



**The
Children's
Society**

Seriously Awkward:

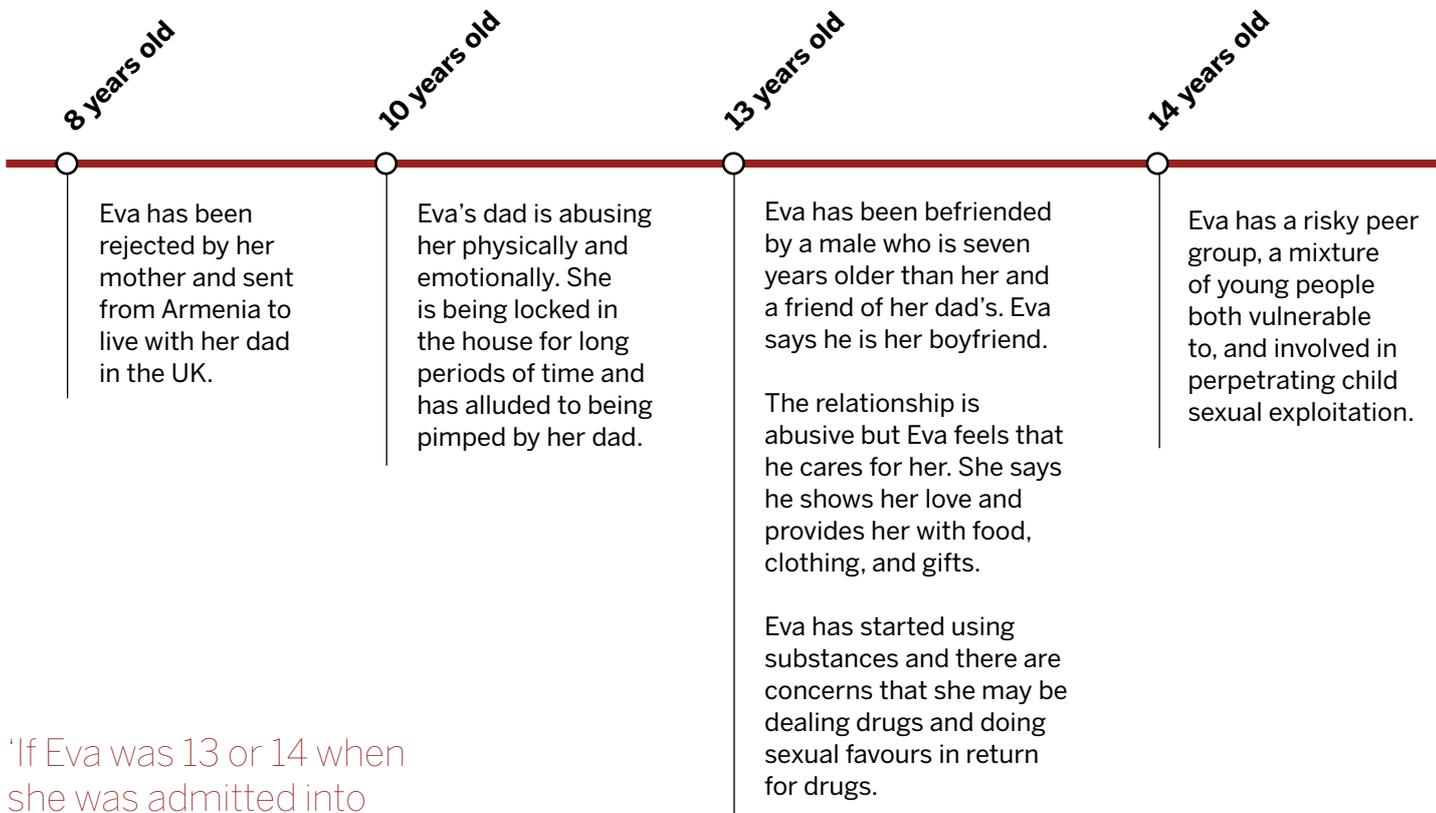
**How vulnerable 16–17 year olds
are falling through the cracks**

June 2015

By Iryna Pona, Sam Royston, Clare Bracey, Amy Gibbs

Case study: A journey of vulnerability

This case study case is taken from interviews with practitioners about vulnerable 16–17 year olds they have supported. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.



'If Eva was 13 or 14 when she was admitted into care the agencies would have done more, but because she was 15 she did not get the intensive support that she needed. Ideally a foster placement would be better than a children's home, but social care will not put her in a placement at this time'

Practitioner



15 years old

Eva has been taken into care. She has been moved into a children's home but is continuing her relationship with the older male.

In time, Eva makes a disclosure to the staff in the children's home about the 'boyfriend', saying that he is violent, possessive, and has made threats to kill her. The police are informed and the man is arrested and given a short prison sentence.

16 years old

Eva's placement in the children's home has broken down and she has moved to a new children's home.

Those trying to support Eva feel that they are starting to make progress now that the 'boyfriend' is in prison, but Eva feels guilty. As she cannot make contact with him things are starting to settle down. She is beginning to form good relationships with the staff in her new placement and at college.

17 years old

When Eva's 'boyfriend' comes out of prison she gets back into a relationship with him. Because of her age there is a perception that agencies consider the relationship with the 'boyfriend' as domestic abuse rather than child sexual exploitation (CSE), making it more difficult to protect her.

Eva has a social worker but she hardly ever sees her and is not really getting any support. The children's home she is in leaves Eva to her own devices. There seems to be an attitude that 'she is 17 so she can look after herself', when in fact she has been robbed of her childhood.

Eva is using substances daily – she says it helps her block out the pain of her past and cope with the present. It's impacting on her attendance at college and she is at risk of being expelled. Eva's outlook now is that she thinks that life is tainted so she should just lead the life she currently has.

Eva now has a leaving care social worker and the plan is for her to live in her current placement until she is supported to move into independent living – but while she has a streetwise demeanour, her past experiences and her current exploitative relationship make her extremely vulnerable.

She needs support to build her self-esteem and awareness of her rights so that she can exit the abusive relationship she is in. Therapeutic work and counselling might help Eva to understand the earlier traumas that she has been through.

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Foreword

We work with thousands of teenagers each year. We see that too often the most vulnerable older teenagers are being let down by the law and not getting basic protections to keep them safe, healthy and happy. We estimate that half a million 16–17 year olds face particular risk of harm because they are already dealing with multiple issues such as poverty, poor health or a lack of supportive relationships.

This period of adolescence is known as an awkward age, but the challenges are seriously awkward for the most vulnerable teenagers falling between the cracks of childhood and adulthood.

Children and young people of all ages can face disadvantage and neglect. However, our frontline work shows that 16–17 year olds in particular are so often let down, the protections and support of childhood stripped away as they face huge life challenges.

Three quarters of parents believe 16–17 year olds are still children and should be protected from harm. Yet this report uncovers dangerous inconsistencies in the law and alarming inadequacies in services for this age group that mean many older teenagers whose needs are not being met do not get the protection they need.

Young people at 16 are becoming more independent but still need advice and protection. This group are even more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation if they have missed out on vital practical and emotional support before then to navigate this important period of life.

The most vulnerable 16–17 year olds in particular are in grave

danger, facing hidden abuse and harm. This age group are more likely to be known to services as 'children in need' because of abuse and neglect at home, to go missing or be victims of violent crime than any other age. They may not live in stable family environments. They are also a high risk group for sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

And yet they are being systematically failed. In many areas they are overlooked by support services, misunderstood by those who support them and let down by the law, failing to be given the same very basic protections as other children and teenagers – or the same rights as adults.

This is an awkward age – both for older teenagers themselves, and for those whose job it is to support them, whether that is family or professionals. But for the most vulnerable, the lack of protection and support is seriously awkward and cannot be ignored.

Society is failing to grow up at the same rate as these teenagers. It is failing to listen, failing to notice, failing to act. It is failing to provide emotional support and care for too many older teenagers.

At The Children's Society, we see behind the armour teenagers so

often put on to shield themselves. The armour that makes them seem troublesome when they are troubled; that makes them seem difficult when what they most need is someone who cares.

We all have a role to play in enabling teenagers to succeed in life; parents, carers, communities, charities like The Children's Society, service providers. Beyond this, the government and local government have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Our recommendations aim to ensure that 16–17 year olds are protected from abuse, harm and neglect, and given the support they need to thrive. That's why The Children's Society is campaigning to improve protections in the law, increase access to services and ensure all 16–17 year olds have their voices heard and their needs met.

It doesn't need to be so seriously awkward.



Matthew Reed, CEO
The Children's Society

Executive summary

Every year nearly 800,000 children across the UK turn 16. This is an important milestone in the life of any child as their rights to make independent decisions expand and future education, career and life choices are made. As most teenagers and parents recognise, it is a period of major change and development.

It is also a period of heightened vulnerability due to a lack of experience in the adult world coupled so often with the desire to want to explore it. At 16, young people are undergoing significant physiological change and can be exposed to new social networks and developing romantic relationships. Some may even be having their first experiences of independent living.

This period of adolescence is often referred to as an awkward age. 16–17 year olds are caught between childhood and adulthood, emotionally and physiologically, but also legally – neither treated fully as adults under the law, nor given the same basic protections as children.

The majority of young people get through this period just fine. The support and care from the majority of families will help them navigate their way from

childhood to adulthood. But for those who do not have a trusted and reliable adult to guide them, or whose needs are greater than their families can manage alone, additional support and protection must be available to keep them safe and help them grow into resilient adults.

In the 25 years since the UK signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹, major changes have been made to deliver on the commitment to treat everyone under the age of 18 as children, safeguarding their rights to protection from harm, provision of services and participation in decisions about their lives. Successive governments have sought to improve support for children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable, through changing and enhancing the legislative framework – from the Children Act 1989 to the Children and Families Act 2014 – and through improving local services to help keep children safe.

The legislative framework in relation to 16–17 year olds remains highly inconsistent, leaving many unprotected in key risk areas such as abuse and neglect. Services can

fail to adequately assess or meet their needs, so older teenagers struggle to access age-appropriate support. Public and professional attitudes can compound the problem, deeming them as troublesome rather than in need, and able to cope and deal with all the issues in their lives on their own.

The Children's Society works with some of the most vulnerable teenagers, facing issues like child sexual exploitation, family neglect, domestic abuse or mental health problems. We see all too often how legal protections, statutory services and practical support fall away when a child reaches 16, leaving older teenagers abandoned, alone, and at even greater risk of neglect, harm or abuse.

'If it wasn't for them [The Children's Society] I wouldn't be where I am. They got me back up on my feet. They don't do what they think's best, they try and understand your point of view of everything'

Male aged 16–17

We estimate that around half a million 16–17 year olds face multiple risk factors, which may put them in need of support and protection without which their current safety and future life chances may be in jeopardy.

In this report we explore the issues that vulnerable 16–17 year olds face and analyse the barriers in legal protection and service provision that prevent them from accessing the support they need and too often leaves them at risk of harm and neglect. The report is based on:

- analysis of the Understanding Society survey to estimate the number of vulnerable 16–17 year olds in England and the range of challenges they face
- analysis of a new poll of 1,004 16–17 year olds and their parents to establish the issues, pressures and responses of teenagers and their families to different issues they face. We also polled 1,000 young people aged 10 to 17 in order to compare the prevalence of issues affecting young people at different ages

- analysis of official data on a number of issues experienced by young people and of the legal framework in place to protect them from risks they face at this age
- interviews with and case studies from practitioners in The Children’s Society’s services to explore the additional challenges faced by the most vulnerable 16–17 year olds
- consultation with young people which explored the challenges faced by the most vulnerable older teenagers. This includes some children supported by The Children’s Society services as well as young people in care, young people and families living in debt and homeless teenagers.

We understand that this is a challenging period for both older teenagers themselves and those who try to support them, whether family or professionals. The law is complex and often fails to protect 16–17 year olds when they are most at risk, whilst support from statutory services falls away at this age. At the same time, older teenagers push the boundaries

and their behaviour can be seen as ‘difficult’ when they are most in need of support.

Yet while the issues are complex, it is simply not good enough to ignore them, leaving teenagers to fall through the cracks in legal protection and service provision. For the most vulnerable teenagers it’s not just awkward – it’s seriously awkward.

There is no quick fix, but there are a number of practical solutions that would ensure all teenagers are protected and supported when they face harm, abuse and neglect during their transition from childhood to adulthood.

Summary of key findings

Many vulnerable 16–17 year olds are being systematically failed by the law and by services. Not only have they endured a difficult adolescence to date, they are often spectacularly let down by the systems designed to support vulnerable childrenⁱ, and not given the same rights or entitlements as adults.

16–17 year olds experience multiple risk factors

Based on analysis of the Understanding Society survey we found that around one in three 16–17 year olds – the equivalent of around half a million across the UK – face five or more risk factors across a range of different areas affecting their lives. These include risky behaviours, poor health and emotional well-being, poverty, and low levels of future aspirations. Around 60,000 of these children face 10 or more risk factors. Last year 70,680 children aged 16–17 were assessed by local authorities as ‘children in need’,¹ meaning they were unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of support by a local authority. Our analysis shows that 16–17 year olds are more likely to be ‘children in need’ because of abuse and neglect at home than any other age group.

Young people aged 16–17 are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner report into sexual exploitation by groups and gangs estimates that 16,500 children and young people were experiencing or at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Of these, 44% were aged 16 or 17 – 7,260 young people – which is likely to be an underestimate as the report explained.²

16 to 19 year olds are more likely to experience abuse from their partners than any other age group.³ This frequency coincides with a lack of information about healthy relationships and sex education as well as a lack of domestic violence services that work with young people.

Gaps in legal protection

There are clear gaps and inconsistencies in current UK law which leaves 16–17 year olds unprotected. In many cases they have neither the same very basic protections as younger children, nor the same rights as adults. For example, the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 does not include 16–17 year olds in protection from child cruelty, despite other laws reflecting the

determination in Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that a person is a child up to the age of 18. At the same time, the UK benefits system and employment protections does not normally treat 16–17 year olds as adults, giving this age group fewer entitlements to financial support to live independently.

‘Because I’m 16, it will be quite difficult to get my own place, because of course you can’t get a tenancy agreement unless you’re 18’

Male aged 16–17

The majority of parents we polled viewed this age group as not yet old enough to look after themselves and three quarters agreed that 16–17 year olds are still children who should be protected from harm. In fact, most parents thought that young people are already protected from cruelty and neglect in law up to the age of 18 and that parents can be prosecuted in such cases, which is not the case.

ⁱ For the purposes of this report we define a vulnerable 16–17 year old as someone who is unable to keep themselves safe and is at risk of harm or who is at risk of not reaching their potential and achieving their outcomes. In many cases these risks go hand in hand. For more details of this definition, see the Methodology section.

Absence of age-appropriate support

The needs of vulnerable 16–17 year olds are particularly acute and they are more at risk of neglect and abuse at home,⁴ sexual exploitation⁵ and domestic violence⁶ than any other age group, but too often these needs are overlooked by professional agencies and services that see them as someone else’s problem or whose statutory responsibilities reduce at 16. In addition, 16–17 year olds can struggle to access the support they need due to their age, and when they do access services, they are often not age appropriate.

Our poll revealed that families play a crucial role in helping young people stay safe and providing support and information on important aspects of life. However, one in every 25 young people we polled did not feel safe at home.

Our interviews with practitioners and case studies show how support services too often fall away at 16, with professional attitudes compounding the problem, as vulnerable older teenagers are deemed to be exercising their choice and independence, and are left to their own devices just when they need support even more to navigate the risks of adulthood.

Lack of understanding

Often teenagers’ reluctance to engage with statutory services is mistakenly perceived by professionals as a signal that help is not needed or that a young person is resilient enough to cope on their own. In the worst cases they can be seen as beyond help and left to go it alone, even when they do not have family support to help them get through difficult circumstances in life³. Practitioners we spoke to described having to confront attitudes of ‘they can look after themselves’ from some staff supposed to be providing support to vulnerable 16–17 year olds. The majority of parents feel that life is harder today for 16–17 year olds than when they were that age. Young people echoed the views of their parents with nearly nine out of 10 (87%) agreeing that they feel judged by society just for being a teenager, with a third stating that they feel judged all the time or often.

Key concerns facing older teenagers

Family, relationships, and support

- Almost half of 16–17 year olds in our poll who feel under pressure to take part in activities such as drinking and drug use said that their family helped them to withstand that pressure.
- Our poll of 16–17 year olds showed that a small but

nevertheless significant group of them experience worrying issues at home. Around 4% of those who took part in our poll reported that they do not feel safe at home. This number is worrying but not surprising considering that around 2% of 16–17 year olds are ‘children in need’ because of neglect and abuse experienced at home.

- Also in our poll around 6% reported that they never or rarely felt cared for and loved and 8% did not feel happy about their relationships with their families. Again, this does not come as a surprise. Our forthcoming research on adolescent neglect shows that around 1 in 12 adolescents aged 15 (8.3%) are not receiving the most basic forms of emotional care from their parents. They rarely, if ever, get help when they have a problem, support when upset or positive encouragement. The same proportion are inadequately supervised. Their parents hardly ever want to know their whereabouts, or seem concerned if they are late home.
- Our poll shows that 16–17 year olds are unlikely to turn to professionals for support and information if they are worried about themselves or someone close to them.

Health and well-being

- The Understanding Society survey analysis shows that around 7% of 16–17 year olds report their health as not being good.
- In our poll with 16–17 year olds a significant number of those polled had felt a range of negative emotions over the last 12 months. One in four said they often or always felt low, with 38% sometimes feeling this and only 9% never experiencing these negative emotions.
- Both 16–17 year olds and parents identified a need for more information and support on mental health issues.
- A fifth (19%) of 16–17 year olds said they don't have the information they need regarding mental health issues and one in ten (11%) said they were unhappy with the choices they have made with mental health issues.

Risks that may lead to exploitation

- The majority of 16–17 year olds polled did not report feeling under pressure to engage in activities such as drinking or taking drugs. However, this was not universally the case – the three activities that young people most frequently feel under pressure to engage in are: spending time with people they do not feel comfortable with; attending

events and parties where they do not feel comfortable; and drinking alcohol.

- Where they did feel under pressure, 16–17 year olds most frequently reported that this pressure comes from friends their own age and peers in school or college. The only exception was pressure coming from people they got to know online to take and send explicit pictures.
- Parents underestimate some of the pressures facing young people – for example, to take and send explicit photos of themselves. Just 13% of parents thought pressure to do this came from online contacts, but of 16–17 year olds who felt under pressure to do this, 38% said they felt this pressure online.

Poverty and inequality

- From the Understanding Society survey statistics we estimate that 1 in 5 young people aged 16 or 17 are living in poverty.
- 16–17 year olds from poor backgrounds on average have fewer friends than those from better off families – nearly a quarter (22%) of those in the poorest families have less than two close friends they could talk to if they were in trouble, compared to less than one in 10 (8%) of those in better off families.
- 16–17 year olds from poor families report feeling a

lot less safe in a range of environments. For example, in the school environment – 92% of those who said their family is 'very well off' reported feeling completely safe, compared to just 45% of those from families who said their family was "not well off at all".

- 16–17 year olds from the poorest backgrounds were less likely to be happy with their life overall – with more than half (54%) of 16–17 year olds reporting their family was 'very well off' saying that they were very happy with their life, compared to less than one in 10 (9%) of children saying their family was 'not well off at all'.

Future prospects

- The Understanding Society analysis shows that around a quarter of 16–17 year olds do not feel optimistic about their future.
- Two of the areas where 16–17 year olds feel least happy are in relation to how much choice they have in life, and how happy they are with their education.
- 16–17 year olds from families who said that they were 'not well off at all' are significantly less likely to report that they are happy with their future prospects. Only 39% of them are happy with this compared to 81% of young people whose families are 'very well off'.

Key recommendations

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 and states they must be afforded rights to protection from harm, provision of services and participation in decisions about their own lives⁷ – this is as true for a 17 year old as for a younger child.

The government, local government, and service providers all have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in society. Our report shows that all 16–17 years olds face increased risks and less protection due to their age – but this situation is even worse for the most vulnerable teenagers.

We all have a role to play to improve the situation for older teenagers including parents and charities, like The Children’s Society. In particular, in this report we are calling for:

1. Better legal protection for 16–17 year olds

The new government should rectify and streamline the legislative framework which currently fails to protect the most vulnerable older teenagers, by conducting a full review of relevant legislation and ensuring that vulnerable 16–17 year olds are fully protected from risk of harm and exploitation.

2. Increased and more flexible service provision for vulnerable 16–17 year olds

The government should change the law to recognise the specific vulnerabilities faced by older teenagers and create a new status specifically for vulnerable 16–17 year olds, which would entitle them

to additional and flexible support during these late childhood years and post-18, to ensure that they are not abandoned when they are most at risk.

3. Greater involvement and participation in decisions that affect their lives

We can all do more to listen to the concerns of young people and support a successful adolescence.

