



# Prevention Service



## Prevention Service

*'Trying hard and being well meaning is not enough we want to get the results that help change young people's lives'*

St Basils is a youth agency which uses housing as the medium to work with young people aged 16 - 25 to enable them to find and keep a home, to develop their confidence, skills and opportunities and to prevent homelessness. To do this we provide a range of services to young people in Birmingham and some of the surrounding areas of the West Midlands.

This briefing paper tells you about one aspect of the range of services we provide.

### Summary

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The Prevention Service is central to the work of St Basils and is made up of a network of services that are designed to reduce the numbers of young people who become homeless or need to move home in an unplanned way.

Our starting point is that primary prevention of homelessness makes the young person's journey into adult life more successful and less traumatic, where some one has to move from home we believe the more planned and open that process the better.

The Prevention Service has three elements:

- Home Options which sites specialist staff in local housing offices and provides a specific service to young people.
- 'The Link' which is our city centre based housing advice and access point for young people.
- Family Mediation which supports young people and families to address some of the underlying problems that may create situations that lead to young people leaving home in an unplanned way.

Although each element of the network is sustainable in its own right we believe the combination provides an excellent vehicle for primary and secondary prevention.

The Prevention Service has been successful in helping young people to remain at home and rebuild relationships with families; it has been successful in ensuring that where a move from home is necessary, it happens in the most planned way possible.

### The challenge facing us

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The transition from adolescence to adult life is a challenging one and for some young people it can be traumatic and have long term impacts on their adult life.

Most of the young people we work with have minimal support networks and resources.

Some young people see leaving home as being the solution to their problems and yet it may make things worse and put them at risk of becoming more socially excluded.

Some families find supporting a young person through their journey to adult life a very challenging task and parents and young people may not have the experiences or resources to deal with this challenge successfully.

The challenge facing services is to engage with young people and families in time to reduce the risk of homelessness and to ensure that if a move away from home is inevitable that it happens in a planned and sustainable way.

### Developing the Prevention Service

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The Prevention Service has developed over a number of years and has evolved into a coherent network as practice, funding opportunities and experience have developed.

'The Link' has been an integral part of the St Basils network for over 20 years and provides a wide range of housing advice and links to housing and support services from its city centre base.

The Home Options team started as a pilot with Birmingham City Council in 2003. Housing & Family Support workers were placed in one of the local housing offices (neighbourhood office) in an area of Birmingham with high rates of deprivation and youth homelessness.

The pilot was successful in reducing the numbers of young people who became homeless or needed to move in an unplanned way and as a result of this the service has now expanded covering all 33 neighbourhood offices.

Family Mediation which provides support to families where homelessness is a risk factor has been part of our work at St Basils for over 10 years. The work of Family Mediation has grown and helped to stimulate our work with much younger people, for example working with 13 and 15 year olds who have been referred by the local Children's Services.

## How it works

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The Home Options team provides a dedicated service to young people who attend at the City Council's neighbourhood offices looking for accommodation; the team also make links with community groups and other community services where young people might be involved.

Key to the work of the Home Options team is turning the potential crisis of an unplanned move into a more considered and slower process so that young people and families have the option to reflect on what is happening and to create the space for all those involved to think about how difficulties might be resolved without causing chaos in the young person's life. Slowing things down and creating space for reflection is not the same as telling someone to sort it out for themselves or telling people that it is not the services responsibility to help them.

Every young person who makes contact with the housing department through one of its neighbourhood offices is directed to the Home Options worker for their area.

The initial contact with the young person includes an assessment of their current situation built into that is a 'slowing down' element which allows the young person time to think through what is happening and make a reality check on their circumstances.

Part of this early stage of the Home Options process is spending time with the young person developing an insight into the resources and networks they have access to, for example other family members. The process includes identifying the key conflicts that need resolving and helping them to set medium term aspirations that can be achieved.

Once this first slowing down has taken place it is possible for the young person to get the most out of other services and their existing networks, the Home Options worker will help the young person to connect with other services. For example the key worker might make a direct link with the young person to the Family Mediation element of the network.

For some young people a move maybe inevitable for a short term cooling off period whilst bridges are rebuilt and conflicts addressed in a positive way. Where a young person does need to move out of home the Home Options worker has access to St Basils resources as well as other providers. The emphasis of short term moves is always getting the young person back to their support network, strengthening that network and helping them to make a sustainable journey to adult life.

For a small number of young people a long term move away from home is inevitable, this needs to be managed so that the young person can open up relationships with family and retain what positives there might be in their current support networks.

The evidence suggests that this approach of slowing down the crisis whilst still taking it seriously works well and maximises the potential for the young person and family to reconnect and face up to some of the challenges of the transition from adolescence to adult life.

The work of the Home Options service is designed to help young people review their options and the consequences of those options.

'The Link' provides an access point to Home Options for those young people who do not go to their neighbourhood office or are unsure where to go for help.

The Link will engage with young people in a number of ways, from information giving through to making a direct link to accommodation based services. The initial assessment is a type of triage where decisions about the pace of engagement etc are made with the young person.

Underpinning the work at The Link is an assumption, shared with Home Options, that the most pressing action maybe to get the young person to slow down enough so that they can take a serious reality check on their current situation. This needs to be done in a way that does not make the young person feel they are being fobbed off and without putting those at real risk of homelessness in a worse position.

