

# **The Positive Pathway Model: *A Rapid Evaluation of its Impact***

## *Executive Summary*

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## Executive Summary

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## Introduction

This report presents the key findings from a rapid evaluation of the impact of the St Basils 'Positive Pathway' accommodation and support model for young people. The evaluation was commissioned by St Basils and conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. The funders of the model, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), requested a rapid evaluation to understand more about the model's impact within English local authorities. This report is the main output from this evaluation, and aims to provide St Basils, DCLG, and their partners with a better understanding of the impact and traction that the Positive Pathway Model is having within local authorities and the effectiveness of St Basils' efforts to promote it. Based on these findings, the report makes recommendations with a view to supporting further development and refinement of the model.

The following methods were used:

- an online survey of local authorities in England
- in-depth interviews with 15 local authorities
- site visits in two local authorities to interview a range of key stakeholders on their positive pathway.

## Key Messages

This evaluation has evidenced four overarching findings:

1. The Positive Pathway Model is a robust framework that can be implemented in a wide range of different contexts - different local authority structures, different housing markets and different geographical areas.
2. Local authority officers had high regard for the work of St Basils' Youth Homelessness Advisory Service, highlighting their nationally recognised expertise, knowledge and understanding and ability to influence key decision makers and, in so doing, help local authorities forge better partnerships, particularly between Housing and Children's Social Care.
3. Where implemented, the Positive Pathway Model has a significant impact on local authority practice and provision, including their use of data and their understanding of the needs of younger people. Local authorities report that this had led to improved services, more effective use of scarce resources and better outcomes for younger people.
4. The financial constraints facing local authorities pose a risk to the sustainment of existing Positive Pathways, and may limit the ability of more local authorities to establish a positive pathway. However, the Model does offer local authorities the ability to

identify the gaps in their provision and think creatively about how to improve their services for younger people by using resources more effectively.

## **The Impact of St Basils Youth Homelessness Advisory Service**

- The Positive Pathway Model is well known amongst local authorities in England. The survey found that 90 per cent of local authorities had some knowledge of the model. However, knowledge was limited for a fifth of local authorities and 6 per cent reported no knowledge of the Model at all.
- The Positive Pathway Model has been used extensively in English local authorities (see Figure 2.3). While 7 per cent had used it extensively, 40 per cent of local authorities had made use of certain aspects of the model, suggesting that local authorities often adopt key aspects of the model. There was, therefore, significant latent demand for the Positive Pathway Model. Just over a third (36 per cent) of local authorities had so far not used the Model but were interested in doing so.
- Local authorities with knowledge of the Positive Pathway Model regarded it as a robust, developed and 'fit for purpose' tool, capable of improving pathways for younger people facing homelessness.
- St Basils' Youth Homelessness Advisory Service was providing valuable support and advice to local authorities - both in direct relation to implementation of the Positive Pathway Model and more general advice and support around issues associated with youth homelessness policies and practices. Advisors were particularly well regarded for having the following attributes:
  - highly skilled and knowledgeable about youth homelessness policy and practice in local authority settings
  - the ability to identify good practice from other areas and shape it to the needs of the local authority
  - having gravitas as nationally recognised mentors, which carried weight with senior staff and helped to forge partnerships (in particular between Housing and Children's Social Care).
- Awareness of the Youth Homelessness Advisory Service was high. Over 60 per cent of local authorities had benefited from the service. However a quarter of local authorities were aware of the service, but had not used it; and 13 per cent were not aware of it.
- The Youth Homelessness Advisory Service had made a significant impact on local authorities that had engaged with it. Nearly half (46 per cent) reported that the service had made a lot of difference and helped a lot to move forward with implementation of an enhanced pathway, and 37 per cent reported that it had made some difference that had resulted in changes being made.
- The Youth Homelessness Advisory Service was regarded by local authorities to be of high quality. Over half (54 per cent) of local authorities rated the service as 'excellent'; 39 per cent rated it 'very good'; and 7 per cent rated it 'good'. No respondents rated it negatively.
- Local authorities were generally satisfied with the amount of advice and support they received from the Youth Homelessness Advisory Service. At the current delivery level of two days free of charge, the majority of local authorities (62 per cent) reported this to be the right level of service, though a third would have preferred some more time. In many cases, Advisors offered advice and support above this amount, especially for follow-up questions and queries. In addition, the survey found that around half of local authorities would like additional support to implement the Positive Pathway Model.