The government and local authorities should ensure vulnerable 16–17 year olds have a right to advocacy, so they are supported to make fully informed decisions.

We would also like to see a number of specific changes related to specific themes highlighted in this report:

■ Protective relationships

The government should raise the age of a victim of child cruelty and neglect from 16 to 18 in the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, to ensure that 16–17 year olds living at home are offered the same protection as younger children.

The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become ‘intentionally homeless’.

■ Health and well-being

The government should establish a right for 16–17 year olds to be entitled to support from Child and Adolescent

Mental Health services (CAMHS) when they need it. This support must be available as early as possible, and long before mental health needs turn acute.

■ Risks of exploitation

The government should raise the age for Child Abduction Warning Notices from 16 to 18, to ensure that the police can intervene where vulnerable 16–17 year olds are targeted by predatory adults for the purposes of exploitation, either of a sexual or otherwise criminal nature.

■ Poverty and inequality

The government should change the law so that families are automatically entitled to continue to receive child benefit and child tax credit for children living with them until they reach 18.

■ For those in Apprenticeships, the minimum rate of pay should be aligned with the under 18 rate of the Minimum Wage.

■ Future aspirations

The government should extend eligibility for the Bursary Fund so it benefits more 16–17 year olds who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or face vulnerabilities beyond the current group. Automatic entitlement should be extended to those living in families with an income below £16,000 and to all those known to the Local Authority as a ‘child in need’.

Methodology

‘Give us a focus and a goal and give us as much support as is needed for young people to succeed’

16–17 year with experience of being in care

This report draws together a number of different data sources to provide a thorough analysis of the risk factors faced by 16–17 year olds across Britain. This includes:

- Analysis of the Understanding Society survey to estimate the number of vulnerable 16–17 year olds in the UK and the range of challenges they face across a range of different areas including health, risky behaviours, family and relationships, poverty and home, and education and aspiration.
- Although the analysis does not contain an exhaustive list of criteria that determine the extent to which young people aged 16–17 are vulnerable, the issues covered present a broad enough spectrum to determine the prevalence of factors that impact negatively on young people’s lives.
- Analysis of a new poll of 1,004 16–17 year olds and their parents to establish the issues, pressures and responses of teenagers and their families to different issues they face. We also

polled 1,000 young people aged 10 to 17 in order to compare the prevalence of issues affecting young people at different ages.

- Analysis of official data on a number of issues experienced by young people and of the legal framework in place to protect young people from risks they face at this age.
- Interviews with and case studies from practitioners in The Children’s Society’s services to explore the additional challenges faced by the most vulnerable 16–17 year olds.
- Consultation with young people which explored the challenges faced by the most vulnerable older teenagers. This includes some children supported by The Children’s Society services as well as young people in care, young people and families living in debt and homeless teenagers.

Criteria of vulnerability used for Understanding Society analysis:

- 24 different risk factors were identified using the large survey dataset ‘Understanding Society’
- The 16–17 year old respondents to this survey were then identified and isolated within the sample, and the numbers facing each of the 24 risk factors were analysed.

- Respondents were then grouped together according to the number of risk factors they faced.
- In the first band, all cases where there were no criteria matched were grouped together with cases where the criteria score was less than 5. Around 65% of all Understanding Society surveys completed by 16–17 year olds fell into this band.
- In the second band, all cases were grouped where the scores ranged from 5 to 9. This group have matched vulnerability criteria across two or more areas and therefore includes young people who may find themselves in need of support and guidance to overcome several difficulties they face. 32% of cases with matched criteria fell into this band.
- The third group included cases where the highest number of vulnerability criteria were matched that scored 10 or more. This group includes young people who are vulnerable due to a high number of risk factors present in their lives. They may be expected to require more intensive support from services. 4% of cases fit into this band of vulnerability.

Chapter 1. Caught between childhood and adulthood

1.1 The last opportunity to get help as a child

16–17 is known as an awkward age, but it can be seriously awkward for those who face multiple vulnerabilities and need additional support to move successfully from childhood to adulthood. Young people of this age will not often want to be defined as a ‘child’ but in terms of their rights, this helps ensure they have the right to expect support until adulthood. Professional attitudes to older teenagers can often result in them falling through the cracks through their adolescent years and emerging at the age of 16 with problems that require more intensive interventions.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁸ defines a child as ‘a person under the age of 18’ and outlines key areas of support and protection that all children should be afforded as they grow up. Childhood is also recognised as a period of greater vulnerability in legislation,

with Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 – the key piece of legislation which outlines the duties and responsibilities of local authorities in relation to children in need of protection – placing a duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their area up to the age of 18, whose health or development may be impaired if they do not get the support they need. Acquiring the status of vulnerability during this time, for example, by becoming a looked after child or being assessed as having mental health needs, may also determine the help and access to services they can get into adulthood.

Old enough to be treated as adults or young enough to be seen as children?

Popular opinion of older teenagers is often not favourable. In the media positive stories are sparse, with a focus instead on

‘troublemakers’ or ‘criminals’. In its latest report, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of a Child shared concerns about the ‘general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents, which appears to exist in the UK, including in the media, and may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights.’⁹

Public opinion is also confused about whether to treat 16–17 year olds as children or adults. Contradictory trends illustrate the dilemma, with the age of participation in education and training being raised to 18 at the same time as 16–17 year olds were given the vote for the first time in the Scottish Referendum election. The debate continues about whether teenagers should be allowed to vote at 16, dividing professional and public opinion.¹⁰

Word cloud 1A: Top 10 words chosen by 16–17 year olds to describe themselves



In our poll of 16–17 year olds we asked how they perceive themselves and how they think their parents or other adults in their life perceive them.

They felt they were trustworthy, hardworking, thoughtful young adults or teenagers with a sense of humour and realism. They mostly did not feel ‘streetwise’ and only one in five picked ‘resilient’. Both ‘adult’ and ‘child’ score very low, indicating the awkwardness of this age, falling between childhood and adulthood.

There were some marked differences between boys and girls, with girls believing they were more trustworthy and reliable, but

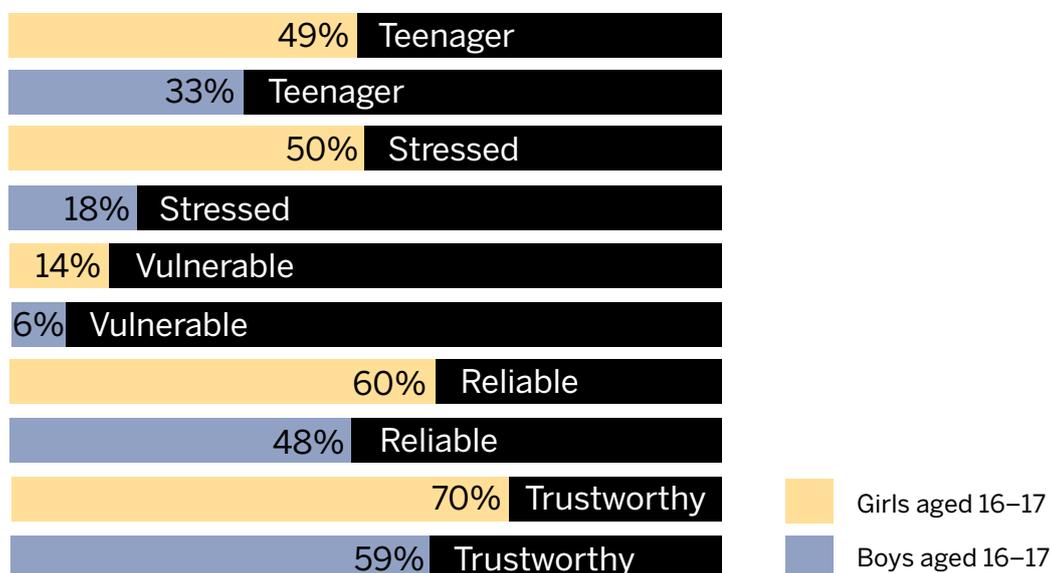
also more stressed and vulnerable (**Table 1B**).

We also undertook a similar exercise with 18 young people aged 16–17 who are supported by The Children’s Society’s services. They also felt they were trustworthy, hardworking and thoughtful with a sense of humour, but compared to our general poll of 16–17 year olds, they did feel they were ‘streetwise’, ‘resilient’ and ‘headstrong’. None of the words attached to an age group such as child, adult, or young adult made it into their top 10 words.

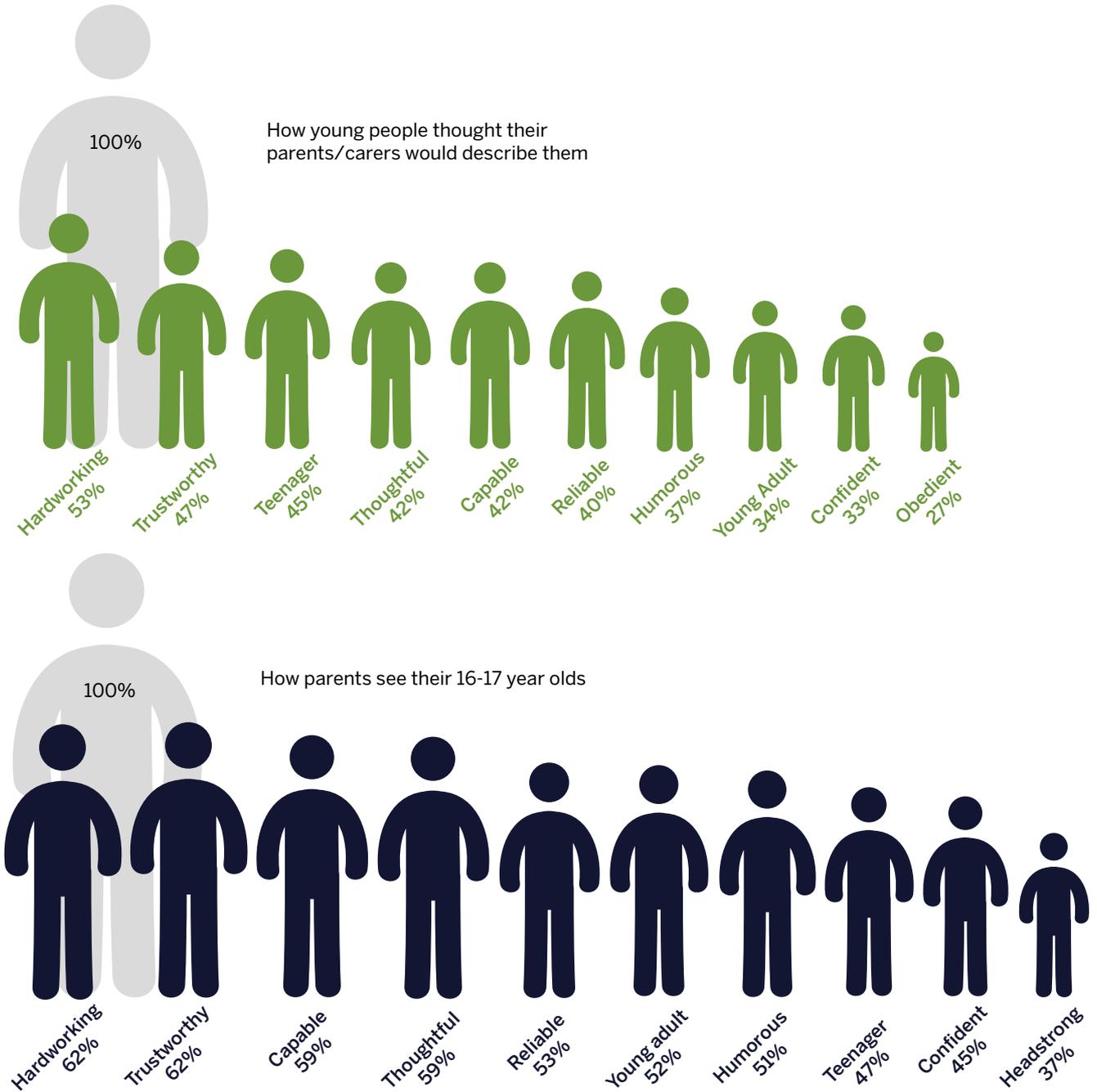
The majority of parents’ feel that life is harder today for 16–17 year olds than when they were that

age. The majority believe this age group are not yet old enough to entirely look after themselves with two thirds agreeing that 16–17 year olds are still children and should be protected from harm. In fact, most parents thought that young people are already protected from cruelty and neglect in law up to the age of 18 and that parents can be prosecuted in such cases (**Infographic 1E**). In reality 16–17 year olds are not protected in this way, as Chapter 2 explains. 16–17 year olds echoed the views of their parents in our poll, with seven out of 10 agreeing that they have felt judged by society just for being a teenager (**Infographic 1F**).

Table 1B: Gender differences in how 16–17 year olds describe themselves



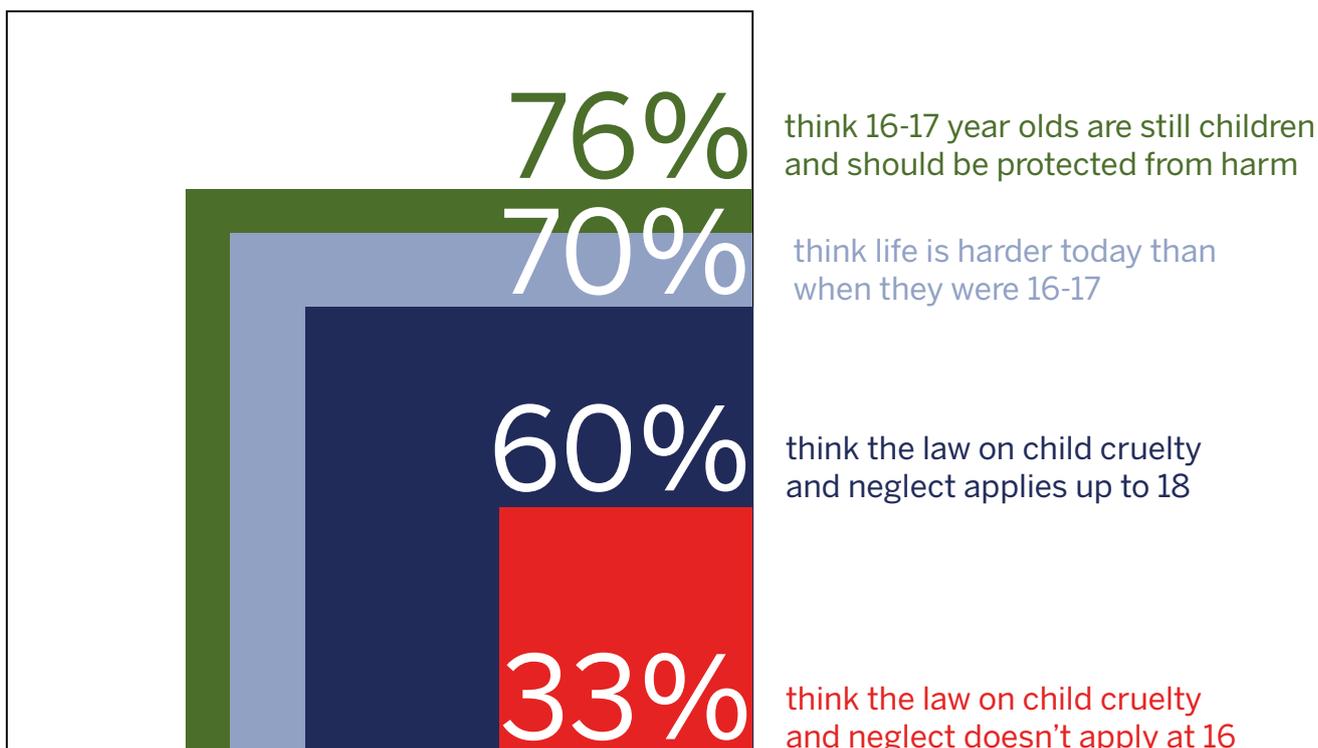
Infographic 1C: Parents' perceptions of 16-17 year olds



Word cloud 1D: How parents feel the general public perceive 16–17 year olds



Infographic 1E: Parents' perception of the life of 16–17 year olds



Infographic 1F: Feeling judged or disrespected by society just for being a teenager

69%

of the 16–17 year olds we polled feel **judged** or **disrespected** by society just for being a teenager sometimes, often or all of the time

Only

8%

said they **never** feel judged just for being a teenager

1.2 More resilient? An inappropriate response from professionals

‘She [my teacher] wouldn’t listen to anything that I was trying to ask or tell her’

Female aged 16 –17

It is interesting to note from the poll results that ‘child’ appears at the bottom of both young people’s and parents’ lists of how teachers and employers would see this age group, with ‘young adult’ dominating in both lists. This choice of words may be reflective of the attitudes they experience from professionals working with children and young people, whereby older teenagers are more likely to be seen as adults than children. In cases where there are safeguarding concerns such attitudes can lead to the needs of 16–17 year olds being misunderstood or even ignored.

Previous research from The Children’s Society has highlighted an alarming lack of awareness and understanding by professionals with safeguarding responsibilities of the needs of older teenagers. Many

professionals see them as less in need of support in comparison to younger children and also as more resilient and able to deal with troubles in their lives¹¹. Such attitudes can lead to their needs being ignored or misunderstood by those that should support them, even when the level of need is high. This is a repeated message coming from Serious Case Reviews and reports into sexual exploitation, with failures in other contexts, such as health provision, showing again and again the danger of such attitudes.¹²

An Ofsted evaluation of Serious Case Reviews also found that agencies too often see older teenagers as challenging, rebellious and hard to reach and treat them as adults because of confusion about the young person’s legal status or a lack of age-appropriate facilities.¹³

Such attitudes contradict what research tells us about the development of young people through their adolescent years. Teenagers’ skills to develop emotions, behaviours and thoughts continue to develop during adolescence, making

this an important and influential period of growth. It is also a period of great vulnerability as different parts of teenagers’ brains mature at different paces, which can lead to developmental imbalances and risk taking behaviour.¹⁴

Combined with peer pressure to take part in ‘adult’ activities, such as sexual relationships or drinking alcohol, and the gradual withdrawal (or, in the case of some neglected teenagers, an absence) of adult supervision, 16–17 year olds become at increased risk of harm.

For young people who have been maltreated in earlier years and whose cognitive functioning may already be impaired, this can lead to an inability to adjust to particular situations, over-reacting to non-threatening cues or ‘disrupted attachment’ such as difficulty in regulating emotions, showing empathy or forming relationships.¹⁵ These factors make them even more vulnerable to engage in activities where they are at risk or being exploited by manipulative adults.¹⁶

1.3 A journey of vulnerability

Young people do not become vulnerable overnight on turning 16. Many of the most vulnerable young people at this age come from situations known to and receiving support from children’s or other services.¹⁷ Too often that support is either insufficient or ineffective and as they cross the 16th birthday milestone this help dwindles away, despite the young person’s vulnerability persisting and even intensifying through the two last years of what is legally considered childhood and well into adulthood.^{18, 19} Practitioners we interviewed described how at the critical point when

older teenagers begin to push boundaries, too often services step back rather than continue to provide the intensive support the most vulnerable 16–17 year olds need to navigate risk and stay safe.

Analysis of our poll results with children aged 10 to 17 years old (**Table 1G**) shows that their outlook on life worsens as they near adulthood. 16–17 year olds are more likely to be unhappy with their family relationships, education, future prospects, and their life as a whole, than younger children.

National statistics on children who require help from children’s services demonstrate the rising level of need at 16–17 and the level of response decreasing for adolescents under the age of 16. For example, since 2009 the number of looked after children aged 10–15 has been decreasing (from 41% in 2009 to 36% in 2014)²⁰ while overall the ‘looked after’ population has been growing steadily. There were 68,840 looked after children as of 31 March 2014, an increase of 7% compared to 31 March 2010.²¹

At the same time, The Association of Directors of Children’s Services reports a steady increase in the number of 16–17 year olds who are subject to a child protection plan or become looked after: ‘...although only 2% of children becoming subject of a plan are aged 16–17, this is the area of greatest increase.’ The largest increase is 16–17 year olds starting to be looked after.²²

‘At 16 a young person from a normal family thinks about getting a car and having driving lessons but all you can think about is being homeless’

Female aged 16

Table 1G: Proportion (%) of different age groups who are happy or unhappy with different aspects of their lives

		10–12	13–15	16–17
Relationships with family	Happy	90	86	77
	Unhappy	2	5	10
Relationships with friends	Happy	86	87	74
	Unhappy	3	4	13
Romantic relationships	Happy	50	57	65
	Unhappy	11	7	12
Place where they live	Happy	83	84	76
	Unhappy	5	4	9
Work	Happy	65	62	55
	Unhappy	11	12	20
Education	Happy	80	71	64
	Unhappy	8	12	18
Choice in life	Happy	69	66	60
	Unhappy	8	10	17
Life as a whole	Happy	86	83	68
	Unhappy	4	5	16
Future prospects	Happy	66	65	60
	Unhappy	5	9	18

‘They sit there and they go like, this is what needs to happen, and then like, they refuse to do what you want to do [...] perhaps if they just listened to you for once [...] perhaps they should just listen to you in the first place. It’s ridiculous’

Male aged 16–17

Whether this increase in numbers may be attributed to greater levels of need among the 16–17 year old population or to the decrease of support to younger teenagers resulting in their needs intensifying by the age of 16, the need for more support for older teenagers is very clear.

