

Young people talk about mental health and youth work

Should we get young people to tell their stories over and over again or should we listen more closely first time round? Below we print some anonymised extracts from interviews with young people aged 16-25 which may be of interest to anyone researching mental health or youth work.

The extracts come from interviews conducted with young people in Hampshire in

- supported accommodation for the homeless
- community centres
- and young carers and careleavers' groups

They were conducted to research a report by the Southern Policy Centre, funded by the Blagrove Trust, into problems facing young people in the region and possible policy solutions. If you are interested in housing or education, training and employment issues, the end report '[Help us to move on](#)', focuses on those topics. But young people also talked to us about mental health and youth work. All the quotes have been anonymised and in some cases we have changed details such as age and places.

We have not added our own text or interpretation, just occasional clarification for context.

Value of young carers' groups

Here two young women interviewed separately talk about problems they had as carers and three initiatives which have helped; a regular young carers' group, the annual young carers' festival and the 'drop in' scheme for young carers within schools. The bits in bold refer to cuts in services.

Carole 22, young carers' group, living in the family home (2018)

One of the boys from the younger [carers'] group has two younger siblings who I've looked after in my job and so he's got two younger siblings with additional needs and has an older sibling with additional needs and so he comes along [to the young carers' group] and it's – it's a break. It's something to do that you don't have to worry about your parents trying to sort out for you.

Diane, 19, carer for father and older sister, mental health problems, living in the family home.

[At secondary school] every Thursday [youth workers supporting carer students] used to come into us and I got an hour out of a lesson...Once a week, yeah. Just to talk about my feelings. I could basically do whatever I wanted in that hour. I could do homework if I really wanted but I could just sit there. It doesn't matter what lesson I was in either. So if I was in English and I had the exam that week they would have still taken me out, just so I could have that break away from everyone...It was nice...

Well they've stopped doing it now.

I had to do quite a lot of putting electric on and doing gas and electric and sometimes when my Dad wasn't well enough to go outside I had to do my shopping. And I had my Nan down the road as well, who had dementia, so I had to look after her. I wasn't looking after her 100% of the time because he had carers but yeah, it was a bit full on.

It did put pressures on my GCSEs completely because I failed most of them because you can't – you focus on one thing and unfortunately family comes first. And I think the school didn't understand it as much, because where they're not put in that position, but yeah...

I think it was just as I was taking my exams and [my father] had an [operation] and obviously they, I had my [older sister, with mental health problems] who was 18 and technically my guardian, but I was looking after [her]. They didn't understand it as much and they didn't really care. I spoke to the school and they were just like...okay. [Social services] didn't get involved at all.

Both [my sister and I] went to the young carers' festival. That was brilliant. It was a really fun weekend. **It's just our carers' group [no longer has] enough money to go.**

Carole, 22, young carers' group, living in the family home (2018)

This [young carer's group] a monthly; the one in X is a weekly...At least they used to be every other week, I haven't talked to many of them in a while.

I met [friend who is also a carer] when we were a lot younger when I first moved down here about 14 years ago, and we took part in a weekend thing where it was a drama activity for family members, young children who have siblings with additional needs. And it was such a good time but I didn't know anybody's name but I found a friend in him. But then I never spoke to him again.

And then the first time I came here I went, hang on, I know you! But watching this place change and grow and losing people and gaining people, it's, it's been really good. Being able to help the younger kids who come...And then when there were so few people it used to just be one group and then we split again to sort of the older and younger because there are now more...

Yeah. It's – it's a really good support and [youth worker who runs the group] is fabulous. She is the best person for everything...She is brilliant. She is the best support worker if you can say that. She's been really good for this group. Because she didn't always used to run this group.

And then the younger kids get to go to the Young Carers' Festival during June, the last weekend of June, which is just a big get together...the first year that I went, which was 2009, was the ten-year anniversary and so it was this big huge party.

It's, you go on the Friday and then you come back on the Sunday but then the entire weekend you're just a kid. You're not a Young Carer, you don't have to worry about anybody. You can just have fun and that's so freeing, it's lovely.

Value of youth workers and carers who have come from similar backgrounds

Spencer, aged 16 and having relocated to the south from a young offenders' institution, living in supported accommodation, respects his carer because he used to be in care:

He was the same as me, he was in care, had a bad upbringing and then he started boxing and then that's what changed his life. He relates to me, you know what I mean? He's been there, he's done it all before and then he understands what I'm going through. It's all right saying, okay, I'm your carer and da, di, da but listen mate if you was in care at this age being taken away from your Mum and Dad and your brothers and sisters...and being taken away from your childhood...you don't understand that at all mate, you know what I mean?

Decline in number of youth clubs

Natasha 22, mother, living on a North Hampshire estate

So maybe, like I know they have a youth club here [on a large estate North Hampshire]. I think that's like once a week. I don't know if it's been on during the holidays, which is obviously a really bad thing to probably have done, not having it on in the holidays when they have nothing to do. There's nothing round here for teenagers and maybe the younger older lot to be doing.

