

# ***Crumbling Futures: Why vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds need more support as they move into adulthood.***

*A briefing for Director of Children's Services*

For too many children on the edge of adulthood, support is inadequate to address their needs. Often it is not available when they need it or even when they do receive help it is often short term and does not address their needs. As a result their engagement with children's social care is infrequently one-off and thousands of children in England exist in the 'revolving door' children's social care system moving in and out of support from the local authority. Unlike for children in care, children in need and on the 'edge of care' are not entitled to support to help them transition into adulthood. Resultantly, their outcomes can be extremely poor.

The Department for Education have now launched their review into the educational outcomes of children in need of help or support. This review is to be welcomed, but The Children's Society are clear that this review must look at their wider outcomes such as employment, health, housing and safeguarding needs, and transitions for 16 and 17 year olds into adulthood. Importantly, the review must pose a range of recommendations for change.

## **What is a 'child in need'?**

Local authorities have a duty to safeguard the welfare of children in their area by providing an appropriate level of services for any child it deems to be 'in need'.

Where there are concerns that a child is at risk of significant harm, the local authority is under a duty under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to undertake an investigation. They must also develop a Child Protection Plan which brings together professionals and the family of the child to agree a set of actions to mitigate the risks that child is facing.

## **How many children are vulnerable in England?**

**57,570** The number of 16 or 17 year old of children awaiting an assessment, 'in need' or on a 'child protection plan' in England in 2016/17.

**46%** The number of 16 and 17 year olds who were referred to children's services but receive no support.

**240,000** The estimated number of 16 and 17 year old children in England who are experiencing 5 or more vulnerabilities in their lives. The vast majority of this group will not be receiving support from children's social care.

## **What do we know about vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds?**

- There are more vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds than the number being supported by local authority children's services (240,000 vs 58,000, respectively).
- Of those being supported by children's services, 35% will have been referred within the preceding 12 or 24 months.

**35%**

of 16 and 17 year olds who are referred to children's services have also been referred in the preceding 12 or 24 months.

**1 in 3**

referrals of 16 and 17 year olds to children's services come from the police

Less than

**3%**

of closed cases of children in need aged 16-17 get transferred to adult services

- They are more likely to be vulnerable because of issues such as their own mental ill-health and risks which can occur outside of the family environment such as sexual and other forms of exploitation and substance misuse.
- 16 and 17 year olds are the most likely of any age group to be referred to children's services by the police.
- Of those referred to children's services, almost half (46%) receive no support; and of that number, 14% won't even receive an assessment of their needs.
- As few as 3% of children in need are referred into adult services when they turn 18 often meaning that all support ceases after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## What about their outcomes?

**Poorer educational attainment** 13% achieved no GCSE passes compared with 2% of all other children. (Based on response from 14 local authorities)

**More likely to be NEET** Being known to children's services as a 'child in need' is one of the biggest determinants of becoming NEET. Our analysis has found that young people who experience 5 or more vulnerabilities are more than twice as likely to be NEET in early adulthood. [Data from the DfE](#) has found that 18% of former children in need were NEET.

16 -17 year olds affected by vulnerabilities such as poor health, low life satisfaction, growing up in poverty, or those who feel useless are at least twice as likely to become NEET at 18-19.

**Higher risk of homelessness** 3 times as many former children in need present as homeless at age 18-19 than former children in care. (Based on response from 19 local authorities)

## Recommendations for change

1. The Government must use the 'child in need' review to propose changes for how 16 and 17 year olds are supported into adulthood, to ensure that they are able to reach their full potential. This must address their education, health, housing, and employment needs as well as safeguarding issues.
2. Children aged 16 and 17 years old who are referred to children's services should not be dismissed without an assessment of their needs, as even where they are not at immediate risk of harm they are likely to experience a number of disadvantages that will persist into adulthood. When they are assessed as 'in need', support must be consistently provided until they are at least 18.
3. Transition planning should be made a statutory requirement in every child in need and child protection plan for children aged 16 and 17.
4. Following the Local Government Association's analysis of the emerging £2bn shortfall in children's services budgets by 2020, the Government should allocate adequate additional resources to local authorities in order to allow them to meet their duty (under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) to support children in need in their area, and to support the transition of children in need into adulthood.

## What now?

- You could undertake an internal review of the outcomes of young people who were previously classified as children in need when they were 16/17.
- Get in touch - we know this is a complex issue with no easy solutions. We're keen to work with local authorities to consider how systems and processes can be redesigned to ensure better outcomes for these young people.

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