Turning 16 also means that young people can have a greater say in decisions about their lives and greater independence from adults. In cases where young people have faced years of ineffective interventions from services prior to turning 16, it can lead to disengagement from services all together.

Our poll with 16–17 year olds shows that the vast majority are unlikely to turn to professionals for support and information if they are worried about themselves or someone close to them.

Table 1H
Who would you turn to if you were worried about your close friend...

	Police	Teacher	Social worker	Doctor	School nurse
Running away from home	3%	6%	1%	0%	0%
Taking illegal drugs	2%	4%	1%	1%	1%
Being hurt physically by someone	9%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Being hurt emotionally by someone	0%	5%	1%	0%	0%
Not getting the emotional or physical support they need from their parent(s)/ guardian(s)	0%	7%	2%	0%	0%
Having a difficult or damaging relationship with someone in their family	1%	6%	1%	0%	0%
Being exploited or taken advantage of by an older adult	12%	7%	1%	0%	0%

Who you would turn to if you were worried about your...

	Police	Teacher	Social worker	Doctor	School nurse
Physical health	0%	1%	0%	12%	0%
Mental health	0%	1%	1%	8%	1%
Friendships	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Romantic relationships	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Education	0%	19%	0%	0%	0%
Sex life	0%	0%	0%	2%	1%

‘We have been in positions where we have literally been counting days and trawling through case notes to try and get a child their 13 weeks so they can have care leaver support’

(from consultation with The Children’s Society’s practitioners)²³

Often teenagers’ reluctance to work with statutory services is perceived by professionals as a signal that help is not needed and that the young person is resilient enough and able to cope on their own. In the worst cases they are perceived by those who should be supporting them as beyond help and are abandoned, even when they do not have family support to help them get through difficult circumstances in life.²⁴

The current safeguarding response does not offer solutions to vulnerable older adolescents that reflect the emerging abilities and desires of this age group and allow flexible support to meet their needs. They are either treated exactly the same way as younger children which can lead to them pushing back even harder against boundaries – if they are lucky enough to be seen as children at all – or expected to deal with issues on their own,²⁵

the way adults would, which is inappropriate for most 16–17 year olds, but especially those with complex needs and those who have no stable support networks.

For some groups of young people, such as those with special educational needs, a disability or those leaving care, the law rightly recognises that the need for support does not stop overnight when people turn 18. Yet for other young people whose level of need may be equally high but who are not entitled to further support – for example, a child who was supported through homelessness but did not become ‘a looked after child’, or who has experienced years of exploitation or abuse – turning 18 is a terrifying prospect.

‘My pathway plan is a waste of paper, waste of a tree. They may as well let the tree live longer’

Female aged 16, with experience of being in care

The consequences of not getting the right support are costly to an individual. They are also costly to society as those who are vulnerable as adolescents are more likely to become long-term unemployed, have mental health issues, or become involved in criminal and antisocial behaviour.²⁶

1.4 Childhood, adolescence or adulthood? Changing perceptions through history

It may be that the perception of 16–17 year olds is still influenced by how they have been seen throughout history. The position of 16–17 year olds in society has changed significantly in the last 100 years but societal attitudes and some legal provisions have yet to catch up.

Whereas at the beginning of the last century 16–17 year olds were significantly likely to have left education, have a job and even to have married (see **Table 1K** for comparative numbers between 1930s and 2010s), modern day 16–17 year olds are more reliant than ever on their families for financial and emotional support. Changes to legislation on education, welfare and housing support mean that young people are staying at home for much longer. More than 90% of 16–17 year olds currently live with their families.²⁷ And the rising cost of living and high independent housing costs make independent living impossible for many 16–17 year olds. Despite this, many legal provisions still date from the 1930s or pre UNCRC times, when life and social expectations for 16–17 year olds were very different.

Table 1I

		Present day	1930s
Education	Numbers	18	School leaving age 14²⁸
Total population of 16–17 year olds	Numbers	1,314,124³⁴	1,399,744²⁹
	% of total population	1.2%	1.8%
Participating in the Labour Market	16–17s	34%	88.5% of Males³⁰ 65.6% of Females³¹
	Adults	78%³⁵	
Unemployed	16–17s	35%³⁶	5%³²
	Adults	5%	14%
Participating in full time Education or Training	16–17s	85%³⁷	N/A
Marriages	16–19	3,315	30,175
	16–17	271	4,017³³

Chapter 2. How many 16–17 year olds are vulnerable?

Vulnerability in adolescence can be the result of numerous combinations of factors. From our frontline practice, we know that a significant number of the young people we support deal with a range of different issues in their lives³⁸ and that the level of an individual's vulnerability increases with the number of issues they struggle with.

Their long-term prospects in adulthood also worsen when there are a multitude of problems present in adolescent years. While the importance of early years experiences is acknowledged and better understood by those who work with children, it is too often overlooked that experiences during adolescent years also present a real challenge. A study into life chances has estimated that adults who have experienced four of a range of risk factors (such as poor parental mental health) during their childhood have a 70 per cent chance of multiple deprivation at the age of 30, compared with a five per cent chance for those who have experienced no risk factors.³⁹

We have estimated the scale of risk factors faced by 16–17 year olds, a combination of which may equate to greater levels of vulnerability among 16–17 year olds using data available from the Understanding Society survey. We analysed a range of factors across five key areas that we know, from both available research and our direct work, influence both risk factors and potential resilience factors to overcome these:

- The lack of protective relationships and social networks
- Poor health and well-being
- Factors associated with risk of harm and exploitation
- Poverty and poor living standards
- Low future aspirations.

Protective relationships and social networks within families and wider friendship networks play an important role in helping a young person deal with risks in their lives. The impact of family on child well-being and safety and long-term life prospects is well researched.⁴⁰ The Children's Society's research into children's well-being shows that children who experience a change in the family members or carers that they live with are twice as likely to have low well-being as those whose relationships are stable and of good quality.⁴¹ The devastating impact of family conflict and relationship breakdown on children is also well documented by The Children's Society's research on children who go missing.⁴²

In adolescent years closeness to friends alongside family relationships begins to play an increasingly important role in aiding social and emotional growth.⁴³ Children who feel isolated from their friends are four times as likely to have low well-being as those who do not.⁴⁴ This in turn leads to a risk of being exploited as well as an impact on mental health.

Among the criteria that we included in this area is the experience of being a young carer. From our experience of working with young carers across England we know that caring responsibilities impact on a young person's access to education and friendship opportunities and has a significant impact on their experience of transition to adulthood.⁴⁵

'Too many cases are responses based on the age of the child rather than actually the child's needs. From practice we know that age group can be really difficult to engage in services and that can be for a number of different reasons. It might be if they have had lots of different circumstances and placement changes in their lives, things that have got them to a point where things are spiralling out of control and also they've been exposed to more and more risk like sexual exploitation and drugs and alcohol issues'

The Children's Society's practitioner supporting young people at risk of sexual exploitation or those who go missing⁴⁶

The variables from the Understanding Society survey that we associated with a lack of protective relationships and social networks included the following:

- Less than two close friends
- Cares for someone sick or disabled
- Does not often feel close to others
- Would not turn to family if upset
- Not supported by family in most or all things

Health and well-being play a key role in a young person’s personal and social development and their ability to participate in activities supporting their development – such as education and employment. Positive physical and emotional health is one of the key components of resilience and determines young people’s ability to enjoy life and deal with and recover from challenges. Emotional well-being is also associated with behaviours that pose a risk to their health, such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse and risky sexual behaviour.⁴⁷

The variables from Understanding Society that we associated with poor health and well-being included the following:

- Poor health
- Longstanding health problems
- Less than five hours sleep per night
- Overall life satisfaction low

Factors associated with risk of harm and exploitation:

As well as contributing to poor health and emotional well-being there is an established link between such behaviours as smoking, drinking, using illegal drugs and young people’s sexual behaviour and the risk of being at harm or exploited.^{48, 49, 50} Often such behaviours are a sign of underlying issues in the young person’s life that need to be resolved, in some they are a coping mechanism young people employ to help them deal with negative experiences they have. On other occasions, as highlighted by numerous court cases across the country, access to drugs and alcohol is used by predatory individuals to entice young people and groom them for exploitation, either sexual or for criminal purposes.

In this area we have also included the poor self-esteem criteria which as we know from our direct work with vulnerable young people is often an underlying

factor in cases of grooming and exploitation.

- Feels useless at times
- Doesn’t feel likeable
- Used illegal drugs five or more times
- Drunk six or more times in last four weeks
- Out after 9pm without telling anyone

Poverty and poor living standards/inequality:

The impact of poverty on a young person’s life is high both in terms of their short and long-term prospects. Poverty impacts on their access to education and educational attainment,⁵¹ is linked to fewer social opportunities, lower well-being and even a greater risk of harm.⁵² Although being poor is not synonymous with a child being at risk of harm, there is a correlation between children from poorer backgrounds being exposed to higher levels of different risks and problems to deal with in their lives.

The variables from the Understanding Society survey that we associated with poverty and poor living standards included the following:

- Cannot afford to replace worn out furniture
- Cannot afford £10 saving per month
- Home not warm
- Cannot afford to keep home in decent state of repair
- Household poverty (living in a household with less than 60% equivalised median income)
- Behind with bills
- Problems paying housing

esteem and therefore one of the determinants of how resilient the young person is to the challenges they face.

The variables from Understanding Society that we associated with future aspirations included the following:

- Not feeling optimistic about the future
- Don't feel as able as most people
- Feels a failure

may not in itself be symptomatic of vulnerability.

Also, we should be clear to state that this is an exploratory approach to analysing this data and so we should treat the findings with caution. This said, around 90% of young people who took part in the Understanding Society survey scored on at least one of the selected criteria of vulnerabilities with the highest number of criteria matched in the same case being 14.

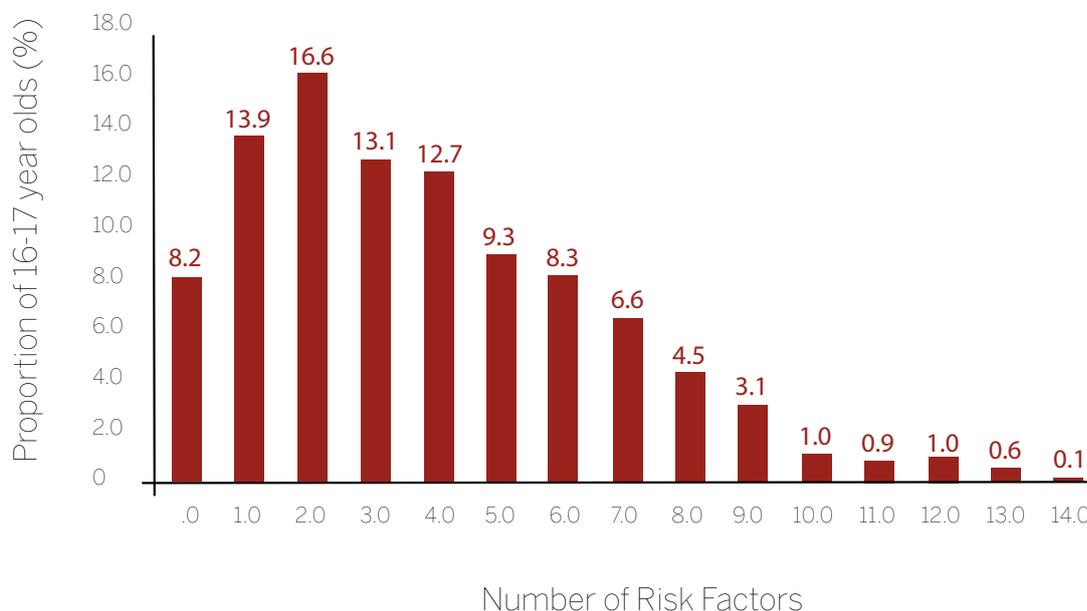
Future aspirations and confidence to set goals and achieve them contribute to building resilience in young people. Low aspirations may also be indicative of low self-

What did we learn from the Understanding Society survey?

Altogether we identified 24 individual criteria that may impact on a young person's resilience and risk of harm. We recognise that any particular individual criteria

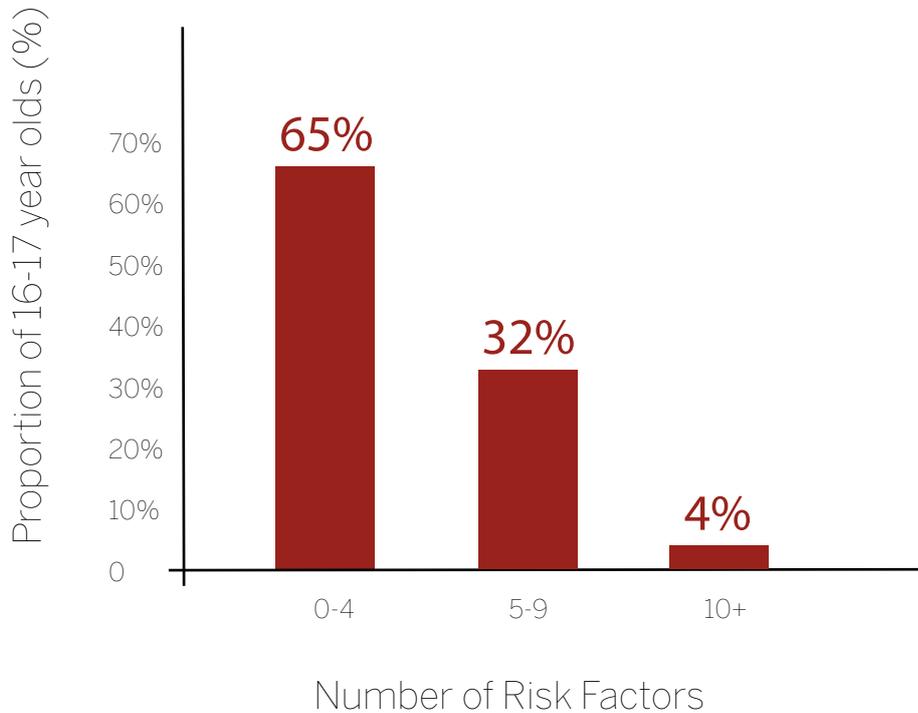
Graph 2A gives the proportion of 16–17 year olds facing different numbers of risk factors (the minimum possible being 0 and the highest possible being 24).

Graph 2A: Proportions of 16–17 year olds facing different numbers of risk factors



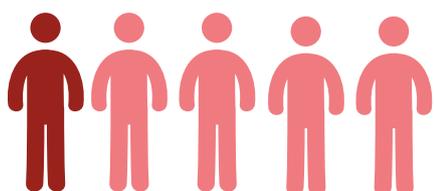
We estimate that around one in three young people aged 16–17 (around half a million across the UK) faces five or more risk factors and around one in 25 of young people aged 16–17 (around 60,000) are at high risk of harm – facing 10 or more different risk factors. These results are represented in Graph 2b.

Graph 2B: Proportions of 16–17 year olds facing 0–4, 5–9 and 10+ risk factors



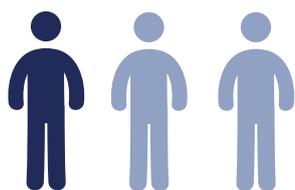
Other key findings from our analysis about the scale of need facing 16–17 year olds:

Infographic 2C



One in five
16–17 year olds
are living in **poverty**

16–17 year olds living
in families in poverty
faced an average of
six vulnerabilities
compared to those
in other families
facing just **three***



One in three
16–17 year olds didn't feel
supported by their family
in most or all things they do

16–17 year olds who
didn't feel supported
by their parents
faced an average of
six vulnerabilities
compared to those
in other families
facing just **three**

(*this difference was statistically significant p=0.000)

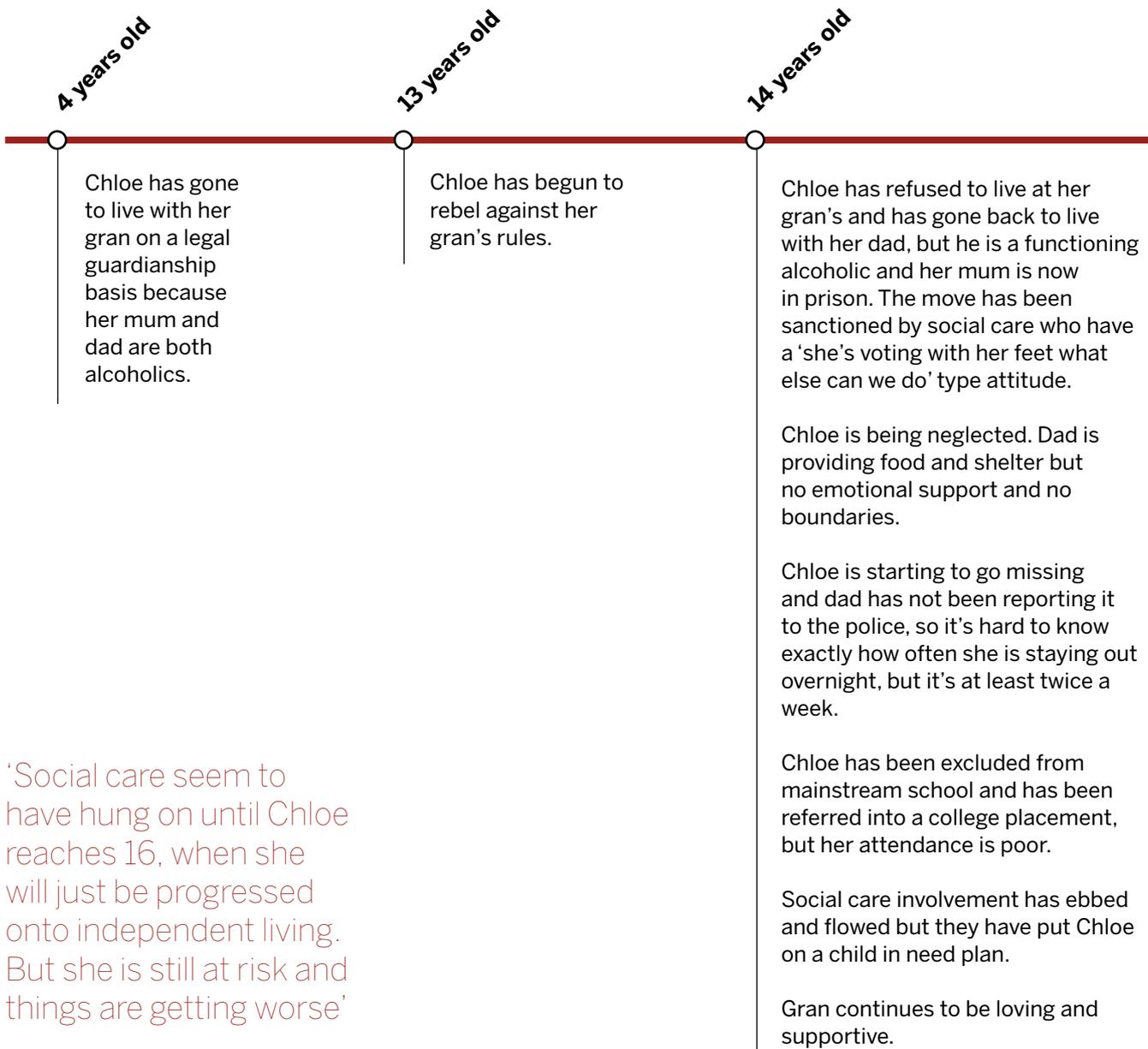
15% of 16-17 year olds
feel a failure

The following chapters consider in more detail each of the five domains we explored through Understanding Society, and consider the number of 16–17 year olds who face vulnerabilities on each of the 24 indicators we analysed.



Chapter 3. Protective relationships and social networks

Case study: A journey of vulnerability



'Social care seem to have hung on until Chloe reaches 16, when she will just be progressed onto independent living. But she is still at risk and things are getting worse'

Practitioner



Chloe has developed a peer group who regularly drink and smoke cannabis leading to petty crime issues. She was recently arrested for anti-social behaviour.

Chloe is associating with other young people who go missing and stay over at risky adult addresses and her name has been linked to a police operation to tackle CSE – a known perpetrator had her name and details on a piece of paper in his flat and had befriended Chloe online.

