



ASK US
Advice toolkit

Ask Us – Understanding the Advice Needs of Young People in Bristol

This resource is part of the Ask Us Advice Toolkit. For more information or queries on any of the topics covered in this toolkit, or to find out about training and consultancy the Ask Us partners can offer please contact enquiries@1625ip.co.uk



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Ask Us – Understanding the Advice Needs of Young People in Bristol

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Introduction

The Ask Us project was a 5- year partnership between Bristol Law Centre, Bristol Citizen's Advice Bureau and 1625 independent people. Funded by the National Lottery Help Through Crisis fund, the project supported young people aged 16-25 in Bristol to access support and advice.

As part of this project, we have researched the advice needs of young people to better understand their advice needs and how best to help them. This document presents the findings of the research for advice agencies and others who are interested in how to help young people in crisis to access the support and advice they need.

Through the project, toolkits were also produced for advice workers and support workers to help them to work with young people.

The findings presented here are based on:

- Interviews with practitioners on the project and other relevant organisations working with young people
- Policy documents and reports on young people's advice needs and access to advice
- Young people's feedback and voice – a range of engagement activities that were held throughout the length of the project
- Interviews with young people who had received support through the project
- Analysis of details of young people helped through the project i.e demographics

The findings relate to 4 research questions

1. What are the advice needs of young people in Bristol?
2. What are the barriers to advice for young people in Bristol?
3. What enables young people to seek advice?
4. What does good practice in advice and support work for young people look like?



1. What are the advice needs of young people in Bristol?

The context for young people

Young people in Bristol and throughout the UK face a range of challenges. Some of these, such as issues around welfare benefits, are faced by people of all ages, but young people's experiences of these issues may differ. It is important to recognise young people as a distinct cohort with specific features but it is also important to remember that young people are not a homogenous group and an intersectional approach is also relevant when understanding young people's needs.

Additionally, a young person's journey to adulthood is often not a linear one. A young person may appear 'grown up' or manage responsibilities we see as 'adult' (such as caring responsibilities) but need support in other areas of their life. As a result, it's always important to start with the person in front of you, seeing their age as one aspect of a complex picture that shapes their needs, ability to seek and use advice and the opportunities available to them.

Especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting impact on wellbeing and the economy, young people may have different outlook to those held by those delivering support due to socio-economic change. As one researcher put it, "[t]raditional linear notions of an individual biographical transition to adulthood depend on a set of economic possibilities that may no longer be in place," (Boddy et al p 291).

Young people often came to case workers with complex situations, and a key skill for support and advice workers was identifying the key issues that required support and advice from a complex picture. It was important that advice workers were able to build understanding with the young person and work with them in order to prioritise and take action on the key issues they were facing. This can be summarised by the approach 'start with the person, not the law.'

Debt

Debt is an increasing problem in the UK however, young people face specific issues around debts.

- Young people sometimes seek support for debts but on investigation, reveal further issues that mean they are struggling financially
- Psychologically, people under 25 are likely to prioritise short term needs over longer-term issues meaning that the short term gains of credit outweigh the longer term consequences of paying back debts.
- Young people may not have been taught about the consequences of loans and debt.



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- There are many myths surrounding debt payment and so it is important to work with young people to help them to understand their rights and responsibilities around debts that they owe- even when these debts were taking out with another person or when the situation seems unfair.

Welfare benefits and poverty

Changes to Welfare Benefits over recent years including the introduction of Universal Credit have increased reliance on support and advice across the country (Trussel Trust, JRF) and the bureaucracy of applying for, appealing and managing benefits claims has also placed an increased burden on individuals and, in turn, support and advice organisations. Young people in particular face challenges in making ends meet.

- In Bristol 16-24 year olds are twice as likely to be affected by food insecurity compared to those aged 50 and above ¹
- Additionally, 13.8% of people aged 16-24 find it difficult to manage financially – nearly three times the level for people of over 50 (5.5%) ²
- Young people were the sector most forced out of employment due to the Covid-19 crisis, starting a ‘youth employment crisis’³. In Bristol, the proportion of young people classed as NEET 15% (2019/20 figures) which is about twice the national average. This is double the figure for Bristol in the previous year (2018/19 - 7.7%) according to Bristol’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment figures ⁴
- The benefits available to young people have been reduced as they “receive a reduced level of Universal Credit, are only entitled to the lowest rate of Local Housing Allowance (shared accommodation rate), and are at greater risk of benefit sanctions.”⁵
- For young people who turn 18, changes to the support that’s available to them can be difficult to understand and leave them to seek help alone
- Young people may not have applied for benefits before and need support to understand and navigate the system.

Insecure housing, homelessness and eviction

Homelessness and rough sleeping are hard to measure however, many of the young people we worked with were facing problems with their housing including notices for eviction, disputes with landlords and other issues were often tied up with complex life situations which made their housing insecure.

