

Crumbling Futures

Why vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds need more support as they move into adulthood

Summary Report

March 2018

The
Children's
Society

No child
should feel
alone

**SERIOUSLY
AWKWARD**



Introduction

Being 16 and 17 can be awkward, but it's seriously awkward that too often vital support falls short for nearly 58,000 vulnerable teenagers – and can disappear overnight at 18.

Our research has found that many vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds need more support as they move into adulthood, as their outcomes look bleak at the moment.

At 16 and 17 young people are making important choices about what they want to do with their lives. Even with supportive adults in their lives, it's hard for children this age to prepare to juggle new responsibilities like housing, education, employment, budgeting and relationships. Alone, it's almost impossible.

All children need support to help and advise them with the choices they face, and for children who are experiencing serious difficulties and require extra help, children's services have a duty to step in and provide that support.

But we know that for many 16 and 17 year olds who are referred to children's services, support is too short term, does not help them

prepare for adulthood and can disappear overnight when they reach 18. Our research has found that 16 and 17 year olds who are vulnerable are likely to remain vulnerable – and in many cases, their needs will intensify in early adulthood, having a serious impact on their ability to reach their potential.

In June 2015, we launched our Seriously Awkward campaign to highlight the fact that vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds are not getting the same protections to keep them safe, healthy and happy as younger children are. This report builds on that campaign, and shows the profound impact this lack of support can have when these children turn 18. The report also makes the case for better, longer term support for this group to help them through this difficult transition to adulthood.

The support available

In this report, we specifically focus on 16 and 17 year olds referred to children's services and assessed as being a child in need or who become subject of a child protection plan.

Children who require extra support to develop and stay healthy are some of the most vulnerable children in society, and they are officially known by children's services as 'children in need'. These children face complex problems like mental ill health, poverty, alcohol abuse and domestic violence. On 31 March 2017 there were 316,760 young people recorded as 'children in need' who were not looked after, 57,570 of whom were 16 or 17.¹

The difficulties these young people experience as they move into adulthood are often similar to those experienced by children who were in the care of local authorities. However unlike care leavers,

who receive some extra support as they move into adulthood, these children are not entitled to additional support post 18. Our emerging evidence shows that they are at risk of experiencing poor outcomes in early adulthood – such as low educational attainment, increased NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates and homelessness.

We are concerned that due to the difficulties 16 and 17 year olds experience in their lives, the limited support they receive as children in need, and the lack of statutory support once they turn 18, they become unseen and unsafe, with an uncertain future.

Nearly
58,000
16–17 year olds are
'children in need'

The duty of local authorities to safeguard vulnerable children

Local authorities have a duty under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard the welfare of children in their area by providing an appropriate level of services for any child they deem to be 'in need'.

Where there are concerns that a child is at risk of significant harm, the local authorities have 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.

'I took an overdose and... I was trying to end it because I thought in my head what was the point in living? Because why aren't the Government helping us?'

Young person, age 18





The issues

The issues that 16 and 17 year olds face are complex. As well as facing issues at home such as emotional abuse and neglect, they are more likely than younger children to experience vulnerabilities associated with themselves, such as:

- Mental health problems
- Drug use
- Going missing from home
- Sexual or other forms of exploitation
- Domestic violence

‘You get given loads and loads more responsibilities and more decisions to make, and sometimes you get stressed and the stress makes you develop anxiety and depression and stuff.’

Young person

The scale of vulnerability

The true scale of how many children require help as they move into adulthood is not known.

Our analysis of the Understanding Society survey has found that one in five 16 and 17 year olds experience five or more issues in their lives – this equates to 240,000 older teenagers in England. These vulnerabilities include poverty, feeling like a failure, taking illegal substances and not feeling supported by family. A smaller group of around 58,000 16 or 17 year olds are recognised as having additional needs by their local authority and receive support as a child on a child protection plan or a child in need. This does not include the number of children who are looked after.

Issues that 16 and 17 year olds experience are likely to remain or even intensify as they move into

adulthood. While any child can experience a number of risks and vulnerabilities during their transition to adulthood, young people with the highest number of risk factors and vulnerabilities are less likely to report that they have resolved them as they reach adulthood.

Thirty one percent of all young people either experience the same level of vulnerability throughout their adolescence and 33% experienced an increase in vulnerabilities from 16–17 to when they were 18–19.

Further information on our methodology can be found in our full report.

1 in 5

16 and 17 year olds experience five or more issues in their lives

Interactions with children's services

Our analysis has found that 1 in 16 young people aged 16 and 17 are experiencing complex issues in their lives which require them to be referred to local authorities for help.

The highest number of referrals to children's services come from the police (1 in 3). This is higher than for children aged 0 to 15 (1 in 4). The second highest source of referral for both age groups is schools, although referrals for 16 and 17 year olds from education providers are lower in number than for children 0 to 15 (15% compared to 20%). These statistics probably highlight that some of the most vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds may not be in education, employment and training, and may be falling through the cracks between services.

46%
of 16 and 17 year olds referred to children's services receive no further action

Our research confirmed what we often see in our direct work: that for many of these children it is not their first encounter with local services. Our analysis found that 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. Re-referral suggests that the problems a young person is experiencing are not improving or new ones arise.

