Evaluating an innovative scheme for preventing youth homelessness

Safe in the City provided an innovative response to preventing youth homelessness, delivering intensive packages of support through multi-agency working ('cluster schemes'). This evaluation examined young people's perceptions of the scheme and of its impact. It also described the extent to which young people's involvement with the programme reduced their risk of homelessness, the reasons for this and the implications for good practice. The study, by Sarah Dickens and Kandy Woodfield from the National Centre for Social Research in collaboration with Safe in the City, found:

- Young people cited the following as having improved as a result of their involvement with the scheme: family relationships and an ability to cope with problems at home; anger management, self confidence, outlook on life and self-worth; and attitudes towards education and/or employment.

- Most young people in the sample were gauged less at risk of homelessness after their participation, although the extent of reduction varied.

- Positive impacts and reduced risk were most likely to occur where:
  - the young person felt *involved and consulted about* the process of referral and where involvement was not compulsory;
  - from the start, a dialogue was built up with young people and interventions were carefully tailored to fit around young people's key needs at particular times;
  - young people received one-to-one advice from a keyworker, who was able to build up knowledge of their individual needs, support them through crisis and make them feel valued and important;
  - key issues affecting a young person's outlook on life - such as family problems, low self-worth and entrenched world-views - were tackled and challenged early on through one-to-one keyworker support and/or family work.

- Improvements to life at home (through family work), and one-to-one support and attention (keyworker relationships) could instigate change by leading young people to rethink their role in the world, place more value on themselves and their actions, and think more positively about their future. Subsequent interventions could then act as important facilitators of change – for example, in education and employment.

- The *order* of interventions was key. Young people were unlikely to engage with group-based, structured programmes focusing on education and/or their futures whilst they were experiencing upheaval at home, low self-worth or confidence and negative outlooks.

Background

Safe in the City developed a model for co-ordinating new and innovative approaches to preventing youth homelessness by delivering intensive packages of support through multi-agency working ('cluster schemes'). The Safe in the City approach to homelessness differed from conventional methods by attempting to tackle the problems that can lead to homelessness in advance of crisis points being reached. As a result the target group for Safe in the City work differed from the traditional constituency of currently or recently homeless young people and comprised instead people "who are not, and who hopefully will never be, homeless". As part of this remit Safe in the City commissioned a series of eight 'cluster schemes' in London boroughs.

The clusters

The cluster schemes were managed and implemented by different permutations of statutory and voluntary sector service providers reflecting the focus on multi-agency working and seamless support. Each cluster project was managed for Safe in the City by a local lead partner agency and brought together projects tackling three strands identified by preliminary research as key areas of risk that can lead to a young person becoming homeless. These areas are:

- family support;
- personal development;
- skills and employability.

The intention was that participants received intensive, personalised programmes based within the project or projects which were the most appropriate to them delivered in the order that was the most appropriate.

Experiences and appraisals of the cluster schemes

Young people's experiences of the cluster schemes were primarily positive. Positive or negative appraisals depended upon the following:

- **Engagement with the main point of contact with cluster:** it was particularly noticeable that the degree to which young people engaged with the whole cluster tended to depend on their attitude towards the first and main point of contact. Young people who disliked their first point of contact were more likely to disengage with the cluster overall.

- **The extent to which services were tailored to the individual** was a further key factor influencing experiences. Evidence of this tailoring was particularly strong in two of the clusters where there appeared to be a culture of adapting services to fit around the individual rather than expecting the individual to fit around the services. In the other two clusters, by contrast, young people tended to receive a standard, 'one size fits all' package of interventions. Some of these young people felt that their key needs had been overlooked and/or that the services they received were inappropriate.

- **Close key worker relationships:** a keyworker relationship – where a worker maintains regular one-to-one contact and has the confidence of the young person – was, where present, highly valued by young people and often spoken about as their central experience of the cluster. Key benefits of these relationships for young people were feeling valued, feeling that the cluster took a very personal interest in their welfare, and having an outlet to talk about problems or crises.