But obviously, like the summer holidays, if one [teenager] has a friend outside and lets them in, next thing the whole estate is in here and it's used as a massive playground pretty much and obviously they're running on the balconies.

And obviously for the little ones, say it's raining now, we would let our little ones run up and down the balcony, play on their bike or their scooter, but when there's bigger teenagers running round and they don't look where they're going they knock the little ones over and then obviously then the parents get involved because a fully-grown teenager has just knocked their little kid over and it's just stuff that doesn't need to be handled.

Like there needs to be something here, not obviously 24/7 but so many days a week, even during the holidays, that keeps kids entertained, even if it's like a football tournament. Loads of kids love football nowadays; you know tournaments, get little teams together, make a tournament about it.

Effect on young mothers of closing children's and sure start centres

Natasha 22, mother, living on a North Hampshire estate

So I think, like I say, [we need more social groups in the community centre]...make it a family thing. Don't just say, oh yes, just chuck your kids down here. Obviously give the option, if you want to just have your kids down here for an hour and you want an hour of freedom or a bit of peace to get something done or just chill out, have it as an option, but try and make it a family thing where parents can actually spend time with their kids as well as, you know...

Obviously all the young mums' sessions have been cancelled because obviously all the children centres got shut down in Hampshire. So the closest one to here is in Y. So yes, it's an okay distance but if you're not driving you're not going to want to spend a day-rider price of what's nearly £7 now to get to Y and back just to spend an hour or so at a group.

We [used to go to the children's centres] two or three times a week me and my little girl. We used to go to any group that was available just so, because like I said, just to get out the flat. Because obviously with my depression at the time I knew that I literally had to walk from there to the centre, which was just here, or even the one at X school down the road.

But yeah, I went, I started going there when she was four weeks old and obviously we were there till the very last day. So obviously all the staff knew us, we knew all of them; we went on so many like trips and days out with them and obviously it was all free, which was good because obviously, like you say, young mums we don't have a lot of money, we live on benefits.

So like we went on trips...Like what more could a mum ask for with a young one, and X theme park...and I think every child loved it because you could like, as soon as you got off that coach, you didn't have to stick as a group like when you were at school. You could just go off and do your own thing as long as you're back at that coach at a certain time and you can come home. It was just one way of getting everybody out.

But even like the groups at the centres, they would last at least an hour and a half to two hours, which is reasonable and then when they're finished it's usually either lunchtime or you would have lunch and go to a session. So when you get home it would be, right, I've got to make little one dinner and then get them sorted for bed and then you would have your own time in the evening.

So they never, I can't believe, I was absolutely devastated when they said they were shutting them down because I said, oh, if I ever have another [child] you're never going to get to meet them like you've met my first and stuff like that. So it, obviously it was really upsetting for, obviously all the staff.

I see like the odd midwife every now and then but other than that I've never seen anyone that I used to know...I was literally devastated when they said, and obviously it was obviously a very big thing.

Youth workers running care leavers' forum better than the council

This exchange is between two care leavers, Tom aged 25 and Paul aged 21, discussing how a youth worker run care leavers' council deteriorated when it went back into council control.

Paul: The thing is, because the fact [the council have] messed it about, because they have, they've really messed it up, like the whole thing is messed up. We haven't had the chance to actually advertise and make it even grow and try and get more people because we, when they very first started you know there were a lot of people...

Tom: Really outspoken, really passionate.

Paul: And we were talking about, you know, issues and things that needs to improve in the system, in the care system because from our experience of being in foster care and all that...

Tom: So all they can ever do is try to understand it but the thing is that people can look into our eyes and know that we understand it and know that we're good at it. You know, we truly know what we're talking about and how these things feel and they they've just sort of read a report about a paragraph big trying to judge a whole person's life, it's...

Paul: Youth Options, they were running it. They used to do it so they were running it every month and what we used to do every month is we'd sit down and we'd talk about the things, we used to have like minutes, and on the minutes we used to write – used to talk about different topics that we'd been doing like to try and like improve and...what we should do to like explore issues that were out of sight so we talked about that.

Tom: We went to, we did a residential as well where we went out, we went out to just near where was it? Down in Sussex and we talked about, we went to go to meet up with another Young People in Care Council to speak to them about ideas, what we can do to like try and improve or get people to cover more, like more...

Paul: But ever since the Council took over it's just gone from downhill. And I said it to you wasn't it, I said it to you, as soon as they took over trust me they're going to mess it up and they have. They've stopped posting, there's a group chat and they've stopped posting on the – there's a group chat on Facebook, that's how everyone used to be in the know about it and they've stopped posting on that. They've, it's just been really, I don't know like, because every council has to have one it's like they're doing as little as they can to have it, but as long as they've got it and they can say, look we've got one, that's fine but...

Tom: Whereas it's not, you know, there's so many care leavers in X , that's the thing...