## Local Authority Implementation of the Positive Pathway Model

- Local authorities identified a range of challenges faced in relation to youth homelessness, including: an increase in the proportion of homeless younger people; poor access to emergency, supported and affordable housing; poor working relationships between housing authorities and children's social care; and ongoing reductions to service budgets.
- The Positive Pathway Model has led to significant improvements to strategic and collaborative approaches to youth homelessness. 80 per cent of local authorities reported that there had been some or major improvement in this aspect.
- In particular, the Positive Pathway Model and the support from St Basils' Youth Homelessness Advisory Service has been a catalyst for better collaborative working between housing authorities and children's social care.
- There was notable variation in the engagement of local authorities in different aspects of the Positive Pathway Model. More local authorities have been improving emergency and supported accommodation for homeless young people and commissioning housing related support for this group. Fewer local authorities are currently providing additional support for young people with multiple and complex needs, although there was considerable interest amongst several local authorities for innovative initiatives, such as Housing First.
  - While **information and advice** services exist in most local authorities, it was reported that these are poor at delivering services to younger people and families. The model had prompted some local authorities to reshape these services to focus specifically on youth homelessness, but resource constraints and poor access to schools were key limiting factors.
  - **Early help** has proved a difficult area to address within the Positive Pathway for some local authorities and there is often some confusion between its role at stage 2 and stage 3 of the Model. Over half of local authorities who had a pathway reported that early help services were directly impacting on youth homelessness prevention (Figure 3.5). Some local authorities were giving less attention to homelessness prevention via their early help services and, instead, focusing resources on help at the point of need - at the point where a young person presents as homeless. Aligning services towards earlier homelessness prevention was reported to be difficult to achieve in the current climate of austerity measures.
  - Local authorities with **integrated hubs** that combined advice, assessment, prevention and access to commissioned accommodation had a clear advantage in addressing youth homelessness. The Hub is, therefore, *the* core element of the Positive Pathway Model, and its implementation leads to the strongest impact on youth homelessness.
  - The Positive Pathway Model has had a direct influence on the supply of **commissioned emergency and supported accommodation** available to younger people facing homelessness. The model has enabled local authorities to improve their coordination of supported housing and allowed commissioners to respond better to demand from younger people. However, some local authorities were struggling to provide a range of supported housing products. This was particularly the case for dispersed rural areas and for local authorities facing reductions to service budgets.
  - Providing a **range of housing options** was a key challenge for implementing the Positive Pathway Model, and one that many local authorities felt powerless to influence. The more successful local authorities were attempting to use and foster the social rented sector and the Private Rented Sector (PRS) to be more receptive to the needs of younger people. Better 'step down' solutions, the wider use of PRS access projects and the stimulation of well-managed shared housing, can contribute to these ends.

- Overall, local authorities were positive about the impact of the Model. They were most positive about the model's impact on partnership working and homelessness prevention. In contrast, they were least positive about impact on access to affordable and suitable accommodation. This highlights both the strengths of the Positive Pathway Model and the limitations - which appear to be related to the wider housing and welfare reform contexts.
  - Pathways, once established, require maintenance and oversight. The role of a lead officer or coordinator was a critical aspect to the sustainment and improvement of the pathway.
  - Many local authorities reported that the number of younger people becoming homeless as a result of an 'unplanned move' had reduced. In particular, single point access hubs were leading to more young people returning home or to moving in with friends or other family members. One local authority reported that its hubs consistently achieved a prevention rate of around 85 per cent.
  - For 16 and 17 year olds presenting as homeless, services have become more flexible and more responsive. Many areas reported that Children's Social Care were taking a lead role for this age group and holding responsibility for their housing and care, be it via a housing solution or a looked after solution.
  - Local authorities were using supported accommodation more effectively, aligning it to better meet the needs of younger people.
  - The Model's robust and clear nature, supported by advice and support from St Basils, has been influential in achieving 'senior level buy-in' within organisations - which in turn has driven the model's implementation.
  - Implementation of the model has resulted in good practice. This is being disseminated across England, and being adopted by others. For example, the Welsh Government has adopted a version of the Positive Pathway Model.<sup>1</sup>
  - Local authorities who have engaged in the Positive Pathway model often report becoming more confident in their ability to tackle a problem that previously appeared to be intractable.
  - Greater impacts were reported by areas that had adopted the Positive Pathway Model as a central ethos, rather than 'borrowing from it' in a piecemeal fashion.