There is a major concern about Chloe hanging around with a woman in her 20s and an attempt has been made to see if the police could issue a harbouring notice to stop the woman seeing Chloe but this option is not available now because Chloe is 16.

Her gran now refuses to have Chloe back as she feels that she can no longer manage the behaviours that she is showing.

Chloe still has a child in need plan but the plan seems to change daily. Dad is in supported accommodation and because of Chloe's behaviour there is a risk of him losing his current address, so he has said she can no longer live with him.

The response from social care is inadequate. There is a sense that the social worker has just been waiting until she can transfer Chloe to the 16 plus team and progress her to 'independent' living.

Chloe says she wants her own accommodation which has led to differing views from social care and housing – both saying that the

other is responsible for sorting her out with some accommodation, neither taking ownership and actually progressing some support. If Chloe gets her own flat and is supported to live independently there are real questions about the risks she may face, and her ability to succeed under such arrangements.

Chloe is being treated as an adult but still faces huge risks which date back to inadequate support throughout her teens. Now this support is dwindling even further, leaving her abandoned and vulnerable when she is at a crucial transition point between childhood and adulthood.

3.2 Key messages

Supportive families help protect young people during adolescence. Half of 16–17 year olds who took part in our poll identified support from families as one of the key factors that helps them withstand the pressures they face.

Yet, a third of 16–17 year olds do not feel supported by their families in most things (Understanding Society). Our forthcoming research shows that emotional support in particular drops off as children grow through teenage years.

Older teenagers aged 16–17 are more likely to be ‘children in need’ because of abuse and neglect they experience in their families than any other group of children, yet the law does not afford them the same protection from cruelty inflicted by those who should provide love and care.

Young people’s experiences of relationships with families and close social networks

For most 16–17 year olds, any difficulties transitioning from childhood into adulthood are mitigated by the love and support they receive from their parents and carers. The majority of young people this age continue to live at home (93%) and depend on their families for emotional and financial support, a dependence that is increasing in part due to raising the age of participation in education and training⁵³ and persistent difficulties for young people looking for paid employment, and restrictions to access to welfare benefits and tax credits for this group.

Analysis of Understanding Society revealed that many

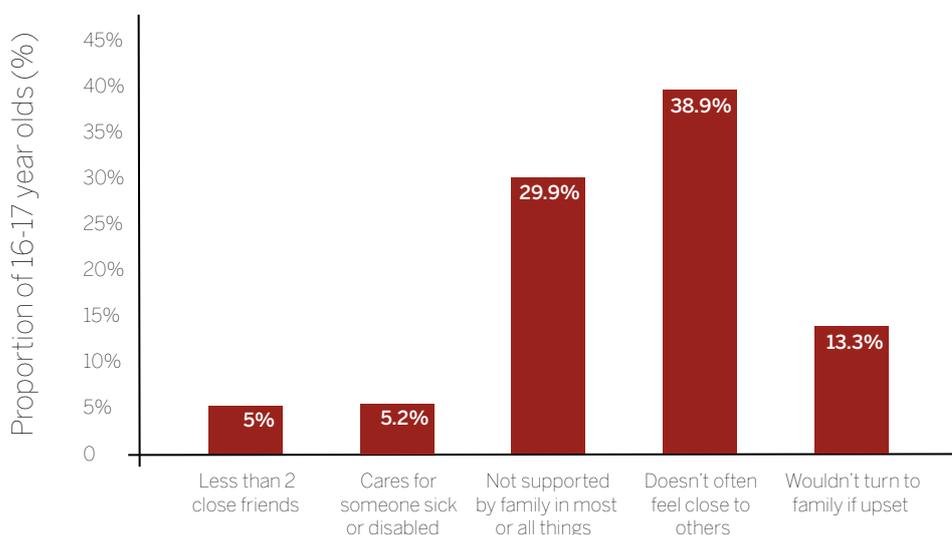
young people of this age may be experiencing difficulties in their relationships and social networks. Worryingly, **Graph 3A** shows that nearly a third of 16–17 year olds (more than 450,000) did not feel supported by their families in most things they did. Nearly four in 10 (around 600,000) said they do not often feel close to other people.

Results from our polling of 16–17 year olds revealed that most feel happy about their relationships with families and friends, feel safe at home and feel loved and cared for. But the picture is not all positive and shockingly one in 25 of 16–17 year olds do not feel safe at home (**Table 3B**) – as revealed in chapter 4, this picture is still more concerning when considering 16–17 year olds living in poverty. This number

is worrying but not surprising considering that around 2% of 16–17 year olds are recognised by local authorities as ‘children in need’ because of neglect and abuse experienced at home.

The majority of 16–17 year olds rely on their parents and families for advice and support, but this is not universally the case, with our analysis of the Understanding Society survey indicating that 13% would not turn to family if they were upset. Many young people rely on social networks for advice and support at times of difficulty but our polling showed that one in 10 had less than two close friends that they could turn to if they were in trouble (see **Infographic 3F**).

Graph 3A: Relationships and social networks



‘[My parents] could have done a lot more, just be there for me more. Understand, help me out, so they got me the help that I needed. Not let me get into the mess that I got into in the first place’

Male aged 16–17

Table 3B: How 16–17 year olds feel about aspects of their livesⁱⁱ

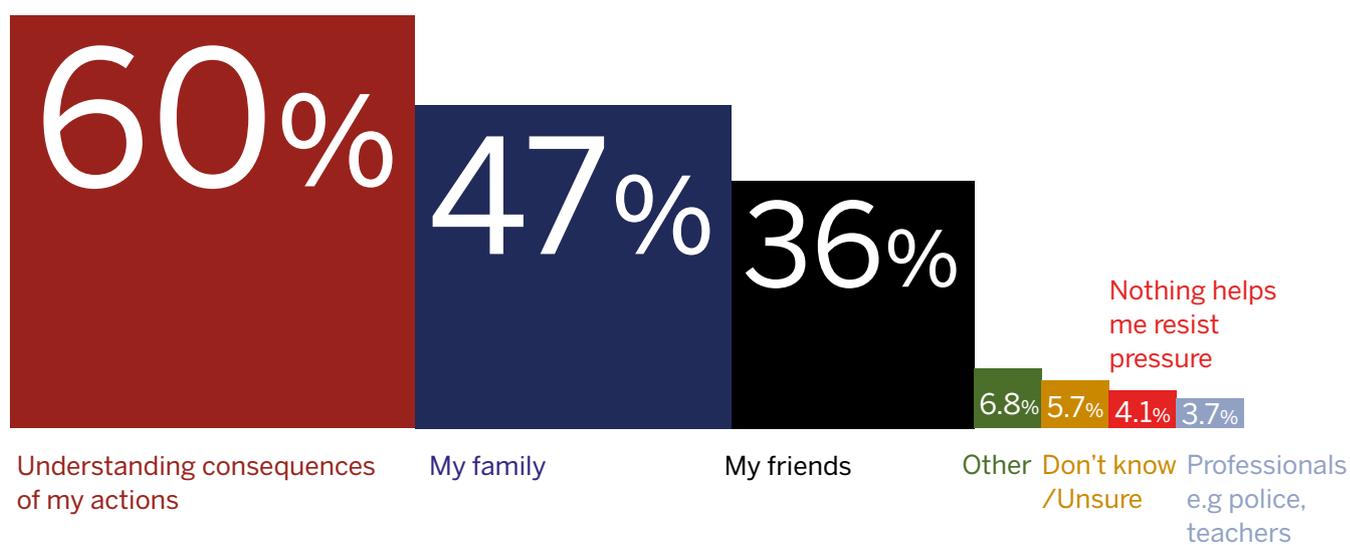
Criteria	Net yes	Net no	Neither happy or unhappy
Happy about their relationships with family	82%	8%	10%
Happy about their relationships with friends	84%	6%	9%
	Completely safe	Safe most of the time	Not safe most of the time
Feel safe at home	81%	14%	4%
	Always or often	Never or rarely	Sometimes
Feel cared for and loved	75%	6%	18%

The poll revealed that families play an important role in helping young people to stay safe by withstanding pressure to take part in activities that may lead to risks and in providing support and information on important aspects of life. For example, almost 50% of 16–17 year olds who feel under pressure to take part in activities such as drinking and drug use said that their family helped them to withstand that pressure (see **Infographic 3C**). Similarly, talking to parents about important aspects of life was the second most popular answer to a question about what would help them to make better choices (See **Infographic 3D**).

When it comes to who 16–17 year olds would turn to for advice if they were worried about their friends or different aspects of their lives, parents and carers are the top choice in most cases (**Table 3E**). This finding is particularly worrying for those teenagers who have harmful or neglectful relationships with their families so wouldn't be able to turn to them for support.

ⁱⁱ In this and other tables where percentages do not add up to 100, this is due to rounding up and a small percentage of responses such as 'Prefer not to say' or 'Don't know/unsure'

Infographic 3C: What helps those who feel pressurised resist the pressure to do thingsⁱⁱⁱ n = 613



ⁱⁱⁱ 39% of 16-17 year olds in our poll responded 'I never feel any pressure to do things I don't want to do in social situations'. This infographic is based on the answers of those who reported that they felt under pressure.

Infographic 3D: What would help young people make better choices on important aspects of their lives



Table 3E Who you would turn to for advice if you were worried about your close friend...

	Parent(s) or guardian(s)	Friends or peers	A sibling or family member of a similar age	Other family member, e.g grandparent	Your partner, e.g boyfriend, husband, girlfriend or wife	Their family	I wouldn't turn to anyone for advice, I can handle this myself	I wouldn't turn to anyone for advice, I have no one to turn to for this
Running away from home	41%	17%	5%	2%	3%	7%	3%	1%
Taking illegal drugs	36%	23%	5%	1%	3%	5%	5%	1%
Being hurt physically by someone	50%	11%	3%	1%	3%	5%	3%	1%
Being hurt emotionally by someone	40%	26%	5%	1%	3%	3%	7%	1%
Not getting the emotional or physical support they need from their parent(s)/ guardian(s)	40%	22%	6%	4%	3%	2%	4%	1%
Having a difficult or damaging relationship with someone in their family	44%	20%	5%	3%	3%	2%	4%	1%
Being exploited or taken advantage of by an older adult	49%	10%	3%	1%	2%	5%	2%	1%

Infographic 3F: Number of friends to talk to if in trouble

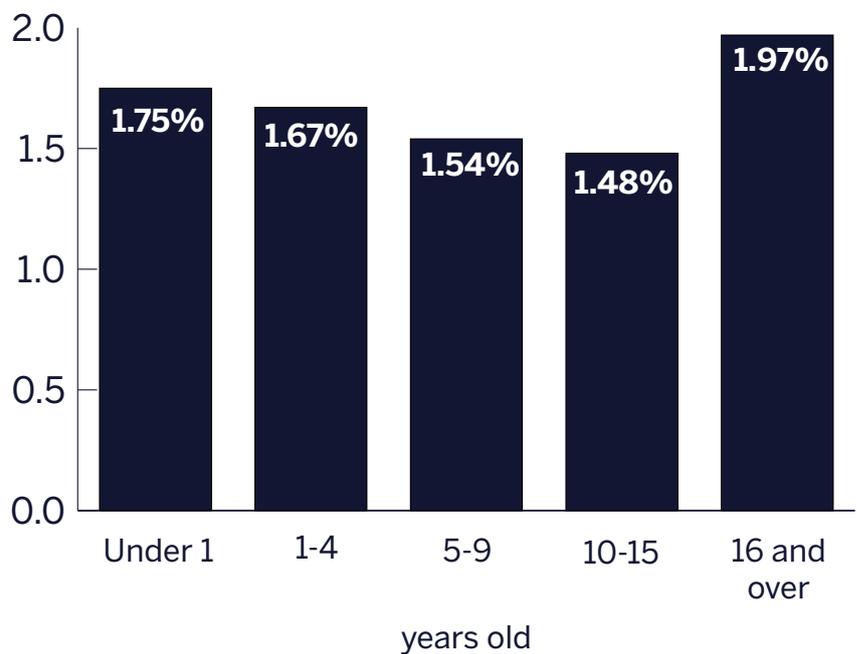


3.3 16–17 year olds experiencing abuse and neglect

Increased dependency on families means that many 16–17 year olds also experience abuse and neglect in families, as well as a range of other serious issues that require children’s services interventions.

Last year 70,680 children aged 16 to 18 were assessed by local authorities as ‘children in need’, meaning they were unlikely to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of support by a local authority. 24,970 of these were ‘in need’ because of abuse and neglect. Our analysis, as **Graph 3G** shows, is that 16–17 year olds are more likely to be ‘children in need’ because of abuse and neglect than any other age group.

Graph 3G: Children in need as a result of neglect and abuse by age group as proportion of population at 31 March 2014⁵⁴



‘I knew there were problems, like because of the arguing and the bullying, the abuse and things like that...but I thought it would just like [go] because it does that - like since I was about six or seven after my biological dad left, it sort of went up, it was really, really good, it was really, really happy for like a year and then just plummeted and went really bad, then it went up again, then it plummeted again so I assumed it would just do that again [...] but of course it didn’t. I wasn’t really expecting that’

Female aged 17

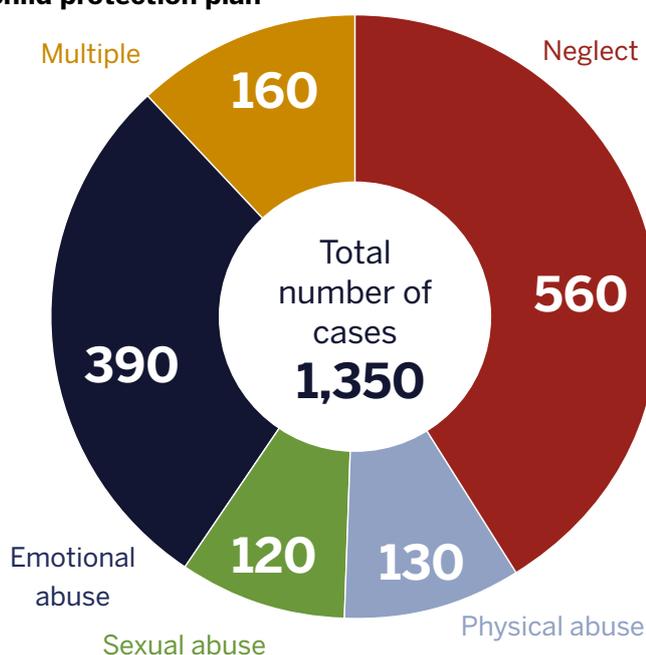
Table 3H Reasons for being a child in need for 16–17 year olds

	Number of cases (or % of all 16–17 children in need cases)		Percentage of all 16–17 year olds out of all children in need category
Abuse or neglect	24,970	35%	13%
Child’s disability or illness	9,200	13%	22%
Parents disability or illness	1,670	2%	14%
Family in acute stress	8,120	11%	21%
Family dysfunction	12,380	18%	17%
Socially unacceptable behaviour	2,890	4%	36%
Low income	450	1%	19%
Absent parenting	7,550	11%	72%
Other than children in need	670	1%	17%
Not stated	2,790	4%	14%

A further 1,350 children aged 16+ were recognised as children at risk of significant harm and placed on a child protection plan last year. The main category of abuse was listed as neglect for 560 of these children and as emotional abuse for 390 of them.⁵⁵

Infographic 3I: 16–17 year olds subject to a child protection plan

Despite our analysis showing that 16–17 year olds are more likely to be recognised by their local authorities as children in need because of neglect and abuse than younger children, they are less protected by the law and services than their younger peers (key provisions in the law which affect this group are outlined in Chapter 8, **Table 8A**). For example, criminal law on neglect defines a child victim of cruelty as under 16, leaving 16–17 year olds unprotected.



3.4 Groups of 16–17 year olds particularly vulnerable to poor relationships and social networks

'The reasons for adolescents coming into care are increasingly more complex, for example respondents told us this could be due to forced marriages, gang related abuse and sexual exploitation, as well as socially unacceptable behaviour. The latter tends to mean that young people are unable to remain with their parents as they are beyond parental control.'⁵⁶

Looked after children and care leavers

Looked after children aged 16–17 make up around 21% of the looked after population.⁵⁷ In recent years The Association of Directors of Children's Services have reported an increase in the number of 16–17 year olds coming into care:

22% of looked after 16–17 year olds live in what is termed 'other arrangements' – neither residential homes or foster care.⁵⁸ Children in care often experience accelerated transitions into adulthood with 3,430 children aged 16–17 leaving care last year.⁵⁹ Many get accommodated in supported accommodation units, hostels and even bed and breakfasts and struggle with the transition to adulthood.⁶⁰

Child victims of forced marriages

Statistics from the Forced Marriage Unit show that in 2014, 11% (140 cases) of forced marriage victims were aged 16–17. In 2013, this number was

25% (325 cases), making them a significant group affected by this crime.^{61,62} Some of the common reasons for forced marriage include parents trying to control what they consider 'disruptive' behaviour, such as wearing make-up or having unsuitable relationships, use of alcohol or drugs, or being in a sexual relationship. Besides being a form of child abuse, forced marriage has several repercussions on a young person's life, including a withdrawal from education and friends, emotional suffering, and financial dependence.⁶³

Children who go missing from home or care

The Missing Persons Bureau report that running away incidents of children aged 15–17 make up the biggest number in missing persons statistics. More than a third (36%) of all child runaways are aged 15–17 and around 45,000 incidents were recorded in 36 police forces in relation to this age group in 2012/13.⁶⁴ Conflict at home is the major reason for young people going missing.⁶⁵

Young people facing homelessness

In our report *Getting the House in Order*⁶⁶ we estimate that every year around 12,000 young people present themselves to their local authorities because they are at risk of homelessness. Only half of them are assessed and the rest are turned away without any support. Only one in five young people who present as homeless get accommodated by their local authority. Despite the Southwark Judgement⁶⁷ requiring that homeless young people aged 16–17 should become looked after by their local authorities, only one third of those accommodated do. The rest are accommodated under other provisions, often in unsuitable or risky places such as supported accommodation that is not safe or inspected, or even in hostels and bed and breakfasts. They typically receive very little or no support.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children

Statistics from the last five years show that the majority of unaccompanied children applying for asylum in the UK are 16 or 17 years old. For example in 2014, 62% were in this older age group, 27% were 14-15 years old and just 6% were under 14 years old.⁶⁸

'After I turned 16, I had to get my own flat as there wasn't anyone for me to live with. I left home because of a disagreement with my foster carers and walked out of the house, into a taxi and straight to my mum's house. My social workers should have explained my family had a lot of problems and helped me look at whether it was a good idea to try to move home.'

Male with experience of being in care

Disabled children and young people

Disabled children and young people we work with tell us that transition to adulthood can be an extremely stressful experience for them and their families. Disabled young people find it hard to have an independent social life and to develop friendships⁵⁵, even though having friends and the opportunity to spend time with them is one of the factors determining the well-being of a young person.^{69,70}

There is considerable research indicating the difficulties disabled young people face, including poorly coordinated transition planning, a lack of accessible and comprehensive information about their options for the future,⁷¹ and a lack of opportunities for them to have a say in decisions about their lives.⁷² Different cultures and eligibility criteria in adults and children's services can also make it difficult for disabled young people and their families to navigate the system without support and to access services they need.

Young carers

2011 Census data shows that there were 55,650 young carers aged 16–17 in England, with 6,690 of them caring for more than 20 hours each week and 4,525 caring for more than 50 hours per week – that is 8% of all carers in this age group. Young carers aged between 16 and 18 are twice as likely to not be in education, employment or training.⁷³

Young offenders

Older teenagers who offend are among the most vulnerable in our society. 15-17 year olds in custody accounted for 1.5 per cent of the total custody population in June 2013.⁷⁴ In 2012/13, the majority (77 per cent) of proven offences by young people were committed by young people aged 15 years and over.⁷⁵ The reoffending rates of young offenders is of grave concern as nearly 70% of young offenders released from custody between 2012 and 2013 were proven to have committed a re-offence within a year.⁷⁶ The transition from custody to community is an opportunity for positive change for young people, but is impeded by the lack of support from families and lack of services to help older teenagers make a positive transition to adulthood.

'I got quite close to her [my young care worker], she was the first one I opened up to I guess. I told her the situation and she just understood and wanted to help me in some way. She was able to find out things better than what I could do in like 1,000 years. And she helped every step of the way.'

Female aged 16–17

3.5 Protection in law

Table 3J: Protection in law and practice – protective relationships and social networks

What protection is (or is not) offered to 16–17 year olds	
The Children Act 1989 legislation and guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Defines a child as anyone who is under the age of 18 ▪ Places ‘a general duty on every local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need’ ▪ Places a duty on local authorities to investigate where they are informed that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm’ and take them into care
The Children and Young Persons Act 1933	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Created a criminal offence of cruelty to a child under the age of 16 only – no protection for 16–17 year olds
The Marriage Act 1949	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allows 16–17 year olds to get married but only with the consent of their parent, guardian, or the courts if consent is unavailable or refused
The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Protects 16–17 year olds from forced marriages
The Housing Act 1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Helps 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness get access to housing but does not offer any additional protections
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduced changes within the youth justice system, including making 17 year olds subject to the same remand framework as 12 to 16 year olds and conferring ‘children looked after’ status to remanded young people. The Act also transferred responsibility for the funding of placements to local authorities.

