schools

Much of the evidence around primary prevention within the review was based on interventions within schools. It remains a popular approach to universal provision; aiming to equip school children with the understanding and knowledge they might need should they find themselves facing homelessness. This approach removes stigma and removes the difficulty of identifying those young people likely to become homeless based on risk factors. It gives all children in a classroom access to the same intervention.

Several of the organisations which submitted evidence to the review operate prevention programmes within schools. The format may differ but the central aim of schools programmes is to raise awareness of the causes of homelessness. Often this involves recruiting formally homeless young people as mentors or educators to talk about their experience of homelessness. One local authority which had developed an education programme reported difficulty in accessing schools and securing appropriate time to deliver the programme. As it is at the discretion of the school which may already have a packed timetable, this type of programme may struggle to get the necessary time. Nor does this represent national coverage; these programmes are usually offered by charities or local partners and so not every schoolchild will have the opportunity to engage in this kind of learning.

There is a lack of evidence on the impact of school-based programmes on youth homelessness. Efficacy is largely measured qualitatively, using participant feedback mechanisms, often at the end of the session. This only gives a snapshot of the young person's understanding immediately following the intervention, but a real lack of any longer term effect. Robustly evidencing the effectiveness of school-based programmes is a challenge and would likely involve comparing the outcomes of peer groups who have experienced these interventions with a control group[57] as a longitudinal study. Given what is known about the causes of youth homelessness and the complex needs of families which experience it, it is unlikely that a school-based workshop alone would prevent youth homelessness, though it may provide young people with the information necessary to access more targeted support if they required it.

Research is needed to ensure practice in schools is evidence based and as effective as it can be. While it may not have the same potential to prevent homelessness as more intensive targeted support, this is not its aim. At the primary prevention level, access to advice and information is essential, but this must be done in an effective way and evidenced as such.

What's needed?

Conclusions

The report is based on a systematic review of the most robust evidence on approaches to youth homelessness prevention. It highlights the diversity of services aiming to prevent youth homelessness and the different ways in which prevention is conceptualised. The focus of both policy and practice is towards the secondary/ tertiary end of the spectrum, supporting those young people who are on the verge of homelessness or who have recently become homeless. This is reflected in the evidence base, which is patchy around primary approaches to prevention. A central focus of primary homelessness prevention continues to be work in schools, however there is a dearth of evidence on this. There is more evidence around early family support more widely, though the aim of this is often not specifically to prevent youth homelessness. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence on the relative efficacy of different approaches. This is especially difficult for commissioners who, when faced with restricting budgets, must consider which intervention will be most effective in preventing youth homelessness.

Mediation, information and advice, and emergency accommodation showed promising signs. However, robust evidence on their effectiveness is urgently needed, particularly given that these services are commonly used by local authorities. Mediation in particular is commonly used by housing authorities as a means of reconciling homeless young people with their families.[58] Research is needed to evaluate different approaches to mediation to build the case for high quality mediation delivered by trained, independent mediators at the earliest possible point.

While information is a central, statutory duty the review found little evidence on the different forms of information and advice. Information and advice and the way in which it is consumed are rapidly changing, particularly in light of new technologies. Research on how information and advice can be made accessible to young people at risk of homelessness and their families is needed. Critically, this should include the impact that types of advice and information have on people's attitudes and actions; whether accessing it makes a difference and ultimately leads to the prevention of homelessness or not.

Five principles were evidenced as key to successfully preventing youth homelessness; multi-agency working, a single point of access into services, a whole-family approaches and positive professional relationships between staff and clients. These elements were repeatedly referenced across the evaluations and had the most substantial evidence behind them; furthermore, they have the potential to span primary, secondary and tertiary approaches.

Given the complexity of problems faced by families where youth homelessness occurs, the government and local authorities must fundamentally reimagine the services they provide.

A package of tailored support which goes beyond housing is urgently needed; going beyond traditional department boundaries and funding arrangements towards a cross-organisational approach.

A shift in resources from crisis intervention to early help is needed, investing in approaches such as holistic family support. While such a move would require upfront investment in the early stages, preventing homelessness occurring in the first place is the only sustainable solution for improving a young person's life chances and securing financial savings for taxpayers over the long term.

Recommendations

Central government should:

- Implement a cross-departmental strategy on homelessness to co-ordinate the necessary action on prevention from multiple departments. This must be reflected at the local authority level

- Conduct a national review of mediation services and the efficacy of different approaches, with a view to ensuring that effective mediation is available in every local authority

- Ensure that holistic early family support, regardless of the child or young person's age, is championed in the government's Life Chances Strategy

- Introduce a homelessness prevention duty and a stronger advice and information duty

Local authorities should:

- Signpost all young people, irrespective of priority need, intentionality or local connection status, who present at housing services for advice and information or make a homelessness application to an independent advocacy service

- Have youth specific emergency/temporary accommodation that is suitable for young people requiring respite from the family home while an assessment is undertaken and appropriate support is put in place for the whole family

- Assess levels of staff turnover in teams working directly with vulnerable families. A strategy must be implemented to address the causes of staff turnover and to put tangible solutions in place

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