The initial triage assessment can lead to the following range of options for the young person:

- Sharing information with the young person that helps them to review their situation and encourages them to find their own sustainable solutions; e.g. discovering that they will not be offered a two bedroom apartment that afternoon, reviewing their options and then going home and patching things up with family without any outside intervention
- Sharing information that leads the young person to access other support services like the Home Options team in their area, or reframe the help they want; e.g. having expressed their needs in terms of a flat of their own they have then looked at the housing options with staff and might express a desire to stay at home but want support to talk to their parents, this might lead to a referral to family mediation

- Sharing information and then making a direct referral to other accommodation based services or providers where preventative work may place the young person at greater risk; e.g. making a referral with the young person to one of the St Basils projects and enabling them to make contact directly with that project.

The Link does not provide a key worker service for the young person but makes the initial connection with them to the right service or information.

Family Mediation provides a resource that supports projects right across the St Basils network. In addition the team will work directly with young people who are referred by outside agencies e.g. Children's Services where the risk of homelessness may not be the prime concern.

The core of the work is about developing a relationship with the young person and enabling them to articulate the issues and problems they feel they have to deal with in their every day lives. At all times we keep a clear focus on the young persons long term needs and in this sense we differ from other forms of mediation that would explicitly avoid the appearance of being partisan.

Once we have established a clear picture with the young person and allowed them to describe and discuss their world we can begin to open dialogue with parents and other family members. The mediation worker will spend time with the young person and then assess the best way of creating the opportunity for family mediation to take place, this may mean arranging a family meeting, engaging with other members of the family to act as support etc.

Our explicit aim is to ensure that the young person is heard and taken seriously by other family members. We feel this is the first step towards them being able to hear what other people are saying and as a result for discussion and negotiation to replace shouting and destructive communication.

However for it to work all the parties involved have to want to change and do things differently so parents and other family members have to be willing to at least try mediation if it is to work.

Within the mediation team there are some workers who are specifically funded to work in families where substance misuse is one of the causes of family breakdown.

## Key principles and assumptions

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All our work is based on theory of change which we have developed through practice, experience and by searching out good practice in other areas of work. This theory is based on some key principles how homelessness can be addressed and assumptions about what works best for young people.

- The journey to becoming an adult is a challenging one for all young people, but for some the challenge is either too big or too complex to make that transition without support
- Family break up and disruption are major causes of young people becoming homeless
- Leaving home too early increases the risk of a young person becoming homeless
- Homelessness is not inevitable even for the most chaotic young people, we believe we can move to a point where homelessness can be dramatically reduced and crisis avoided
- It is young people who have to make some of the key changes needed in order to make sustainable lives as adults, these include changes in how they feel, how they act and how they think
- Families, communities and services have an important part to play in helping young people to make changes in the way they feel, act and think. This does not mean telling young people what to do but creating the conditions that promote positive change
- Families, communities and services have an important part to play in helping to create change in the material conditions that young people have to deal with during their transition into adult life
- The more young people can be engaged in deciding about their own lives, their environment and their communities the more likely they are to successfully move into independence
- Positive social networks reduce the risk of further exclusion, increase the range of resources and skills available to a person and helps to smooth out the inevitable ups and downs of growing up

## Impact

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Judging the impact or difference preventative services make is quite a challenge, but we do have some convincing evidence that all the elements of our home options network are making a difference.

The qualitative data, in the form of feedback from young people, families, stakeholders and other providers, suggests that we are making a difference in some key areas. In reviews and evaluations over 80% of people who have used the services have been very positive about the impact it has on them both in the short and long term. Some quotes from people who have used the service are shown below.

The quantitative data suggests that we have contact with substantial numbers of young people and that for many of them we are making a difference and helping to reduce the incidence of homelessness.

Home Options staff have worked with over 1000 young people and prevented 92% of them from needing emergency accommodation.

The Link sees over 3500 young people every year and have identified suitable placement for 80% of these.

Family Mediation works with approx 175 young people and their families every year and have supported 90% to remain at home and 10% to move in a planned way.

## What young people and families have said about the Home Options network:

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The following quotes are taken from comments collected as part of our internal monitoring, from external evaluations.

“I was referred to (Home Options worker). He was nice. He didn't speak down to you, he explained like he was talking to an average person. He told me all the different ways I could go. All about hostels, about the training I could do. He told me what was what, with no frills. I left there really pleased.”

“They were there when I really needed them, when things got really bad. They didn't judge me or tell me what to do, they helped me think through. They would have got me a bed if I did leave (home). But I have managed to stay and look after my mum and get my own life and career going.”

“My behaviour toward my family members has changed a lot. My mum says I've calmed down a lot now. And getting on with my college course and finding suitable friends.”

“I got involved with St Basils through the Link, even though I had to move out of home I got help to get to the right place and they even got me some bus fare to get there.”

## Lessons learned

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Our experience suggests that the following things are important if you want to achieve high levels of results:

- Co-location of St Basils Home Options staff in housing offices has been very helpful in promoting new ways of working.
- Investing time in regularly briefing staff in other organisations about the work we are doing, changes we are making etc increases referrals and sharing of best practice.
- Investing time with other agencies so that staff are clear about the role of housing in the young people's transition to adult life.
- Investing time with other agencies so that staff are clear about the routes into and out of homelessness.
- Links to other providers, and in some cases direct access to their resources, builds a wide range of options for young people.
- Investing time in 'grown up partnerships' with other agencies always pays dividends.
- Slowing down the young person's crisis will always improve outcomes.
- Linking a young person quickly to non-housing services such as education, training etc, in some cases before the housing issue has been fully addressed.
- Keeping the needs of the young person as paramount helps us to be clear about our role and ensure that young person feels listened to.
- Taking services to the most accessible point possible increases access for the most vulnerable.
- Thinking about prevention as a front line response to homelessness and building it into a triage approach.



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### Further Information

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