3.6 What needs to change

Families and close social networks play an important role in helping 16–17 year olds keep themselves safe and away from harm. It is deeply worrying that 1 in 3 young people identify that they do not feel supported in most or all things by their families. More needs to be done to help young people develop and maintain good relationships with key adults in their lives as they are moving to adulthood.

It also needs to be recognised that positive relationships with parents and guardians are not possible for all 16–17 year olds. 16–17 year olds who face the risk of abuse or neglect, violence or cruelty within families must not

be abandoned to deal with the issues on their own. They need the stable and reliable support of professionals to help them negotiate moving to adulthood.

From our direct work with older teenagers we know that such help is often fragmented between different services and ever-changing professionals, preventing young people from developing trusting relationships with consistent professionals who can help them resolve issues and stay safe. The message from young people we work with is very clear – having professional support they can trust makes a crucial difference.

‘Sometimes the parents are as bad as the kids [...] it takes two to tango [...] and if you are going to be even able to remotely fix something, both parties have to be willing to try. And I think in a lot of cases they’re just not willing. Like the parents’ bullying has gone too far, the children, kids or teenagers are like, I don’t want that, you know, I don’t want to be forced into having to fix something which is already so broken. If you broke a plate on the floor and stuck it all together, it would be as whole, but there would still be cracks wouldn’t there? So you know, you can’t fix something that has gone too far’

Male aged 16–17

For many 16–17 year olds such support is not available at all due to the lack of clear status for this age group in the relevant legislative and statutory frameworks. As shown in **Table 3J** 16–17 year olds do not get the same very basic protections as younger children. For example, parents who treat their 16–17 year old cruelly would not face any prosecution under criminal law. Equally, due to the complex interrelation between The Children Act and

The Housing Act, local authorities are too often failing in their duties to support homeless 16–17 year olds, by placing them in accommodation where they are at risk of exploitation, or by abandoning them when their behavior deteriorates.⁷⁷ These inconsistencies and often conflicting messages from legislation translate into practice, where vulnerable 16–17 year olds are allowed to fall through the cracks and are left without help when they need it.

The qualities of the ideal supportive person as seen by 16–17 year olds:

‘Someone who listens and then understands’

‘Someone who does not judge’

‘Someone who acts and has a plan’

‘Someone who spends time with you’

‘Someone who talks with you and not at you’

‘Someone who has the information that you need and knows about the different options’

‘Someone who gave you choice’

‘Someone who focussed on all your needs and not just your specific problem [eg homelessness]’

Consultation with a group of 16–17 year olds

3.7 Recommendations

The government should change the law to ensure inconsistencies are addressed and the vulnerability of 16–17 year olds is explicitly recognised. In particular:

- The age of a victim should be raised to 18 for the offence of child cruelty under Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 to protect all those young people aged 16–17 who live at home and are as vulnerable to abuse as younger children.
- The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become 'intentionally homeless'.

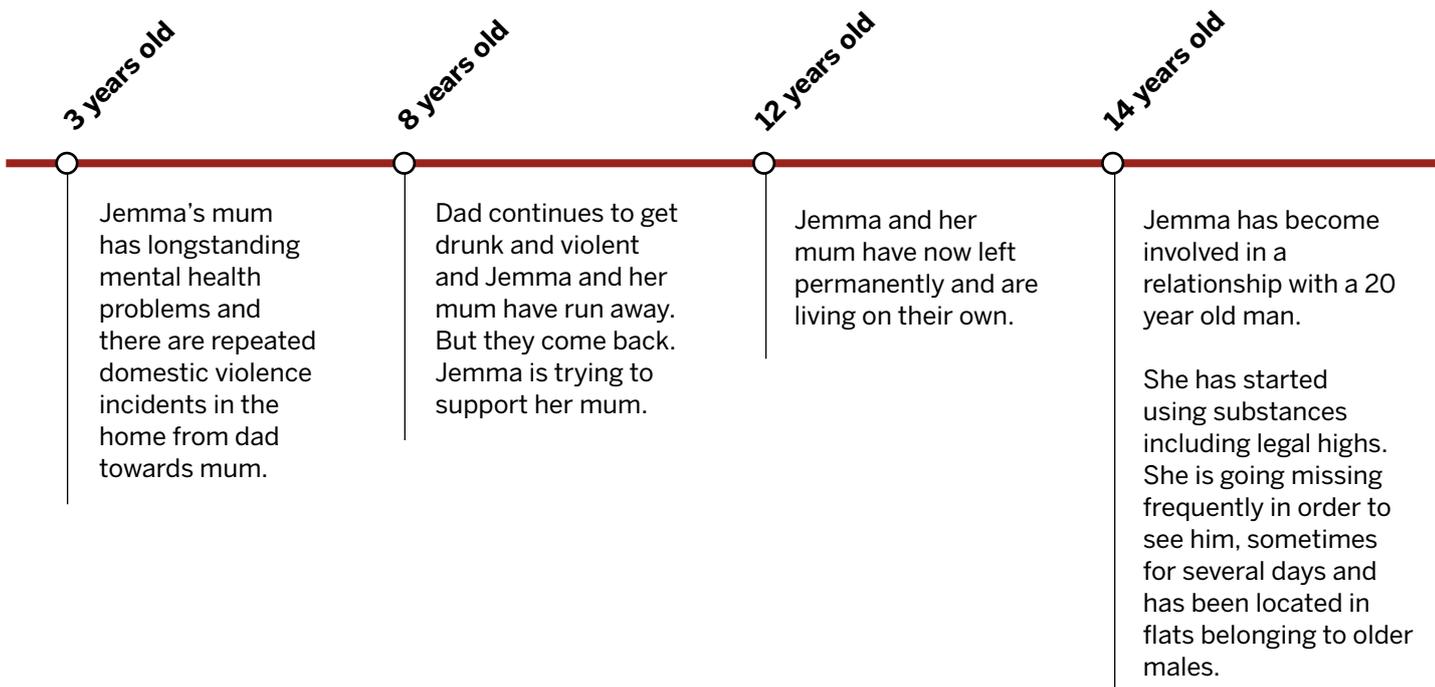
Local authorities should intervene early to support relationships with teenagers and their families, through family mediation and relationship and parenting support services specifically available for families of older adolescents. Much of the breakdown in relationships between 16–17 year olds and their families is linked to long term issues within families.

Where vulnerable 16–17 year olds clearly do not have reliable family support or have experienced abuse and neglect in families, a specific category of support should be placed around that young person for consistent and additional provision from that moment and into adulthood. Local authorities must ensure that such support is provided via the development of a stable, consistent and trusted relationship that would enable the young person to have the support they need.



Chapter 4. Health and well-being

Case study: A journey of vulnerability



15 years old

Jemma has started getting into trouble at school. She has been turning up so her attendance is ok, but she is seen as a problem because she is often angry and staff find her behaviour challenging.

Initially, Jemma's mum has allowed Jemma's 'boyfriend' to live in the home, sharing a room with her.

Later, Jemma's family move her out of the area to live with another family member, but the arrangement doesn't last as Jemma has gravitated back to be with the 'boyfriend'.

A social worker has been assigned to Jemma and she has been placed on a child protection plan. Jemma is not happy as she feels her social worker is too dominant, always telling her what to do, and going behind her back.

16 years old

Things are a lot worse now Jemma is 16. She is even more reliant on substances and is treating increasing independence as a chance to spend more time with her 'boyfriend'. Her relationship with her mum has started to break down.

Jemma has started to self-harm and made a significant attempt to take her own life, saying that she does not want to go on.

Jemma's mum is trying to keep her safe but is struggling. Jemma continues to be on a child protection plan because of the level of risk she faces but isn't happy about it.

Social care has started to try and bring in other services, for example an alcohol and drugs project. The social worker is trying to be really firm and has pushed and supported Jemma's mum to put sanctions in place – for example taking away her phone when needed which has been really effective at cutting off unwanted communications.

The involvement of the drugs and alcohol service is a massive turning point. Jemma has built a good relationship with the worker which has given her the confidence to access CAMHS. She has begun to trust professionals again and can now acknowledge the 'unhealthy' aspects of the relationship she was in and that she had been involved with people who were exploiting girls.

18 years old

Jemma is 18 now. She is growing in confidence, back in education and no longer using substances. She still struggles around relationships with males and recognises she will probably need mental health support – she is still coming to terms with a lot of the things that have happened.

The intensive and persistent support Jemma received at 16 made all the difference – showing how crucial it is that services and professionals stay the course with vulnerable 16–17 year olds, rather than stepping back or giving up when their behaviour becomes challenging and their risks are more acute.

4.2 Key messages

7% of children were reported as having less than 'good' health in the Understanding Society survey.

A significant number of 16–17 year olds have felt a range of negative emotions often or always over the last 12 months, with one in four feeling sad or low, one in three anxious or worried and one in five distressed or panicked.

41% of 16–17 year olds in our poll reported 'always' or 'often' feeling one or more of the following emotions: sad or low, anxious, lonely or distressed and panicked.

On average, parents greatly underestimated the frequency with which their 16–17 year olds had felt negative emotions in the last 12 months.

The law provides some safeguards for all children who require a stay in in-patient settings because of their mental health needs, but there are no entitlements to early intervention support for older adolescents. 16–17 year olds can fall through the cracks between Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS), as their specific needs are not always accounted for when services are commissioned.

4.3 The importance of mental health in adolescent years

Young people’s health and well-being play an important role in determining their enjoyment of everyday life and their ability to participate in the same activities as their peers. When young people do not enjoy a good level of physical and mental health and have difficulties accessing the support they need, their future life chances can be impaired.⁷⁸ Although our analysis of the Understanding Society survey identified that many young people are affected by health problems, the data raised particular

concerns around the level of need around emotional well-being and mental health issues. Therefore, this chapter focuses on issues associated with well-being and mental health needs of 16–17 year olds.

Research has identified that adolescence is a peak age for the onset of serious mental illness, particularly mood disorders such as depression or bi-polar disorder, and psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and self-harm. Serious mental health problems

often first emerge during adolescence and it is thought that about 75% of adult mental health problems, excluding dementia, have their roots in childhood.⁷⁹ The most common mental health problems for this age group are anxiety and depression, but other problems like eating disorders and psychosis can also emerge during this stage of development. Research suggests that from the age of 14 and onwards mental health needs intensify,⁸⁰ as the statistics in **Infographic 4A** confirm.

Infographic 4A

Self-harm and suicide attempts also emerge during adolescence, and are particularly prevalent with adolescent girls.⁸²

One in five girls between the ages of 15 and 17 have **self-harmed**.

Young women aged **15–19** are the **most likely** group to attempt suicide.⁸³

7 to 14% of adolescents have self-harmed, while between **20 and 45%** of older adolescents have reported having **suicidal thoughts**.⁸⁴



12 % of children aged 11 to 15 have a mental health problem

This rate increases to



20 % for 16 to 24 year olds.⁸¹

4.4 Emotional well-being of 16–17 year olds

Analysis of Understanding Society shows that overall 14% of 16–17 year olds report low levels of overall life satisfaction – this equates to more than 200,000 16–17 year olds across the UK (Table 4B).

The results of our poll of 16–17 year olds reflect some of these concerns.

As Table 4C shows, a significant number of 16–17 year olds have felt a range of negative emotions often or always over the last 12 months, with 1 in 4 feeling sad or low, 1 in 3 anxious or worried and 1 in 5 distressed or panicked. Girls overall scored significantly higher than boys on the frequency of these negative emotions.

Around two thirds of 16–17 year olds in our poll have experienced being so worried about things that they have difficulty sleeping at night, with more than one in ten (13%) experiencing sleepless nights often or always. Altogether 41% of 16–17 year olds in our poll reported always or often feeling one or more of the following emotions: sad or low, anxious, lonely or distressed and panicked. Our poll of parents showed that on average they perceived the lives of young people as more positive than the young people themselves do. Parents also tended to underestimate the extent to which their 16–17 year olds were struggling emotionally, indicating a worrying disconnect or lack of understanding between teenagers and their parents on this issue (Table 4D).

Mental health was the area where young people most commonly felt they lacked the advice or information they needed, with nearly one in five (19%) saying they did not have the advice they needed on this subject.

‘Just be there for me more. Understand, help me out. Not let me get into the mess that I got into in the first place’

Male aged 16

Table 4B: Health and well-being

			Number 16–17s
Health ‘not good’	6.70%	n=1,602	103,541
Longstanding health problem	12.40%	n=1,602	191,627
Less than 5 hours’ sleep	1.90%	n=1,411	29,362
Unsatisfied with life	13.80%	n=1,308	213,263

Table 4C: How often in the last 12 months young people felt ...

	Often	Always	Total
Sad or low	21%	4%	25%
Anxious or worried	25%	9%	34%
Lonely	15%	4%	19%
Distressed or panicked	19%	4%	23%
Unable or really struggled to get out of bed	17%	11%	28%
Changes in appetite (eating a lot more or less)	17%	6%	23%
Happy or optimistic	52%	11%	63%

Table 4D: How parents perceive the lives of young people

	Percentage of parents thinking their children felt...	Percentage of young people experiencing...
Unhappiness with life overall	7%	13%
Unhappiness with choice in life	9%	18%
In the last 12 months feeling always or often sad	10%	25%
In the last 12 months feeling always or often lonely	7%	19%

4.5 Groups at higher risk of mental health issues

Some groups of young people are particularly at risk of developing mental health problems.

These young people can find it particularly hard to access support and often suffer in silence and isolation.

Looked-after children

Looked-after children are five times more likely to develop a mental health problem than children living at home with their families (46.4% versus 8.5%).⁸⁵ Yet several studies indicate that only a small minority of those diagnosed get access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Support (CAMHS).⁸⁶ Children and young people placed outside of their home local authority find it particularly difficult to access services. A 2010 study found that nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of looked-after children were assessed as having a mental health problem but only one third (32 per cent) were using CAMHS.⁸⁷

Children and young people affected by sexual exploitation

Poor mental health has been identified as a particular vulnerability factor for young people both prior to and following sexual abuse.⁸⁸ In many cases, young people who experience sexual abuse are only provided

support by CAMHS if they present with a diagnosable condition.

Homeless young people

Homeless young people are a distinctly transient group who often have multiple needs, which may include mental health. 33% using Centrepoin services are experiencing poor mental and emotional well-being.⁸⁹ Many homeless young people are in urgent need of support but face problems in accessing the help they need. Despite the high prevalence of mental health symptoms, only 7 per cent have a formal mental health diagnosis.⁹⁰

Children and young people affected by domestic violence

Domestic violence within the home setting can have a detrimental impact on young people's lives, especially their ability to form trusting relationships, particularly with adults. Children living in families where domestic abuse occurs may be the victims of abuse themselves or may need support to deal with the psychological impact of witnessing abuse, to build their self-esteem and to develop personal safety plans and support networks. It is important to provide services for children and young people of all ages and our practice suggests that

there is a particular need for more support services aimed at adolescents.

Separated children and young people

Separated children and young people subject to immigration control in the UK face many obstacles in realising their rights. The circumstances of separated children are unusually stressful – the combination of what they are fleeing from in their country of origin, the journey to the UK, their arrival and settlement in the UK, and the possibility of a refusal and forcible return. Access to good quality advice and advocacy has been highlighted as a factor that can play a role in alleviating possible stress and depression. Various systematic reviews estimate that 19% to 54% of separated children suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder compared to 0.4% to 10% of other children in the UK.⁹¹ Like trafficked children, separated children often have additional needs for their recovery and rehabilitation.

Children affected by poverty

There is clear evidence of a strong correlation between deprivation and poor child health outcomes.⁹² This is explored further in Chapter 6.

4.6 Protection in law

Table 4E: Protection in law and practice – Health and well-being

What protection is (or is not) offered to 16–17 year olds	
Mental Health Act 1983 and 2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stipulates that children under the age of 18 who need to stay in in-patient settings for mental health reasons should stay in an age appropriate environment – though evidence suggests this is too often not the case ▪ Does not explicitly prohibit admission of children to adult wards ▪ Allows for a person found in a public place who appears to be at risk to themselves or others due to a mental health problem to be detained in a 'place of safety'
Mental Capacity Act 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Applies to people aged 16 or over, so young people must be assumed to have capacity to make the decision about a proposed admission to hospital and/or treatment unless it is established that they lack capacity, as is the case with adults
The Children Act 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Allows for a young person up to the age of 18 to be placed in secure accommodation where it is believed that they are likely to cause significant harm to themselves or others

4.7 What needs to change

Our analysis of Understanding Society and of our poll with 16–17 year olds clearly demonstrates that the emotional well-being of older teenagers is an issue of serious concern that needs to be addressed urgently.

The law surrounding mental health predominantly focuses on safeguarding children and young people with a high level of mental health needs who require a stay in an in-patient setting or a place of safety. Despite many legal safeguards in place there remain serious shortcomings in practice, with many children and young people with mental health needs being placed on adult mental health wards or being detained in police cells, as there are not enough places of safety for children.⁹³

The situation is equally worrying with regards to accessing early intervention and prevention services for older adolescents where there are no specific entitlements to mental health support, which results in young people not getting help until their needs escalate. Older teenagers, particularly those aged 16–17, can find it difficult to secure specialist and emergency mental health support from CAMHS as they

fall outside of its remit in many areas because of their age. In some parts of the country these services are offered up to the age of 16, in others it can be up to 18 or 25 years of age.

Their needs are also not always taken into account when CAMHS are commissioned. Data about 16–17 year olds' mental health needs is patchy and there is a real lack of clarity about whether this group should be part of CAMHS or AMHS⁹⁴ – as a result, some CAMHS strategies omit the needs of this age group in assessments. A snapshot review of Health and Wellbeing Strategies indicate that 16–17s are not included in the adults mental health needs assessments either. Transition between CAMHS and AMHS is today commonly described as a “cliff-edge”⁹⁵ where support disappears and young people disengage with services, as a result becoming at greater risk of presenting with serious mental health conditions.

Access to mental health services for vulnerable aged 16–17 year olds is particularly complicated as they may not be in regular contact with services supporting children and therefore may not get referred to CAMHS as easily

as younger children, for example those still in schools. Where 16–17 year olds disengage from services, the long waiting list for CAMHS may be detrimental to their access altogether, as the short window of opportunity where they would engage and accept support is closed before the help is available.

'[At 16–17 we need] someone who listens and then understands, and no judgement [...] Working with the person and making a plan. Someone to talk to'

Female aged 16–17

Given the high cost to individuals and society of mental health issues during childhood and adolescence, such as emotional and behavioural disturbances or antisocial behaviour and the estimated cost to UK society, which ranges from £11,030 to £59,130 annually per child,⁹⁶ it is crucial that mental health support for older teenagers is a key focus for policy and practice improvements in the NHS.

4.8 Recommendations

The government should establish a right for 16–17 year olds to be entitled to support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHs), which is available as early as possible and long before mental health needs turn acute.

The government and clinical commissioning groups should gather consistent and comprehensive data on the mental health needs of 16–17 year olds, particularly vulnerable groups of older teenagers, to inform the development of services and ensure that these needs are accounted for in children's and adults' provision to ensure smooth transition to adulthood.