¹ [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) — Open Data Bristol](#)

² [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) — Open Data Bristol](#)

³ [How Covid-19 has sparked a youth unemployment crisis \(newstatesman.com\)](#)

⁴ [JSNA Data Profiles - bristol.gov.uk](#)

⁵ [Young and Homeless 2020.pdf](#)



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- Young people may not be aware of their rights and responsibilities around housing and eviction and need support to navigate disputes or evictions
 - For young people in Bristol aged 16-24, the rate of homelessness is 0.81 per 1000, a great deal higher than the rate for the rest of England which is 0.52 per 1000.5 ⁶
 - 30% of young people in Bristol have below average mental wellbeing ⁷
 - According to Centrepoin in 2020, 1318 young people approached the local authority in Bristol as homeless or at risk of homeless. 797 (60%) of those were not supported into housing.

Immigration

Cuts to provision and the ‘hostile environment’ mean that there are many challenges facing anyone who needs support with immigration. From Ask Us, we saw that young people were particularly in need of help when they were estranged from family. This meant they were unable to access documents or evidence their status easily. There is research from across the UK that shows that the asylum system is part of “ a broader legal system that fails to see and treat children as children, and routinely violates the rights of children and young people. Consistently the young people ask that immigration judges should be better trained to deal appropriately with the children and young people they encounter.” ⁸

- Support for immigration has dramatically decreased across the UK in recent years due to changes in policy around Legal Aid. These cuts have reduced “access to justice and the hollowing out of the not-for-profit sector, [and] have had a considerable deleterious impact on those experiencing insecure status.” (O’Nions 2020, p331) ⁹
- The Children’s Society has shown that the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) many children and young people, “particularly those who are vulnerable - may now unknowingly find themselves living in the UK unlawfully, having failed to apply or to have an application made on their behalf to the EUSS” .¹⁰

In addition to these issues there were two cross-cutting themes that affected young people and which shape their need to access support: their mental health and wellbeing and their relationships with others or issues around isolation and estrangement.

⁶ [JSNA 2020.21 - Emotional Health & Wellbeing of Children and Young People \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ [Quality of Life 2020-21\(equalities\) — Open Data Bristol](#)

⁸ [Breaking-the-Chains-Evaluation-Report-September-2020-Final.pdf \(miclu.org\)](#)

⁹ [‘Fat cat’ lawyers and ‘illegal’ migrants: the impact of intersecting hostilities and toxic narratives on access to justice: Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law: Vol 42, No 3 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

¹⁰ [LAC & EU Settlement Scheme | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)



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Mental health and wellbeing

To help support young people, it is important to understand their needs in a psychologically-informed way. Young people may face a range of challenges related to their mental health, for example finding it hard to cope with debt repayments or rent. For young people specifically, mental health has particular impact on advice needs as 75% of long-lasting mental illnesses are first felt before the age of 18 .¹¹This means that young people are often learning about their mental health for the first time at this age

Estrangement isolation and relationships

Social isolation and family or relationship breakdown were often intertwined with young people's need for support and advice. Young people are made vulnerable when relationships with family breakdown, or when those caring for them are unwell.

- 'Family breakdown' is a primary cause of homelessness in England, accounting for 59% of the calls to Centrepoin in 2020¹² and relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, harassment or threat of violence, death of a family member or carer were also highly ranked indicated that young people's basic needs such as housing are often met through family and friends, making them precarious in result of relationship breakdowns.
- Young people often turn to those around them for a whole range of support needs so those who don't have strong relationships with friends or family, or for whom friends and family are unable to provide meaningful support, are likely to have a harder time dealing with challenges around the issues identified above. Recent research showed that "those who lead isolated lives and are not linked into local networks may be at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to signposting to, and support throughout, an advice-seeking journey." (Buck & Smith p 185).

¹¹ [Chapter 2a – Mortality, morbidity and wellbeing \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

¹² [a-year-like-no-other.pdf \(centrepoin.org.uk\)](#)



2. What are the barriers to advice for young people (in Bristol)?

The barriers to advice that young people face are not straightforward and relate to wider problems within advice agencies in terms of being accessible to all communities that need their support. From the experience of Ask Us, there were specific barriers that young people and practitioners identified for young people seeking advice.

There is start inequality across the city and although Ask Us was able to help people from across the areas, it is likely that many young people were unaware of our service and/or were unable to access it. The barriers to access are multifaceted but we identified six key themes.

Experience & Trust – knowing where to turn or how to ask for help.

Young people may not have experience of advice seeking, be experiencing an issue for the first time and be unsure about where to turn to help or how to frame their issue. From speaking to young people and practitioners on the project, knowing how to ask for help created several barriers to advice:

- Having negative experiences had a huge impact on YP making them reluctant to seek help in the future
- Being able to trust an adviser or support worker was key. If the advice worker doesn't build trust then it was harder for them to work together.
- Young people often turn to those they trust for advice. If they don't have family or if their family isn't in a position to offer advice, they often turn to friends who may not offer good advice.
- Young people may not know what their rights and responsibilities are
- Understanding how systems and organisations work and what support might be available.