Older teenagers are not always being assessed, or not receiving support following an assessment. Forty six percent of 16 and 17 year olds referred to children's services receive no further action – 14% of young people referred do not even receive a proper assessment. Of those who do receive support, for around 40% it lasts for less than three months.

It is rare for children's services to transfer cases to adult services.

Only 2% of closed cases of children in need aged 16 – and 1% of closed cases of children in need aged 17 – get transferred to adult services. In addition some young people who are currently aged 16 may be transferred to adult services once they become 17.

'Sometimes they expect you to act like an adult but then when it fits them you're still a child. So a lot of the time the individual might not necessarily know what they're meant to do or anything like that, because they don't know where they quite fit in because they're always messed around. It's like am I an adult or am I not?'

Young person

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

Outcomes

Unfortunately, for many children their unmet need at 16 or 17 and the very limited transition support they receive means that their outcomes in early adulthood can be extremely poor.

Educational attainments

Responses from 14 authorities to our freedom of information request found that 13% of children in need did not pass any of their GCSEs – this is significantly worse than all 17 year olds in those areas (2%) and worse than children in care (9%).

NEET and claiming benefits

Our analysis of Understanding Society has found that those who experienced the following vulnerabilities at age 16 or 17 were more likely to be NEET at age 18 or 19:

- **Poor health**
(3.1 times more likely)
- **Low satisfaction with life**
(2.5 times more likely)
- **Experiencing household poverty**
(2.2 times more likely)
- **Feeling useless**
(2.2 times more likely)
- **Having caring responsibilities**
(1.7 times more likely)

Homelessness

From the responses we received from 19 authorities, out of all 18 to 20 year olds who presented as homeless, former children in need made up around 12%, and looked after children around 4%.

The percentage who presented as homeless that were known to children's services across the board is worrying.

'Well, in my school it is pick your options, GCSE option, in Year 9. So you pick two in Year 9, two in Year 10 and GCSE in Year 11. And obviously in Year 9 I missed a lot because I had really bad depression and anxiety and it was too much of a struggle to get out of bed in the morning and actually go and then my crying. So I never wanted to go in so I missed quite a lot'

Young person, age 19



Conclusion

Recent changes to legislation acknowledge that some vulnerable groups of adolescents – such as children in care, young carers and disabled young people – require support as they move into adult life.

Although there is still a long way to go to ensure that children in care, young carers and disabled children, receive the support they need, these changes are welcome and necessary. However, as our report shows, there is a much wider group of young people who miss out on extra support, or lose it altogether as they move into adulthood.

Our report shows that children who are identified as in need of extra support by professionals are often not acknowledged, and opportunities to provide timely help that could make a real difference as they move into adult life are missed. For some, this help may be about strengthening the family and support networks around a child. For others it will be about building the skills needed for independent life, or ensuring that they have the resources to meet their physical needs and access education or training. Support shouldn't stop as

these children turn 18 – their needs do not suddenly disappear as the clock hits midnight at the end of their formal childhood.

The Government's recently announced review of provision for children in need is a welcome and much needed step. Our research provides evidence that this review should be broader, including looking at transition to adulthood for these children as one of the areas that requires urgent review and attention.

Given that councils are increasingly struggling to provide help to all but the most serious cases where a child is at risk of harm, the review should include an examination of how appropriate support can be funded in the context of dwindling financial resources available to local authorities.



Recommendations

We believe that changes in responses to children in need aged 16 and 17, are urgently needed – and that turning 18 should not be a cliff edge to accessing services. Children should not be cut off from support where they are still in need of statutory intervention to thrive and flourish in adulthood.

We recommend that:

1. The Government must use the children in need review to propose changes for how 16 and 17 year olds who are children in need 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 addressing safeguarding issues. Where they identify gaps in the evidence base, the review should set out an approach to delivering the additional research and analysis needed.

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. Local authorities should provide a holistic assessment of needs for this age, which should include a focus on risks, mental health needs, family relationships and risk of poverty.

3. Transition planning should be made a statutory requirement in every child in need and child protection plan for children aged 16 and 17. Young people should be given clear information and coordinated support to resolve the issues identified.

4. The Government should allocate adequate additional resources to local authorities in order to allow them to meet their duty (under the Section 17 of the Children Act 1989) to support children in need in their area, and to support their transition of children in need into adulthood.

5. Local authorities, with local partners, should design and plan services around transition, and should consider the extension of key services – for example mental health services, homelessness support with access to education, employment and training – up to the ages of 25. This should be done in partnership with the voluntary sector and central government, learning from examples of what works in practice both in England and Wales, and internationally.

The Children's Society will be continuing its focus on finding solutions for transition to adulthood for vulnerable adolescents. Following this report we will be undertaking a qualitative piece of research involving adolescents aged 16 and 17 and young adults who were known to children's services, to establish what support makes the difference. We will also look to work in partnership with local authorities, and other partners, to test and develop new solutions that can have a lasting and positive impact on the lives of vulnerable young people.

Reference

¹ Department for Education. 2017. Characteristics of children in need: 2016 to 2017 England.

Right now in Britain there are children and young people who feel scared, unloved and unable to cope. The Children's Society works with these young people, step by step, for as long as it takes.

We listen. We support. We act.

There are no simple answers so we work with others to tackle complex problems. Only together can we make a difference to the lives of children now and in the future.

Because no child should feel alone.

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