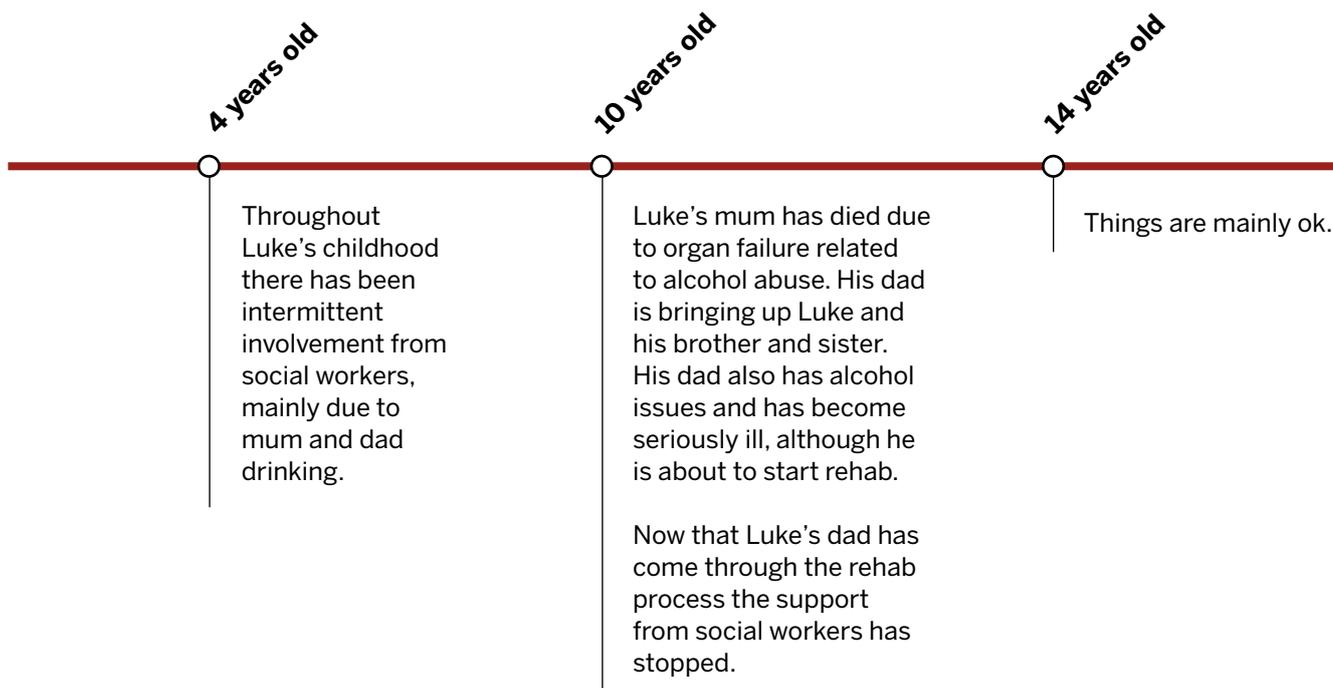
Local authorities and Health & Wellbeing Boards should ensure older teenagers and their parents have better access to information on mental health needs and support available in their area and have an opportunity to inform commissioning of services.

Access to mental health support for vulnerable groups should be improved with better referral pathways in place between safeguarding and mental health services.



Chapter 5. Risks of harm and exploitation outside the home

Case study: A journey of vulnerability



15 years old

Luke's behaviour has started to dip. He has been introduced to 'legal highs' and is now on a downward spiral. He has started going missing, and the episodes are becoming more frequent with Luke often staying out overnight. The police locate Luke and return him home but he just goes missing again straight away.

Luke has started to become heavily involved in offending – mainly theft from shops.

16 years old

Luke's missing behaviour is getting worse and there are now serious concerns that he is being sexually exploited. He is often located in risky addresses and sleeping over with adults who are of concern. Luke is very guarded and closed about who he is with and what he is up to.

As the level of missing episodes have increased, social care have tried to do an initial assessment but Luke and his dad will not engage so they have closed it and ceased involvement.

There are periods where things settle down for a couple of months, but Luke has not been able to sustain this and things keep deteriorating. His case is picked up again and presented several times at the local authority's risk management procedure.

The police are frustrated as Luke is too old for a harbouring notice to try and tackle the overnight missing episodes.

The Youth Offending Team are now involved and Luke has a good relationship with them but is currently at high risk of remand due to the nature of the offending he is involved with which is getting more serious.

17 years old

The current plan is to transfer Luke to the 16plus team, then refer him into a large independent living project with lots of other vulnerable young people.

His support worker thinks this is really concerning because independent accommodation will only facilitate a higher level of risky lifestyle for Luke. The 16 plus team have also decided that they cannot add any extra support so his case has been closed by children's social care, despite concerns continuing to escalate.

5.2 Key messages

The three activities that 16–17 year olds most frequently feel under pressure to engage in are: spending time with people they do not feel comfortable with; attending events and parties where they do not feel comfortable; and drinking alcohol.

The three activities that young people most frequently engage in under pressure are: spending time with people they are not comfortable with; attending events and parties where they do not feel comfortable; and taking and sending explicit pictures of themselves.

In most cases, with the exception of taking and sending explicit pictures, the pressure to engage in activities most often comes from school or college peers and friends their own age. Where young people feel under pressure to take and send explicit pictures of themselves, the pressure most frequently comes from contacts they made online.

5.3 Factors that lead to risk of harm or exploitation outside the home

16–17 year olds are in a period of transition from childhood to adulthood, and this is associated with a gradual decline in supervision from parents and carers. This gives teenagers, particularly 16–17 year olds, opportunities to explore and make more of their own decisions. Young people will be making choices that may have a significant impact on the path of their adult life. Relationships with peers and pressure to take part in activities that may lead to risks also become more prominent for older teenagers.

From our direct work with older teenagers who were groomed for sexual exploitation or criminal

activities we know that there are a number of factors that make them particularly vulnerable. These include some of the issues explored in earlier chapters: experiences of abuse or neglect or poor parenting, poor well-being and feeling isolated from others, being forced out of home and having to survive on their own.

Other factors that we explore in this chapter include issues related to poor self-esteem and the use of drugs and alcohol. These can be detrimental factors in the lives of young people who experience exploitation which make them a target for those who seek to exploit a child’s vulnerability. Drugs and alcohol can both be

used to coerce and control young people and also by some young people to cope with experiences of exploitation.

Our analysis of the Understanding Society survey shows the number of young people who have these risk factors present in their lives (**Table 5A**). The data shows that more than half of all 16–17 year olds are affected by one or more risk factors, with particularly high numbers experiencing poor self-esteem.

Table 5A: Risk issues

			Number 16–17s
Use illegal drugs 5+ times	5.20%	n=1,298	80,360
Drunk 6+ times in last 4 weeks	2.10%	n=1,097	32,453
Out after 9pm without telling anyone 3+ times per month	19.10%	n=1,267	295,168
Feels useless at times	35.60%	n=1,299	550,156
Doesn't feel likeable	6.30%	n=1,299	97,359

5.4 Pressures and risks experienced by young people

'They [older friends] got me selling drugs. I lived in a tent with them for six weeks when my mum first kicked me out. The more I got to know them the more drugs I was doing.'

Male aged 16–17

Our poll with 16–17 year olds explored the extent to which they feel under pressure to take part in and succumb to pressure to take part in activities outside their families that may lead to risks of harm and exploitation. We have also analysed available data on 16–17 year olds whose lives have been affected as a result of those risk factors.

Our poll asked 16–17 year olds about the pressures they face to take part in activities they may not feel comfortable with,

as shown in **Graph 5B**. Although the majority of young people reported that they either do not feel under pressure or do not engage in those activities even if there is a pressure on them to do so, for each of the activities a significant number of young people recognised that there is a pressure and that they do engage in those activities either under pressure or of their own free will.

Comparing the answers of young people aged 16–17 and their parents' on the extent of pressure young people feel to engage in different activities, shows that there are a number of areas where parents' views of how much pressure the young people are under or whether 16–17 year olds engage in those activities with or without pressure differs from what young people report. Some differences are more significant than others. For example, 14% of 16–17 year olds said that they felt under pressure to attend a party they did not feel comfortable

with, whilst 10% of parents reported this. Similarly, 15% of 16–17 year olds reported that they feel under pressure to spend time with people they don't feel comfortable with, while only 9% of parents reported this. 10% of 16–17 year olds reported that they took and sent explicit pictures while only 6% of parents thought it was the case. Parents were, however, more likely to think their children were under pressure to take illegal drugs, with 8% of parents reporting this, compared to 4% of 16–17 year olds. Those parents who thought that their 16–17 year old took illegal drugs were more likely to think that their children do it under pressure (31%) while of the 16–17 year olds who responded that they did, only 9% reported that they did so under pressure. On other pressures, such as taking and sending explicit pictures and pressure to engage in sexual activities the results were very close.

Table 5B: Do you feel under any pressure to do the following:

	Not under Pressure	Under Pressure	Do it	Don't do it	Do it without pressure	Do it with pressure
Stay out later than comfortable	93%	7%	22%	78%	84%	16%
Stay out later than agreed with parents	93%	7%	31%	69%	88%	12%
Take illegal drugs	96%	4%	9%	91%	91%	9%
Drink alcohol	90%	10%	54%	46%	89%	11%
Engage in sexual activity	92%	8%	28%	72%	90%	10%
Take and send explicit pictures	94%	6%	10%	90%	74%	26%
Take 'legal highs'	96%	4%	6%	94%	83%	17%
Attend party not comfortable with	86%	14%	27%	73%	67%	33%
Spend time with people not comfortable with	85%	15%	31%	69%	66%	34%
Intimidate or bully other people	97%	3%	5%	95%	89%	11%

What parents thought about pressures their 16–17 year olds feel

	Not under Pressure	Under Pressure	Do it	Don't do it	Do it without pressure	Do it with pressure
Stay out later than comfortable	93%	7%	20%	80%	79%	21%
Stay out later than agreed with parents	90%	10%	29%	71%	77%	23%
Take illegal drugs	92%	8%	7%	93%	69%	31%
Drink alcohol	87%	13%	49%	51%	83%	17%
Engage in sexual activity	91%	9%	22%	78%	83%	17%
Take and send explicit pictures	95%	5%	6%	94%	69%	31%
Take 'legal highs'	94%	6%	6%	94%	70%	30%
Attend party not comfortable with	90%	10%	22%	78%	73%	27%
Spend time with people not comfortable with	91%	9%	24%	76%	77%	23%
Intimidate or bully other people	97%	3%	5%	95%	86%	14%

Risks of sexual abuse or exploitation

The activities that 16–17 year olds most frequently reported to be under pressure to engage in included 15% who reported feeling under pressure to spend time with people they do not feel comfortable with, with a similar proportion reporting that feel under pressure to attend events and parties where they do not feel comfortable. Nearly one in 10 (8%) of 16–17 year olds also reported feeling under pressure to engage in sexual activity, and more than one in 20 (6%) to send explicit pictures of themselves.

These findings are particularly concerning in light of recent high profile cases of sexual exploitation of teenagers and given research and statistics which suggest that this age group are particularly at risk of being targeted for sexual abuse and exploitation. For example, the Office for the Children's Commissioner report into sexual exploitation by groups and gangs estimated that out of 16,500 cases of those at risk of CSE, around 44% were aged 16–17.⁹⁷

Statistics also show that females aged between 16 and 19 are at the highest risk of being a victim of a sexual offence (8.2 per cent). Around one in 20 females (aged 16 to 59) reported being a victim of a serious sexual offence since the age of 16. Extending this to include other sexual offences such as sexual threats, unwanted touching or indecent exposure, this increased to one in five females reporting being a victim since the age of 16.⁹⁸

Risks associated with substance misuse

We know that the teenage years are ones where many young people may experiment with alcohol and illegal substances. Our poll highlights that one in 10 16–17 year olds reported that they feel under pressure to drink alcohol and around one in 25 signalled that they feel under pressure to take illegal drugs or ‘legal highs’. Worryingly the data (**Table 5B**) also suggests that more than half of 16–17 year olds are drinking alcohol and almost one in 10 take illegal drugs. Around 6% of 16–17 year olds reported that they take legal highs. In the majority of cases where young people reported that they engage in those activities, they indicated that they engage in those activities without any pressure. Understanding Society data indicates that around one in 20 16–17 year olds has taken an illegal drugs five or more times.

Such data is concerning for several reasons. Statistics suggest that substance use at this age is more problematic than for other ages. For example, in 2014, 19.3% of 16 to 19 year olds reported using illicit drugs compared to 13% of 25 to 29 year olds.⁹⁹ Young people of that age are also more likely to engage in binge drinking¹⁰⁰ while those who have been maltreated in adolescent years reported to be more likely to engage in problem drinking.¹⁰¹

This risk taking behaviour can be related to very serious consequences for young people. From our direct work we hear cases where alcohol and illegal drugs, and more recently ‘legal highs’, were used to groom and control teenagers for the purposes of sexual exploitation, or engagement in criminal activities such as drug dealing, shoplifting or begging on the street. In fact, a third of young people accessing drug and substance misuse services are referred from the youth justice system.¹⁰²

‘I was involved in drugs [...] I was finding it very hard to get out of it and I always believed whatever a boy told me. So I was always being used... didn’t have a lot of self-confidence. I was also drinking every night... unhappy. [After support from The Children’s Society] I’m no longer using ANY drugs, not drinking [...] I stand up to temptation and I feel happier in myself’

Female aged 16–17

5.5 Where the pressure is coming from

Compared to younger children, 16–17 year olds spend more time with peers and less time being supervised by adults. This leaves them potentially more vulnerable to external influences outside of the home that may not be in their best interests.

In our poll, a good proportion of young people (39%) reported that they didn't feel under pressure from other people to do things. Where pressure was felt, 16–17 year olds reported that in most situations, most frequently the pressure comes from friends of their age and peers in school and college. The only exception was the pressure to take and send explicit pictures, which most frequently came from people they got to know online (**Table 5C**).

Peer influence can be particularly pressurised for 16–17 year olds who become involved in gang activity.^{103, 104} Although most adolescents avoid involvement in gangs, some are more

likely to be drawn in due to a lack of protective influences from parents, family, and the environment. Factors that increase a young person's likelihood of partaking in gang life include lack of parental supervision, a lack of parental attachment to the child, conflict and violence in the home, parental abuse, familial involvement with gangs, and the presence of gangs in the community and schools.¹⁰⁵

Parents overestimated the pressure that 16–17 year olds feel from older friends and underestimated the pressure coming from school peers. There was also some evidence that they underestimated dangers online. Of those who thought their children were under pressure to take explicit pictures of themselves, only 13% of parents who thought their children came under pressure to do this thought that the pressure came from online contacts, whereas 38% of 16–17 year olds who felt

under pressure to do this, said it came from people they met online. 12% of parents believe that they need more information on online safety to be able to support young people on these issues. Whilst only 3% of 16–17 year olds identified that they do not have enough information, 38% reported that they would like some more information, indicating additional need in this area.

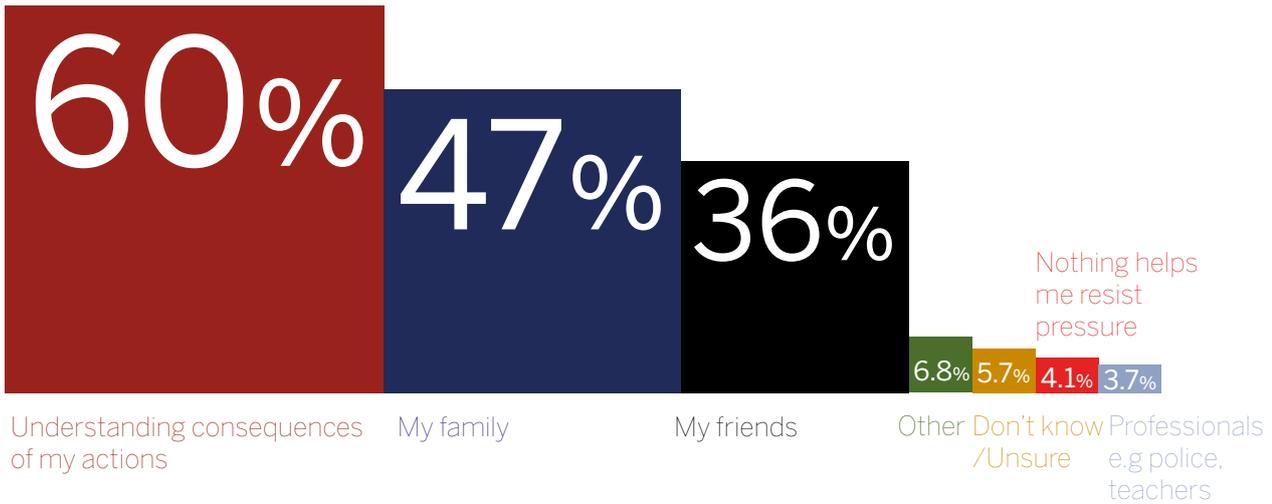
As well as facing pressures from peers, 16–17 year olds were also likely to report that families and friends play an important role in helping to resist any pressures they face, but young people also emphasised the importance to them of independent decision making, with 16–17 year olds most frequently saying that 'understanding the consequence of their actions' helped them to resist any pressures they face (**Infographic 5D**).

Table 5C: Who puts 16–17 year olds under pressure?

You mentioned you feel under pressure to do the following things. Who would you say is putting you under pressure to do them?

	Friends my age or younger	Older friends	Parents or guardian	Other family	Other older adults who aren't my friends or family	School/college peers	Boy-friend/girl-friend	My family	People I have come to know online	Other	Don't know/unsure	Prefer not to say
Stay out later than comfortable	56%	22%	5%	0%	5%	36%	11%	5%	4%	4%	2%	0%
Stay out later than agreed with parents	60%	27%	8%	2%	2%	31%	13%	2%	4%	2%	0%	0%
Take illegal drugs	39%	22%	3%	3%	3%	39%	8%	6%	8%	3%	6%	0%
Drink alcohol	59%	19%	2%	5%	4%	50%	4%	0%	3%	4%	0%	0%
Engage in sexual activity	41%	21%	4%	1%	2%	44%	21%	1%	6%	9%	1%	1%
Take and send explicit pictures	14%	13%	5%	0%	2%	18%	23%	4%	38%	13%	2%	2%
Take 'legal highs'	52%	21%	3%	0%	3%	33%	12%	0%	6%	3%	0%	0%
Attend party not comfortable with	45%	20%	11%	3%	1%	42%	6%	8%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Spend time with people not comfortable with	53%	12%	14%	2%	3%	43%	6%	10%	2%	1%	1%	0%
Intimidate or bully other people	22%	11%	4%	4%	0%	52%	7%	0%	11%	0%	0%	7%

Infographic 5D: What helps those who feel pressurised resist the pressure to do things^{iv}



The role of professionals was less prominent in helping young people to resist the pressures they face. Only 3.7% of 16–17 year olds felt that seeking help from professionals helps them to withstand pressures. At the same time they felt that information and a trusted adult would help them to make the right choices. This is something that we also see in our direct work with children and young people.

^{iv} 39% of 16-17 year olds in our poll responded 'I never feel any pressure to do things I don't want to do in social situations'. This infographic is based on the answers of those who reported that they felt under pressure.

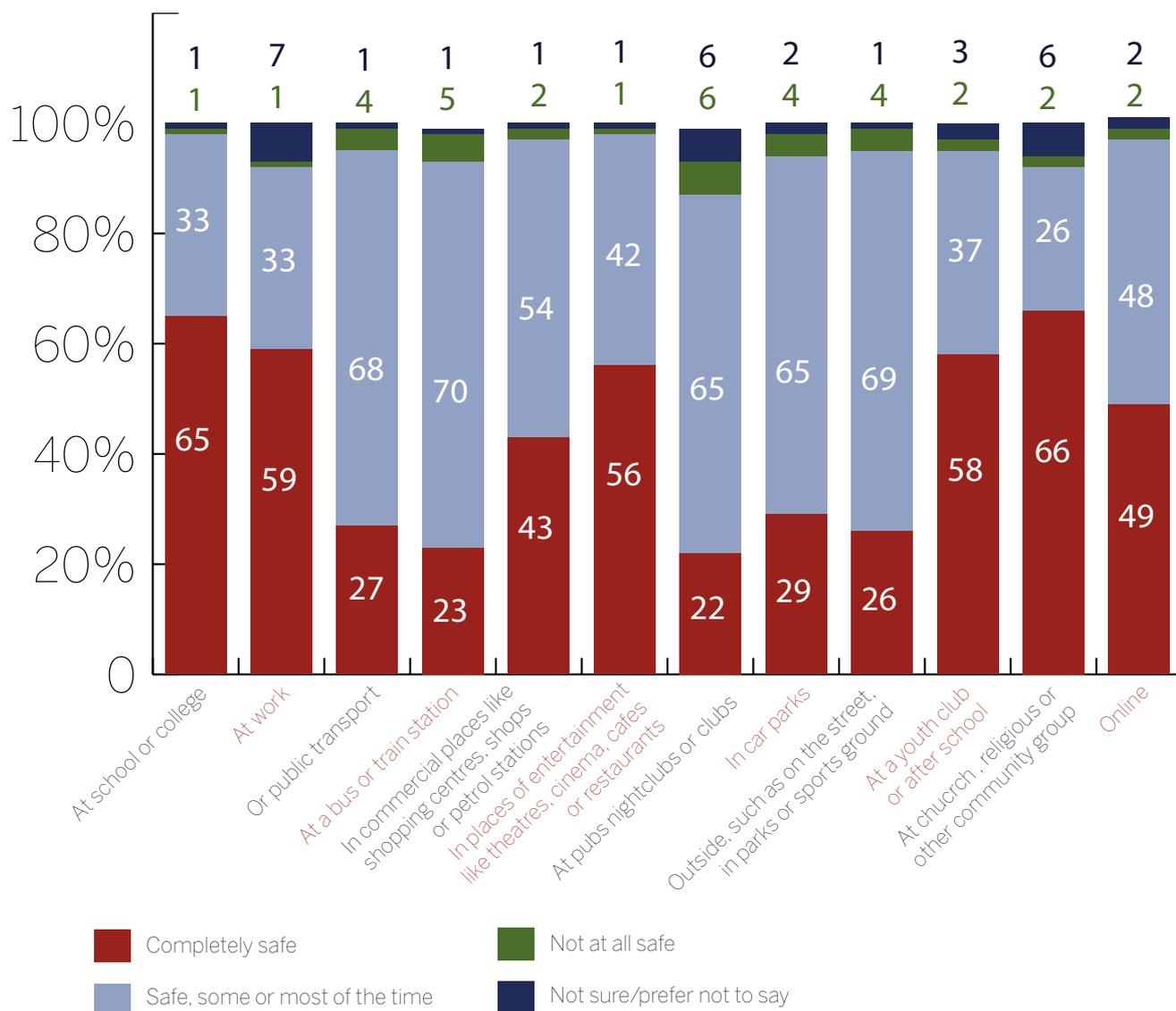
5.6 How safe 16–17 year olds feel in the community

16–17 year olds do not always feel 'safe' in different places (Graph 5E). The streets, public transport and around bus stations are places where young people do not feel completely safe. Yet, these are the places where many very often find themselves.