- **Overcoming negative perceptions or concern on point of referral:** young people's key worries at the point of referral were that the cluster would be compulsory, be "like school", forcing them to talk about issues or take part in activities that they did not want to. Experiencing a personalised and tailored service at an early stage in the cluster seemed the most effective experience for overcoming these concerns. These young people tended to feel involved with, and consulted about the types of activities they would experience on the cluster. By contrast, there was some evidence that where young people experienced a very

structured 'one size fits all' service as first point of contact, their worries could be confirmed and disengagement begin.

- **Overcoming entrenched world-views:** a key theme to run through the interviews was the extent to which young people regarded the issues and behavioural patterns occurring in their lives as the *norm* for people like themselves, making it difficult for them to acknowledge the extent to which they needed to work at or change these patterns.

Impact of the cluster schemes

The researchers analysed the impacts of the cluster relating to young people's vulnerability to homelessness around four main areas, in relation to the three key target risk factors and young people's actual housing situation during their engagement with the cluster.

- **Family support** – young people talked about two key impacts to family life: *actual* improvement in the situation at home and their relations with parents; and an improved ability to *cope* with difficulties at home.

- **Personal development** – young people talked about four main areas of impact: anger management; confidence; interactions with others; and the extent to which they valued themselves and their future and attached consequences to their actions.

- **Skills and employability** – young people talked about practical impacts (e.g. qualifications gained, new place at school, increased chances of gaining employment); and impacts on their attitudes (e.g. increased willingness to engage with and plan for later life).

- **Housing stability** – impacts young people described in this area included being able to return home; surviving a housing crisis; and achieving independent living after support from the cluster.

Impacts on youth homelessness risk factors

In order to evaluate how effectively the cluster scheme interventions moved young people away from key risk factors targeted by Safe in the City's work, a two-dimensional risk model was developed to plot young people's position before and during the intervention. These dimensions were: *'risk of housing instability* and *disruption to family life'* and *'risk of other forms of social exclusion'*.

- A striking finding is the extent of movement individual young people had experienced in relation to the model. This suggests that Safe in the City's interventions had a positive effect on reducing the risk factors around youth homelessness.

- No young person in this sample felt that they had moved backwards in relation to the risk factor model as a result of involvement with a cluster.

- The most far-reaching impacts were likely to occur where key issues affecting a young person's outlook on life – family problems, low self-confidence and self-worth, entrenched world views – were tackled first though one-to-one support and family work if a young person was willing. Once outlooks had shifted, subsequent interventions could then help to facilitate change in other areas, for example education and employment.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the key lessons around service delivery that achieve the best possible outcomes for young people at risk of later homelessness, and broader social exclusion, are:

- A flexible, individualised programme which pays great attention and sensitivity to young people's personal needs.

- High priority given to young people's own feelings and views of their needs.

- Ensuring initial interventions are tailored to young people's key needs.

- An accessible, friendly, non-compulsory cluster scheme ethos.

- Close, regular one-to-one keyworker relationships as an initial and ongoing experience of cluster scheme.

- Overcoming negative outlooks (e.g. family problems, emotional turmoil, low self-esteem) early through one-to-one keyworker support and/or family work if the young person feels ready for it.

- Tailoring individual projects to young people's key needs rather than necessarily providing them with the entire 'project'experience.

- Informing young people about all cluster elements at the outset of their engagement and continuing to make all this information available as appropriate.

About the project

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach to allow detailed exploration of the complex personal circumstances and experiences of young people participating in the clusters. 41 young people were interviewed from four of the eight London boroughs providing Safe in the City cluster schemes. Additional quantitative data was derived from the Safe in the City database providing overall statistics for those attending clusters in the four areas.

All the young people were deemed at risk of homelessness and housing instability, although the level of risk varied and they were also experiencing a range of other factors associated with social exclusion (eg offending behaviour and school exclusion). The young people ranged in age from 12 to 17 years old and came from a variety of ethnic groups. Most young people had been engaging in the cluster for

several months; a handful had recently joined their cluster.

Safe in the City was established in 1998 when the Peabody Trust and Centrepoint successfully bid to set up a £6 million six-year SRB programme with a further £6 million match funding from trust and statutory sources. The programme was intended to develop and evaluate effective models of homelessness prevention. The SRB programme closed on 31 March 2004.

How to get further information