Material and physical barriers

Physically getting to advice -either in person or online/over the phone was also a barrier. This could be due to geography, lack of funds or resources, or the need to prioritise other issues first. While increased uptake of virtual or telephone support can go some way to help this, research in 2008 showed that even with telephone access, “[t]hose [of all ages] furthest away from an adviser and without transport not only fail to obtain advice more, but also ‘do nothing’ to resolve their problems (rather than handling alone), at a higher rate” (Patel et al 2008, p2093). On Ask Us, the barriers that we're mentioned included:



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- Travel and geography
- Cost of transport
- Not having credit or access to reliable internet
- Timing and accessibility- being able to get to services and use them
- Not having a printer/laptop with adobe- digital exclusion

Wellbeing, accessibility and skills

There are a range of accessibility needs that are important for a young person to feel safe and to be able to participate and engage with your services. As mentioned above, young people we supported faced a wide range of mental health challenges. As a result, young people may not always behave in the ways we expect from a 'good' client for example, missing appointments, being late, not responding to emails or calls. This could be for a number of reasons and it's important to be able to help them to learn how they can meet the norms you expect rather than exclude them

Disengaging or 'hitting a wall'

Young people often hit 'walls' in their support due to no fault of their own, but simply because of the way services are designed. While many persisted and were able to seek help, it is impossible to know how many gave up after hitting these walls. Complex pathways for support, the need to rely on project-based funding and attending eligibility criteria as well as waiting times and stress on services meant that young people often had hit many 'walls' before coming to Ask Us. Some of these included:

- Having complex needs that exclude a person from services that could help them
- Turning 18 and no longer being eligible for support
- Not fitting eligibility criteria for certain projects i.e living in a 'wrong' postcode
- Issue falling outside of criteria for Legal Aid

These issues can be particularly challenging for young people who are living in unstable situations and face complex challenges.

Lack of provision

On a related note, advice services are under pressure, facing huge increases in demand and squeezed funding. Resulting 'advice deserts' mean that services can be hard to reach, involve long waiting times and resilience and resources to persist in seeking support.



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3. How do young people access advice and what are the enabling factors?

Although there are barriers to accessing advice, young people are able to get support from a range of sources. We sought to understand how young people seek help when they need it. This is a question that would benefit from further research however, our project indicated that young people seek advice primarily through local informal routes, often looking to individuals they trust.

- **Place based:** young people not likely to travel but much more likely to drop-in to familiar places that they already visit for other reasons.
- **Friends & family:** young people will turn to those they trust for advice. Having links and a profile within a community is helpful. For those who are isolated it becomes important to find 'problem noticers' in other contexts (i.e. youth work, health). Important also to advise young people in context- working with support network where possible and aware of limitations or issues if friends and family are not supportive or are abusive.
- **Tailored and friendly:** Having a service that's clearly for young people can be helpful as young people may not be certain about how to ask for help. Being clear that you support young people is important to help them feel confident in reaching out.

What helps young people to access?

- A range of access points- online, in person and on the phone
- Flexibility around timings and appointment types
- Trust and openness around your role, availability and how you can help them



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4. What does good practice in advice and support for young people look like?

The barriers and challenges facing young people may be multiple and complex but there are many opportunities to provide and advice to those aged 16-25 as well as marginalised groups more broadly. Again, we return to the principle: “start with the person, not with the law”, emphasising the importance of focusing on the whole person, not just an issue in isolation.

From our experience, there are several opportunities and recommendations that can help improve services for young people:

- Partnership working - young people benefit from having extra support alongside an advice worker. Working with other organisations who provide support workers, or using internal staff/volunteers to facilitate actions and support the young person enables the person to be supported holistically and recognises the complexities and real-life challenges faced by young people.
- Training staff in principles of Psychologically Informed Environments and/or trauma aware approach. Meeting young people on their own terms and having a strong understanding of techniques to do this is important to help young people
- Monitoring how many young people are referred to your service and regularly reviewing the outcomes and service they receive as part of evaluation and reflexive practice.
- A staff member who can be considered a ‘young person’s champion’. Having someone that other organisations can speak to directly about a potential referral.
- Co-production and young people’s involvement in service design can be time consuming and challenging, especially if the young people you support have been living in crisis and may not want to engage further than getting advice. However there are benefits to having someone who can advocate for young-person friendly practices and policies when relevant decisions are being made
- Clear up to date communication with other organisations about what support you are able to give and what you cannot help with
- Triage and case monitoring that’s YP sensitive- ask from the start whether the young person has a support worker- identify opportunities for extra support that they might need and signpost if you can’t provide it



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