This poll reflects what is known from other surveys, that 16–17 year olds are more at risk of being victims of violent crime than older adults. The decrease in adult supervision and their lack of knowledge about adult life can leave them susceptible to being

targeted by those engaging in criminal behaviour. 5% of 16-24 year olds were victims of violence in 2013, as compared to 2.4% of 25-35 year olds.^{106, 107} 16-24 year olds are also the most likely age group to be victims of theft.¹⁰⁸

Graph 5E: Where they feel safe



Most 16–17 year olds feel safe at home, but this was not found to be universally true. One in 25 (4%) 16–17 year olds reported not feeling safe at home most or all of the time. This may be for a number of reasons, but 16–17 year olds can be vulnerable to domestic abuse – often a hidden issue. As teenagers begin developing romantic and intimate relationships, they become at risk of being involved in relationship abuse.

In fact, young people aged 16-19 are more likely to experience abuse from their partners than any other age group. This frequency coincides with a lack of information about healthy relationships and sex education as well as a lack of domestic violence services that cater to adolescents.¹⁰⁹

Worryingly, children living in poverty were considerably more likely than other young people to feel unsafe in a number of different locations (including in the home). This is discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Table 5F: Violent crimes

	Victim of Violence 2013-14	Victim of Robbery 2012-13	Wounding 2013-14	Victim of assault with minor injury 2013-14
16-24	5%	1.8%	1.8%	1.5%
25-34	2.4%	0.5%	0.7%	0.4%
35-44	1.9%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%
45-54	1.4%	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%
55-64	0.9%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%
65-74	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
75+	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 5G: Domestic abuse

	Men 2013-14	Women 2013-14
16-19	7.5%	13.1%
20-24	6.5%	10.1%
25-34	4.5%	9.2%
35-44	4.5%	7.9%
45-54	3.5%	7.1%
55-59	2.4%	5.9%

5.7 Protection in law

Table 5H Protection in law and practice – Risk to safety

What protection is (or is not) offered to 16–17 year olds	
Sexual Offences Act 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stipulates that sexual offences committed against children under the age of 13 are always a crime and there is no defence of mistaken belief that the child was older. ■ Sexual offences against children aged 13 to 16 are crimes if the defendant could not reasonably believe that the child was older than 16. ■ Treats 16–17 year olds the same way as adults for most sexual offences apart from cases where offences were committed by a person in a position of trust (eg a relative or service provider). ■ Prohibits taking and sharing of indecent photographs of 16–17 year olds. ■ Contains the offence of sexual exploitation of any person under the age of 18 where sexual services of a child is procured for a promise of payment – although conviction or indictment in cases of 16–17 year olds carries the shorter maximum term than for other age groups (seven years in comparison to 14 for those under the age of 16 and life in cases where the victim is under the age of 13).
The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 (as updated by the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Created an offence of causing or allowing the death or serious physical harm to a child or a vulnerable adult. The Act defines a child as a person under the age of 16 and a “vulnerable adult” as a person aged 16 or over whose ability to protect him/herself is significantly impaired through physical or mental disability or illness, through old age or otherwise.
The Child Abduction Act 2004 The Children Act 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduced Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) which can be used to disrupt contact between a vulnerable child and an adult where there are concerns that the child may be at risk of harm, sexual exploitation, involvement in crime or there are other risks posed by an adult. All children under the age of 16 are protected from abduction. ■ Only permits the use of CAWNs for 16–17 year olds who are in the care of the local authority.
The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 Laws in relation to substance use: Licensing Act 2003 The Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 Confiscation of Alcohol (Young Persons) Act 1997 The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 The Children and Young Persons Act 1933	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Introduced Sexual Harm Prevention Orders/Sexual Risk Orders to protect all children under 18 and vulnerable adults from harm and risk of sexual exploitation. ■ Makes it illegal in the UK for a person under 18 to attempt to purchase alcohol and for someone over the age of 18 to purchase alcohol for them. ■ Places a legal duty on licensed premises to protect children from harm, which can be fined or closed down for selling alcohol to a person under 18. ■ Allows 16–17 year olds to consume beer, wine or cider if part of a table meal and purchased by a person over 18. ■ Gives the police powers to confiscate alcohol and move the person on or take them home if a person under 18 is found drinking in public. If the young person is caught with alcohol in public three times or more, they risk arrest, a social contract or a fine. ■ Schools, sixth forms and the police have the right to confiscate legal highs from 16–17 year olds, while local authorities are able to ban legal highs from the area entirely. ■ In addition to alcohol, it is illegal to sell cigarettes or tobacco products (including cigarette papers) to those under 18, however the law does not prohibit the use of tobacco products by 16–17 year olds.
The Children and Families Act 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Allows a penalty notice to be given to parents of children under the age of 18 if they smoke in the car with their children.

5.8 What needs to change

As the data shows, 16–17 year olds deal with many issues outside their families and come under many different pressures to engage in activities that can place them at risk of harm or of being exploited. A positive finding is that the majority of 16–17 year olds feel resilient to pressures they are under, yet for those without protective social networks or lacking enough information, knowledge or experience to deal with those pressures, vital help and protection is not always there to keep them safe.

Our analysis also clearly shows that much of the pressure that 16–17 year olds face come from their peers. It is true in relation to all aspects of 16–17 year olds lives, whether it relates to drug and alcohol use or to pressures to attend parties where they do not feel comfortable.

The safeguarding risks arising from peer pressure are not adequately identified and assessed in the current safeguarding framework, which

predominantly focuses on risks experienced in the family context. The safeguarding response does not adequately address new threats, such as those arising from online socialising. As a result, older teenagers are falling through the cracks and can be prey to exploitation without the protection they need.

Legal protections are also not consistent in relation to the risks that 16–17 year olds face outside their families. There are many protections in place in case of alcohol use but the emerging threat of young people using 'legal highs' is not yet fully addressed. Despite the high prominence on the national and local agenda of tackling of child sexual exploitation, legal protections for 16–17 year olds are not as strong as for younger children, making it very difficult for them to bring perpetrators to justice and get help to overcome those experiences. The government must ensure these gaps in the law are closed.

'It's not just 'boyfriend' grooming, you see other girls and boys grooming young people, and taking other young girls to sex parties or parties where they can get drink and drugs.'¹¹⁰

Practitioner working with young people at risk of sexual exploitation

'There are challenges around 16–17 olds with legislation. The Child Abduction Act goes out of the window once a child reaches 16'

Staff Officer to the National Policing Lead on Missing Persons, ACPO

5.9 Recommendations

The government should raise the age for Child Abduction Warning Notices from 16 to 18, to ensure that the police can intervene where vulnerable 16–17 year olds are targeted by predatory adults for the purposes of exploitation, either of a sexual or criminal nature.

The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become intentionally homeless. Often those in unsuitable accommodation, such as unregulated supported accommodation or hostels and bed and breakfasts, are at very high risk of being targeted for exploitation.

The government should ensure the new Victims Law recognises 16–17 year olds as a particularly vulnerable group of victims and establish a new status with associated protections. This should ensure that they get additional support when their cases are being investigated and going through the court process, and ensure that they have access to support to overcome their experiences.

The government should develop a national Register of Missing Children and a system for police to flag older teenagers who may be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, which would allow the police to more easily identify older teenagers at risk and ensure they are treated with due priority and urgency.



Chapter 6. Poverty and inequality

Case study: A journey of vulnerability

Jamie has lived in care since he was three years old.



‘Jamie needed more support when he was 17. As soon as he turned 18 he was expected to be able to manage his finances independently, and he hadn’t been given enough advice and guidance to help him with this transition, so he ended up in debt’

The Children’s Society practitioner

17 years old

Jamie moves into his own place: 'they went, here's your house, here's your nine hours support a week, get on with it...kind of thing.'

Until his 18th birthday, the local authority is responsible for providing for Jamie. His rent is paid and he is exempt from Council Tax because he is under 18. His social worker has helped him to put a budget together but otherwise he is getting very little support despite being vulnerable after leaving care.

18 years old

Now that Jamie is 18, he is responsible for managing his own finances.

Jamie has found a job and has come off benefits. Things are ok for a while, but he has been ill and has to take time off work. He gets sick pay, which is about £60 a week – a lot less than the normal pay he receives, and as a result he is starting to fall behind with paying his bills.

Jamie is starting to get into debt and has been using credit cards and taken out a payday loan to try and balance his living costs. He hasn't had any advice on debt management and his social worker hasn't been around much to help him, despite him being put into an independent flat aged 17.

'I was kind of on my own with it [to manage debts]. It was a bit of a one man battle.'

19 years old

Jamie is trying to gain control of his financial situation. He has been trying to get debt management advice but says the company won't help him. He attempted to negotiate with the council about his arrears, but he has received legal summons for his council tax bills. He has tried to explain his situation, but Jamie says they are not taking him seriously because of his age and he's finding it difficult to speak to someone. He is really struggling with debt while he is out of work and on benefits.

6.2 Key messages

The Understanding Society data shows the scale of financial pressure face families with 16–17 year olds – 14% are struggling with housing costs, and one in 10 16–17 year olds live in families which are behind on household bills.

The poll with 16–17 year olds showed that those from the poorest backgrounds were nearly three times less likely than children from the wealthiest families to be happy with their life overall. 16–17 year olds living in poverty are less likely to feel safe in most places than children from better off families. Whilst less than one in 10 16–17 year olds from families who are ‘very well off’ don’t feel completely safe at school, more than half (55%) of children in families that are “not well off at all” don’t feel completely safe at school.

Some groups of 16–17 year olds are at particularly high risk of being affected by poverty. This includes those living on their own, disabled young people, and asylum seeking families.

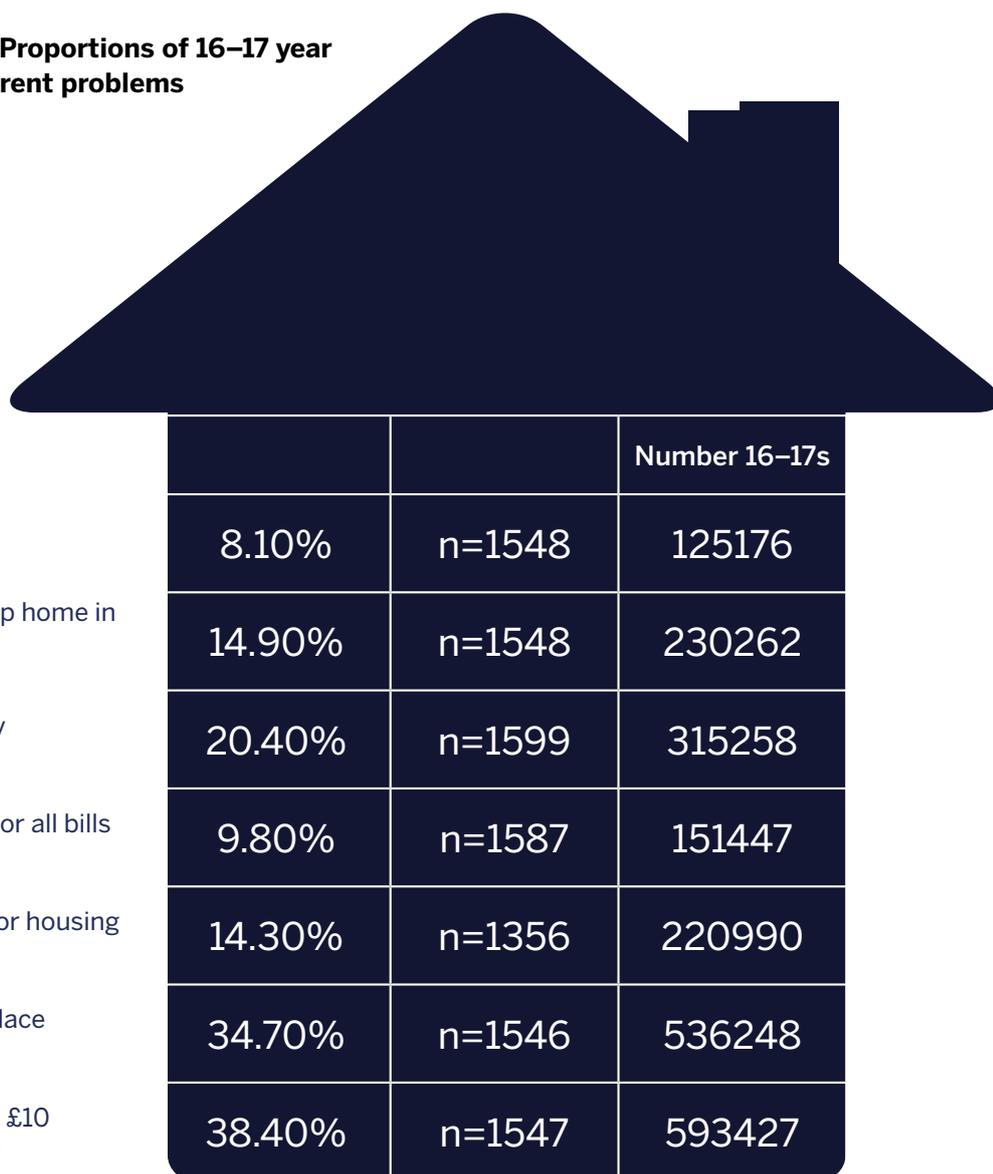
6.3 The scale of the issue

3.7 million children live in poverty across the UK, and whether living in families or living independently, 16–17 year olds are by no means exceptions to these risks, with analysis of Understanding Society data suggesting that one in five 16–17 year olds live in poverty.¹¹¹

Analysis of Understanding Society revealed the scale of financial pressure facing families with 16–17 year olds – 14% are struggling with housing costs, and one in 10 16–17 year olds live in families which are behind on household bills.

Struggling with finances can have a real impact on the standards of living these young people face – for example 8% of this group live in a home which is cold in the winter.

Infographic 6A: Proportions of 16–17 year olds facing different problems



While the majority of young people from poorer backgrounds are cared for and loved, poverty can have a real impact, exacerbating problems which 16–17 year olds face in their lives. For example, in previous chapters we reported on the findings from the poll on frequency of older teenagers experiencing negative emotions. The analysis of polling also shows that children from the poorest families were nearly three times less likely to be happy with their life overall than children from the wealthiest families. 85 % of children from families that were ‘very well off’ said they were ‘very happy’ or ‘somewhat happy’ with their life overall compared to just 32% of children from families that were ‘not well off at all’. These children also reported considerably higher levels of poor emotional well-being, including feeling low or sad, lonely and distressed. The relationship between poverty and life satisfaction amongst 16–17 year olds is shown in **Graph 6B**.

Poor emotional well-being amongst teenagers from the most disadvantaged families may well be related to poor conditions at home (for example, having a home in a poor state of repair, or not being able to keep the home warm). However, it is also likely to be related to their community environment. 16–17 year olds from poorer backgrounds were much less likely than children from the better off families to

feel safe at school or college, on public transport or in commercial places, such as shopping centres – for example more than nine in 10 children from the wealthiest families felt completely safe at school or college, compared to less than half of young people from disadvantaged families (**Graph 6D**). They are also less likely to feel safe at home, although it’s important to stress that the majority (74%) did feel completely safe at home.

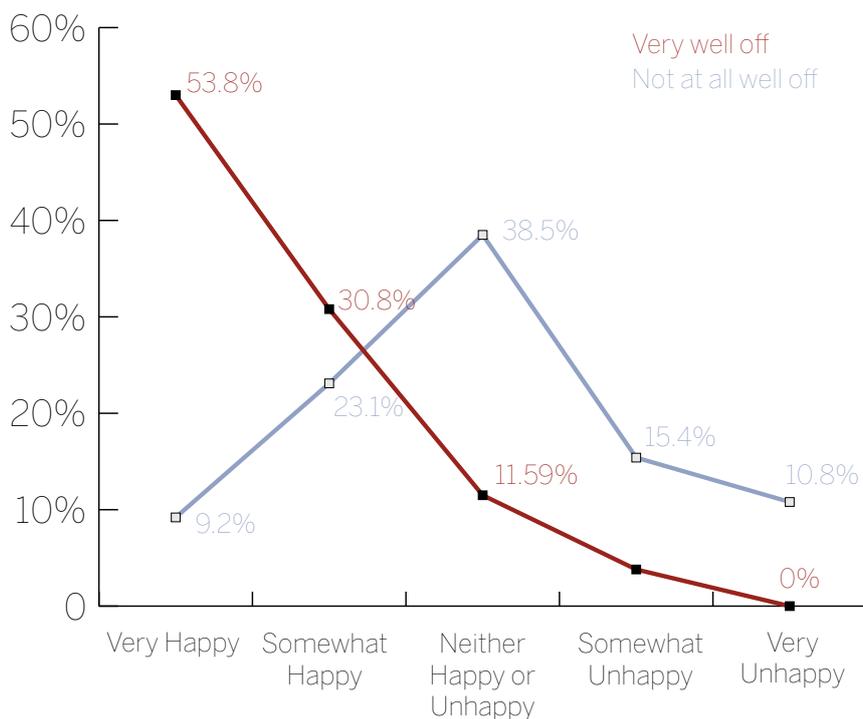
Research shows that young people growing up in poverty are significantly less likely to believe their life and career goals are achievable. One in four young people from poor homes (26 per cent) feel that ‘people like them don’t succeed in life’.¹¹² Statistics confirm that: children from disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely to get good GCSE results. In 2013 37.9% of pupils who qualified for free school meals got five GCSEs, including English and Mathematics at A* to C, compared with 64.6% of pupils who do not qualify.¹¹³

In order to effectively support and safeguard 16–17 year olds, and enable them to have a fair chance in later life, it is clear that further action is needed to recognise the impact poverty has on life chances in these crucial years, and ensure they have the resources necessary to prevent the final years of their childhood being spent living in poverty.