## Recommendations

The Positive Pathway Model is robust, and does not need a major overhaul. The evidence of this rapid evaluation suggests a number of key recommendations.

1. Many local authorities were finding it difficult to provide a range of housing options. But, those taking a more planned, strategic view were looking at influencing their current housing markets to be more responsive to the needs of younger people and seeking out more innovative 'step-down' housing solutions (post commissioned supported housing through their pathways). Also, 'shared housing' was frequently referred to, but without a fuller understanding of how to provide it and (critically) how to manage it. Therefore, the model could be adapted to:
  - a. Highlight 'step-down' housing arrangements as distinctive from commissioned accommodation

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<sup>1</sup><http://gov.wales/topics/housing-and-regeneration/services-and-support/homelessness/youth-homelessness/?lang=en>

- b. Consider a more central role for 'sharing solutions' type housing schemes - PRS access projects (often now known as 'help to rent' projects) who can provide younger people with 'smarter' transition into the PRS, procure and manage shared housing and provide some support to tenants. This will become even more applicable as LHA is introduced in the social rented sector and Housing Benefit entitlement for 18-21s changes.
2. Good practice is being disseminated well by the Youth Homelessness Advisors, and this is often cited as a key benefit by local authority officers. However, it was clear from the evaluation that a more informal network of 'good practice advocates' has emerged - competent officers who have taken on elements of the model and developed bespoke policies and practice within their pathways. St Basils and DCLG should consider:
  - a. how best to harness these 'good practice advocates' - in a more structured and equitable manner
  - b. what other outlets for good practice dissemination are there - seminars; e-seminars; a dedicated web-resource; others?
3. The role of the Youth Homelessness Advisors is crucial to the future implementation of the model, but to gain further traction what is the best strategy? The findings of this report point to a number of possibilities:
  - a. expand the capacity of this service by employing more YHAs
  - b. expand the capacity by offering more than two days of free consultation
  - c. take a more targeted approach - by identifying local authorities that have not taken up support and directly inviting them to do so. This would be more effective if DCLG or St Basils were able to identify the local benefits that could accrue to the local authority.
4. Integrated Hubs are the backbone of the Positive Pathway Model, but some authorities perceive that they can be expensive and complicated to deliver; to a point where local authorities are 'put off' their ambitions to implement one. This is particularly true where Housing and Children's Social Care departments are struggling to work in a more integrated way. Are there ways in which this could be addressed? Perhaps a specific funding scheme or initiative could kick-start this activity in more local authorities.
5. As services became more integrated, local authority officers saw perceptions around housing options changing, especially among 16-25 year olds. But even where local authorities had an integrated hub, it was still felt that more could be done around information provision for young people of secondary school age. Many local authorities reported that engaging with schools was problematic. There may be a need for a more concerted and coordinated effort to 'bring schools on board' with homelessness prevention by involving a range of national and local stakeholders.
6. Although it has not been the direct focus of this report, many local authorities were aware of the work St Basils has done with Barnardo's on developing an accommodation and support framework for care leavers. Local authorities mentioned this work and regarded it as important - seeing it often as the next step (or further development) of their Positive Pathway. It will be worth giving some thought to how these two streams are presented. There may be some merits to keeping them separate - local authorities may require an established Positive Pathway in the first instance in order to provide a framework for enhancing their pathway for young adults leaving care. In addition, the work to implement a Positive Pathway often leads to much improved working practices between Housing and Children's Social Care. However, there were suggestions made that local authorities' rationale for adopting the Positive Pathway Model and seeking support from

the Youth Homelessness Advisors was directly related to the outcome of a negative Ofsted inspection of Children's Social Care, particularly relating to looked after children.

7. Commissioners are influenced by evidence of impact. The Positive Pathway Model may want to be more explicit about the importance for local authorities of collecting and analysing data on the impact that changes have made to youth homelessness.