Paul: And a lot of us have done it and been a part of it and feel like our work's gone to waste because on the take over, I know for certain there was a really good hand over with the Youth Options and the council. We gave them all our DVDs that we'd done, all our work we'd done, like half-done jobs we were in the middle of and then none of it got carried on and we just started anew.

Young people's concerns about mental health

Jason, 20, living in supported accommodation for homeless young people

I would say that like, don't worry, money and housing is a major problem obviously, it's part of the reason that we're here. But as an individual I'd say that a lot of the issues that people face here are mental health related.

I acknowledge that okay, I do kind of need the help, I do kind of need like the support and I think that's a lot easier for a 20 year old to do than possibly a 16 or 17 year old...I know it sounds so stupid but in the months and months since I became homeless, in the months before that when the family breakdown was happening and all the like, the abuse... when I was younger and stuff, in all that time it's been a long time since someone has genuinely sat there and been like what do you need help with? What do you want to talk about? What do you want to discuss?

And I felt because it was someone I didn't know, I felt that I could actually discuss everything I needed to discuss and I think it was really brilliant.

Joe, now 23, now working and living with his partner, at the time he is talking about, from 16-20 living at home unemployed.

I had depression and anxiety and I was sort of scared to leave the house without someone or I would, the only place I would go was to the shop at the front of here and that was it, I would come straight back home and just sit in my room and play X-box or the play station or something... But I think I made it worse for myself that I, I was sort of like scared of sort of everything and anything and like I kept getting pushed but I felt do this, do that but I didn't want to.

Emma, 19, living in supported accommodation, unemployed

I started a college course but then my mental health started to give out and they removed me from the course because they didn't think I was well enough to carry on with the course. Then I started another course when I was 17 and for the same reason they removed me because they thought my mental health wasn't good enough.

I thought it was a little unfair because even, I felt like that was it, like I wouldn't be able to get accepted into education again just because of my mental health.

[I got a] little bit of [counselling from a voluntary sector organisation], but they weren't really helping. [The colleges] just, they just wanted rid of me because I wasn't good enough for their standards and all that kind of thing...because I was, yeah, struggling with like work placements and stuff.

I'm just waiting to get on to start a new work placement up in X youth centre...I'd like to have a full time job as a youth worker for X youth centre or somewhere else.

Stephen, 18 living in supported accommodation for the homeless

Mental health problems will stop me getting on. Just getting some support [[would help], I don't really know, like some counselling or yeah, something like that...but the waiting lists are long and it's just, I haven't really thought about it properly yet because I've just been put off of it I think by the previous times.

When I was younger there weren't much mental health could do except for drug you up, you know what I mean?

Miles, 16 living in supported accommodation for the homeless

But I was always considered as quite loner at school because I didn't have many people to talk to. I didn't, well I guess I just didn't open up to people because obviously the way I was brought up in my house, was that no one was wanting to listen to you if you were feeling down, if you're feeling pressured into stuff or pissed off.

Pete 25, living in supported accommodation for the homeless

I mean I definitely feel like, I mean I'm a very much half glass empty kind of person. Like I try to be optimistic but everything I say ends up sounding pessimistic anyway. And my issue is I feel like you could put more money into like a lot of different things but it's not necessarily going to make as big of a change unless you can show those people, for example, like show those young people that yes, this is going to help.

If you can put more emphasis on like teaching how it will help and showing yes, because that is the main thing, most people now don't want to use hostels, they don't want to use doctors or GPs or counsellors or therapists or medication or whatever because they don't think it's going to help and they've got friends that say the same thing.

So, oh I believe it and all my friends do, yeah, we're right, no one else is right. You can't convince me otherwise. I think if more emphasis is put on like really showing them yes, this can help, this can change your life, this can make you happy, this can make you, you know, more financially secure, stable, whatever, then people are going to be more tempted to think, well what's the harm in trying?

Chris 21, living in supported accommodation for the homeless

Obviously people's mental state can affect people getting a job and stuff because, yeah, this place [foyer] may be a nice place, they may be nice staff but that doesn't affect you going, well this is their job... So now you're taking their time and it's like, it gets a bit like emotional and it's like you don't want to show staff that you're being emotional like that because you want to act like you're the big person when you're really not.

Two older residents of supported accommodation for the homeless, Jason, 20 and Peter 25, both working, talking about unemployed younger residents.

Jason: The other residents... they do know, they understand that they need to get on with things. They need to just do it... I think the working world makes you view things very differently... Yeah, and you get, you've got some people it's like it's almost like they still can't find what it is they need to do or change.

Pete: Like how often is it, 'what are you doing today?' 'Fuck all'.

Jason: 'What are you doing today?' 'Looking at it!' But they're sat on the sofa just watching TV or something and God that is mind-numbing. Like it gets you, like I find

the problem is people need distractions to stop themselves from thinking about a lot of the negatives in their life...if you've got nothing to distract yourself and nothing to focus on apart from your own thoughts, that's going to make a lot of these mental illnesses worse.