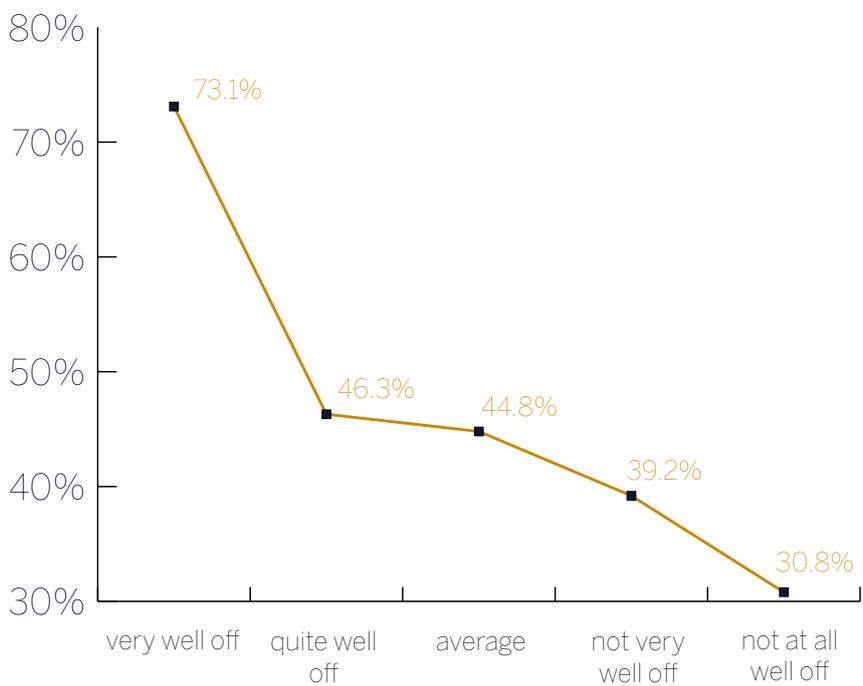
‘I’ve got a job. I am a waitress at a hotel. I get paid minimum wage. It isn’t a lot...£3.79. [...] I am only allowed to work for four hours because I am only sixteen’

Girl aged 16

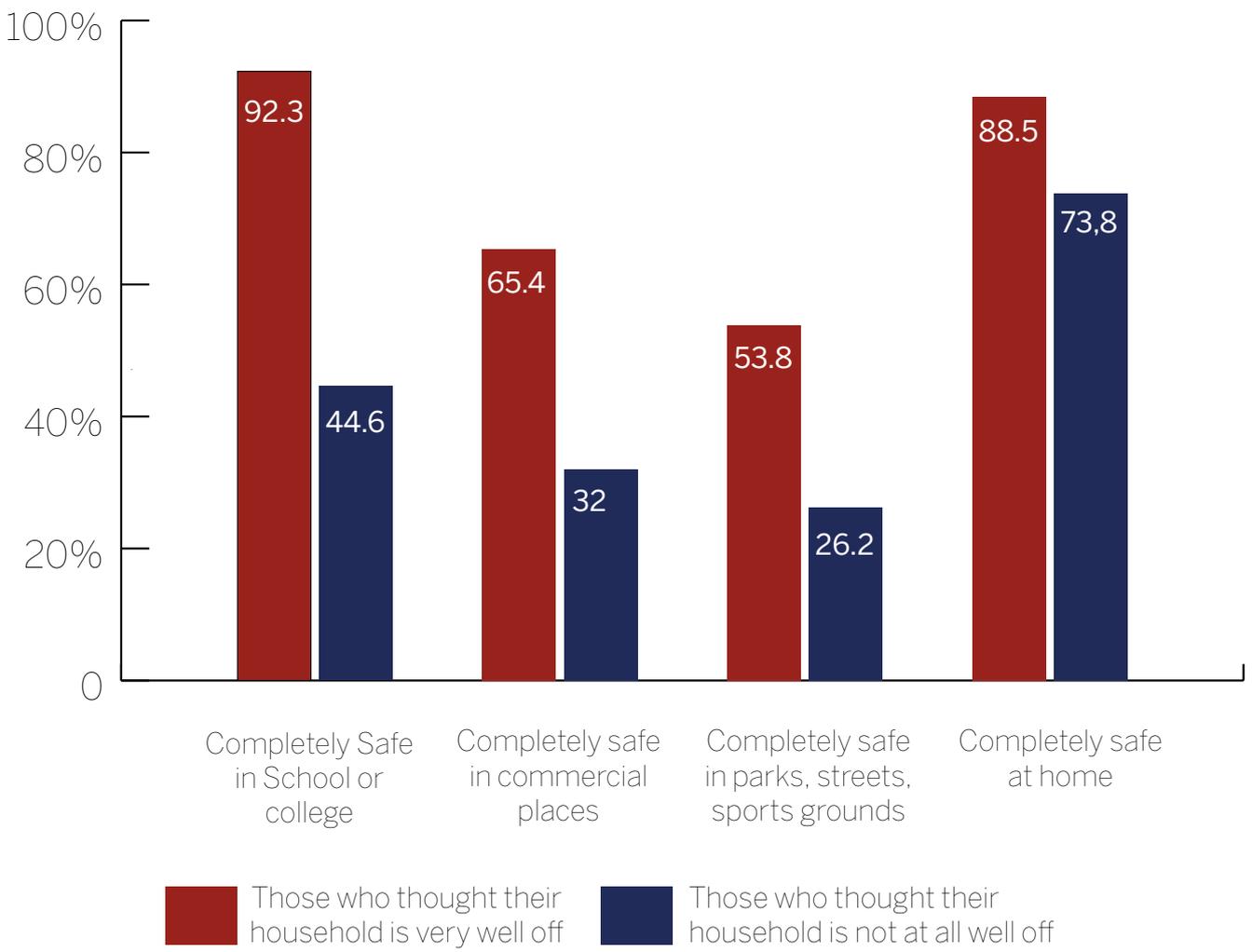
Graph 6B: Relationship between poverty and overall life satisfaction



Graph 6C: Proportion of 16–17 year olds “always” feeling cared for or loved



Graph 6D: How safe 16–17 year olds from different backgrounds feel



6.4 Groups of 16–17 year olds who are at particular risk of poverty

There are some groups of 16–17 year olds who are at particular risk of facing poverty:

Young people who live on their own

It is exceptionally difficult for young people who do not have supportive family to rely on to financially support themselves to live independently.

If they are in work they are paid a national minimum wage of just £3.79 an hour, compared to £6.50 for those aged over 21 and the Office of National Statistics finds young people to be one of the groups most likely to be employed on zero-hours contracts. Those in apprenticeships are provided with an even lower minimum wage of just £2.73 per hour.¹¹⁴ 14.6% of all apprentices are 16 – 17 year olds.¹¹⁵ In 2012, 43% of apprentices under the age of 25 were paid below the minimum wage while only 20% of those over 25 were underpaid.¹¹⁶

It is also not easy for 16–17 year olds to find jobs. 16–17 year olds who choose to participate in the labour market have more difficulties finding work than older age groups. Employment statistics suggest that in May 2015, 148,000 16–17 year olds were unemployed – an unemployment rate of around 30%. This rate is much higher than for other age groups, with 14% of 18–24 year olds and 5% of 25–49 year olds unemployed.¹¹⁷

They cannot rely on support through the benefits system as this is entirely inconsistent with how 16–17 year olds are treated – for example, young people under the age of 18 are only entitled to receive out of work benefits in particular circumstances (such as if they are a young parent). They may only be entitled to receive support on a discretionary basis. Even where they are entitled to receive support, they are likely to receive lower rates than adults. For example, they are unlikely to have made enough national insurance contributions to qualify for contribution-based Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and, where entitled, must rely on the lower rate afforded by income-based JSA which is a maximum of £57.35 a week.

16–17 year olds who are parents

Teenage motherhood has been linked with poor health, poor educational attainment, poor employment prospects and socio-economic deprivation.¹¹⁸ Teenage motherhood is eight times as common amongst those from manual social backgrounds compared with those from professional backgrounds.¹¹⁹ Pregnancy rates for girls aged between 15 and 17 in England and Wales were 24.5 conceptions per 1,000 in 2013, according to a report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The number of teenage pregnancies in England and Wales has fallen to the lowest level since 1969 when records began.¹²⁰

16–17 year olds living with their parents

It is important to note that although living independently puts 16–17 year olds at exceptionally high risk of poverty, most 16–17 year olds living in poverty are not living independently but at home with their parents – this is especially true since increases in the statutory leaving age for education has been raised with 981,000 16–17 year olds currently economically inactive as a result.

Research shows that some families are more likely to be affected by poverty than others: lone parent families, large families, workless households are all more likely to experience poverty. For example, children from larger families with three or more children are more likely to be in relative low income before housing costs, than children from smaller families – 22 per cent compared to 16% for one-child families.¹²¹ Children in workless families are three times as likely to be in relative poverty compared with children in families where at least one adult is in work, and twice as likely as children overall.¹²²

'At 16 you are just thrown into a flat'

Male with experience of being in care

Disabled young people

Four in 10 disabled children have been found to be living in poverty once you take into account the extra costs these families face as a result of disability.¹²³ This is due to the difficulties disabled adults and parents with a disabled child can face in entering and sustaining employment and the additional costs involved with raising a disabled child or supporting a disabled adult.¹²⁴ Disabled young people aged 16–17 are treated as adults for benefits purposes and will in future be expected to transfer from “Disability Living Allowance for a child” to the Personal Independence Payment to help them with the additional costs of disability. Currently young people must reapply for Personal Independence payment at 16 and go through a process which is designed for adults making it more difficult for them to secure this important financial support. Recent statistics suggest that around 57,000 16–17 year olds claim DLA and 11,000 claim PIP.¹²⁵

Asylum seeking families

There is a lack of quantitative data on asylum seekers and poverty. The Children’s Society revealed asylum support levels for children and families fall alarmingly below mainstream benefit levels, leaving around 10,000 children in severe poverty for long periods of time.¹²⁶ Rates of support for these children and their families have not increased since 2011.¹²⁷ Our parliamentary inquiry into asylum support in 2012 found these low rates of support force parents to skip meals so they can feed their children and leaves them unable to buy them warm clothing in the winter.¹²⁸

16–17 year olds are treated as adults within the Asylum Support system, which means children aged 16–17 receive considerably less than younger children — £13.16 per week less than children under 16, despite the fact they are typically in full-time education.

6.5 Protection in law

Table 6E Protection in law and practice – Poverty and Inequality

What protection is (or is not) offered to 16–17 year olds	
The Welfare Act 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specifies that a basic condition of entitlement for Universal Credit is that the claimant is at least 18, (although some exceptions apply.) This reiterates the point that 16–17 year olds should not normally be treated as independent adults within the benefits system.
Jobseeker’s allowance/Income Support/Employment and Support Allowance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These benefits are designed to meet basic living needs, and most 16 – 17 year olds are not normally entitled to receive these in their own right. If they live independently, they still have to meet special rules of entitlement, and if they receive support are likely to receive it at a lower rate than adults.
Child Tax Credit and Child Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If they live at home with a parent or guardian and are in training or education, most 16–17 year olds will still be treated as children for benefit purposes and their family will receive Child Tax Credit and/ or Child Benefit in order to care for them.
Disability Living allowance/ Personal Independence Payments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the purposes of welfare support disabled children are treated as adults from the age of 16. Currently young people must reapply for Personal Independence payment at 16 and go through a process which is designed for adults.
Carer’s Allowance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16–17 year olds can claim Carer’s Allowance if they are looking after someone with substantial caring needs. They don’t have to be related to, or live with the person but must spend at least 35 hours a week caring for them.
Housing Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can only access Housing Benefits if you are liable to pay rent – this often presents problems as 16–17 year olds cannot sign a rental agreement unless they have a guarantor. Finding a landlord who will rent to them and then putting in place a guarantor make private rented accommodation inaccessible for 16–17 year olds Additional rules are placed on single young people under the age of 35. They are normally only provided with a support rate sufficient to enable them to rent a room in shared accommodation. Where a young person lives at home with their family, their family may receive Housing Benefit rather than them receiving this directly.

6.6 What needs to change

Poverty affects 16–17 year olds in many ways. 16–17 year olds in poverty are less likely to have access to basic essentials, they may live in a cold home, and they are less likely than wealthier children to live in a place where they feel safe. Poverty affects their health, their mental well-being, it affects their social relationships and their aspirations in life.

Giving 16–17 year olds the best chance in life means ensuring that they do not spend the final years of their childhood in poverty.

We are calling on the government to change the law in two ways to ensure that 16–17 year olds do not live in poverty.

Families with children often face problems with continuing to receive child benefit and child tax credits after their child reaches 16. This is because these benefits normally stop on the 31st August after a child turns 16. This is despite the fact that for most children, they continue to be entitled until they reach 19, or even 20 in some cases, if they continue in education or training.

‘It is quite hard to find out what to do [to access benefits’], where to go. You can walk into the job centre and they are like oh you need to phone this place, they certainly don’t make it easy for you’

Male aged 16–17

Second, 16–17 year olds in apprenticeships are paid at an exceptionally poor rate of £2.73 per hour. This is despite evidence that where apprentices are paid at a decent rate they are more likely to complete their training.¹²⁹

Third, as explained above, children aged 16–17 in Asylum seeking families are treated as adults, and receive a considerably lower rate of support than children aged 15 and under. This rate of support should be increased, so that 16–17 year olds receive the same level of support as younger children.

6.7 Recommendations

The government should change the law so that families are automatically entitled to continue to receive child benefit and child tax credit for children living with them until they reach 18.

This would reflect the changes to the statutory leaving age for education and would prevent unnecessary admin problems caused by benefits stopping after a child turns 16.

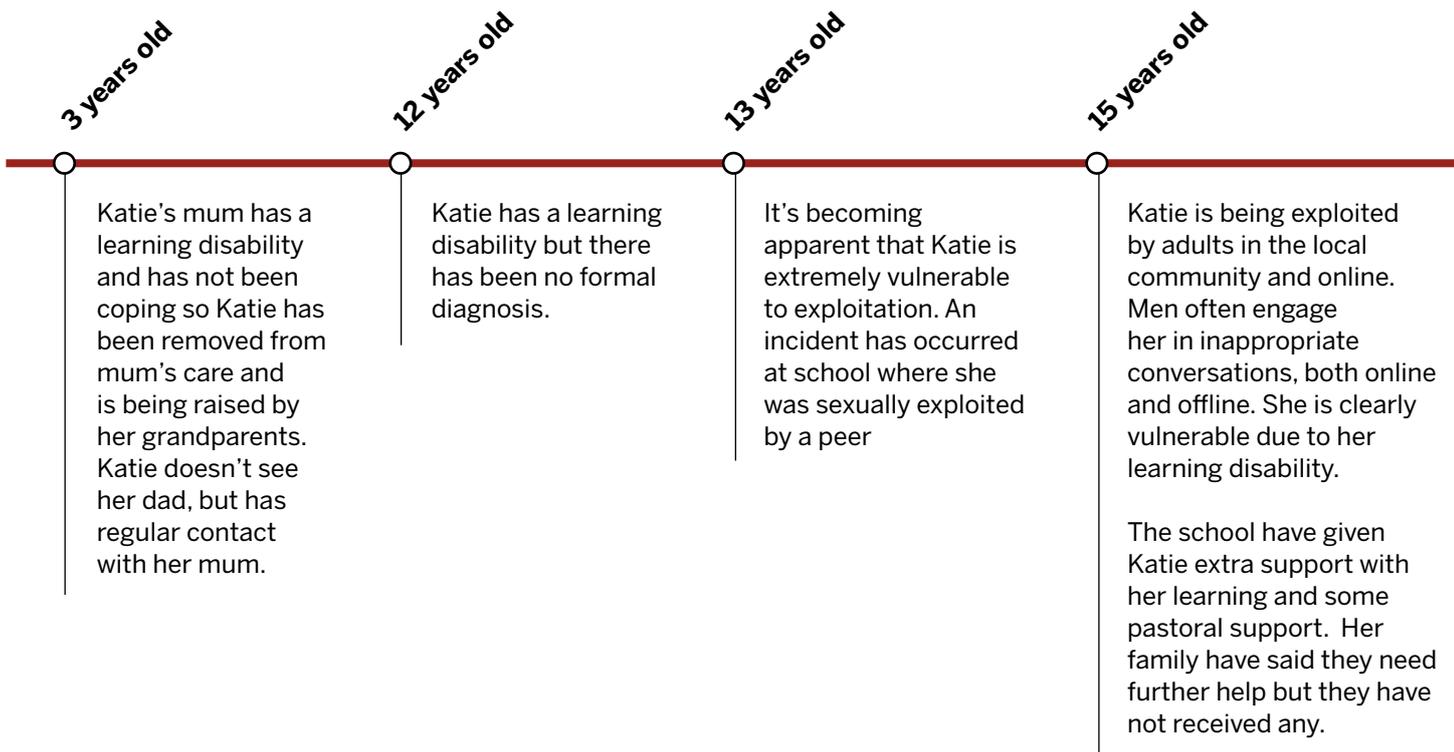
The government should change the law so that the minimum Apprenticeship rate is aligned with the National Minimum Wage Rate for under 18s of £3.79 per hour.

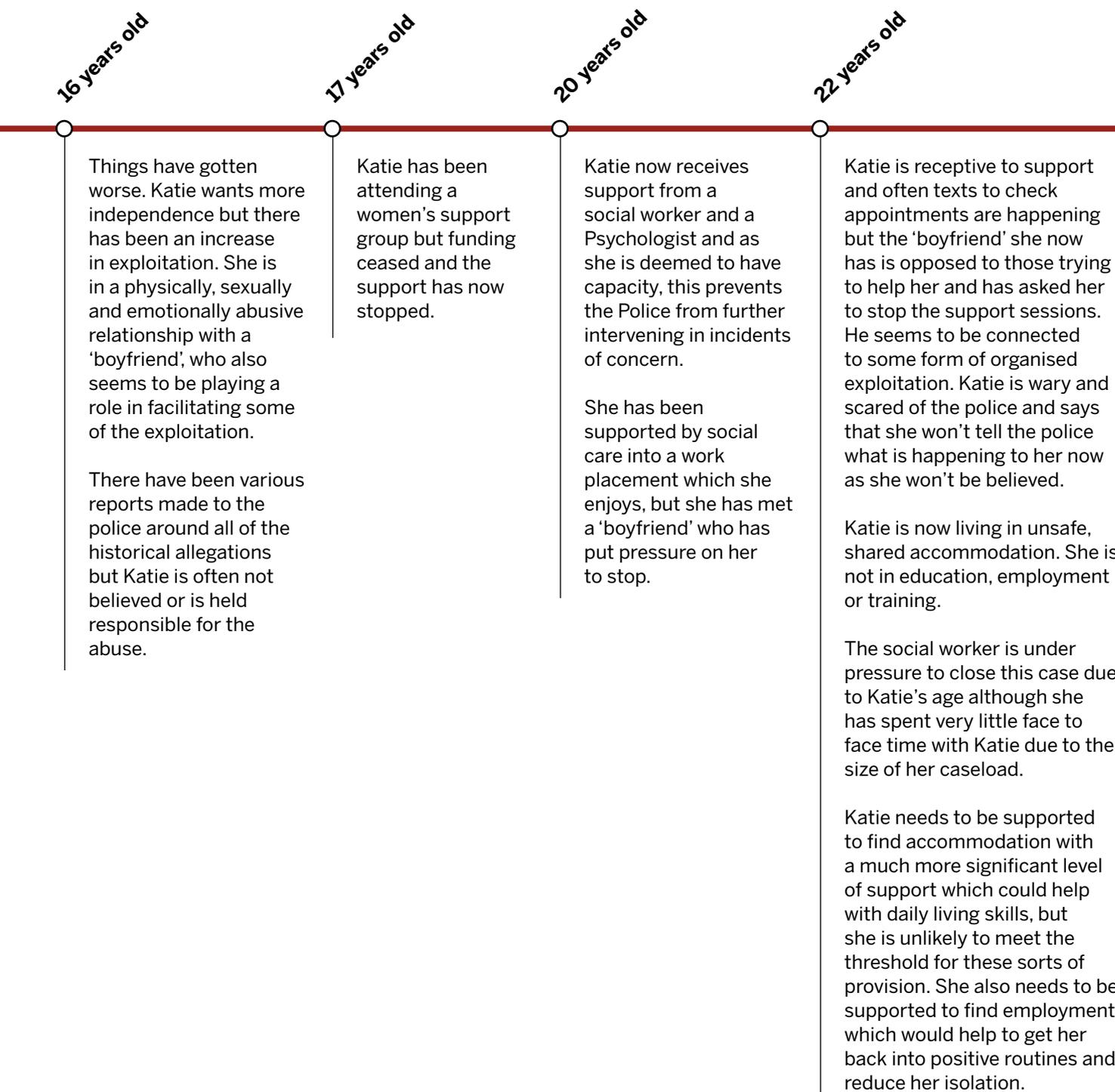
The government should increase rates of Asylum Support for 16–17 year olds, so that they get the same level of assistance as younger children.



Chapter 7. Future prospects

Case study: A journey of vulnerability





7.2 Key messages

Understanding Society data shows that significant proportions of 16–17 year olds have low aspirations, with as many as 1 in 4 not feeling optimistic about the future. As many as 15% feel a failure.

Our poll with 16–17 year olds showed that along with how much choice they have in life, education is one of the areas where they feel least happy.

16–17 year olds from poorer backgrounds are less likely to be positive about their future prospects.

7.3 The scale of the issue

An ability to make plans for the future and implement them is one of the factors that contribute to the resilience of young people. Low aspirations for the future may also be indicative of a range of issues that young people face, as well as impacting on their overall emotional well-being.

Understanding Society data shows that significant proportions of 16–17 year olds have low aspirations, with as many as 1 in 4 not feeling optimistic about the future and as many as 15% feeling a failure.

‘Listen to the young person intently and get to know them and find out their wishes and dreams before making a decision about them’

Female with experience of being in care

Table 7A: Future aspirations

			Number 16–17s
Not feeling optimistic about the future	24.10%	n=1326	372437
Doesn't feel as able as most people	12.30%	n=1298	190082
Feels a failure	15.20%	n=1299	234898

In our poll we asked 16–17 year olds about how happy they are about different aspects of their lives. As **Table 7C** shows, two issues with which they most frequently reported dissatisfaction, were how much choice they have in life and their education. Almost 1 in 5 (17%) of 16–17 year olds who took part in the poll reported that they are unhappy with the amount of choice they have in life. A similar number were unhappy about their education, school or college. 13% of 16–17 year olds polled felt unhappy about their future prospects, with 16–17 year olds from poorer backgrounds being considerably less likely to be positive about their future prospects than their peers. 81% of young people from 'very well off' families reported being 'very happy' or 'somewhat happy' compared to 39% of those from families 'not well off at all'.

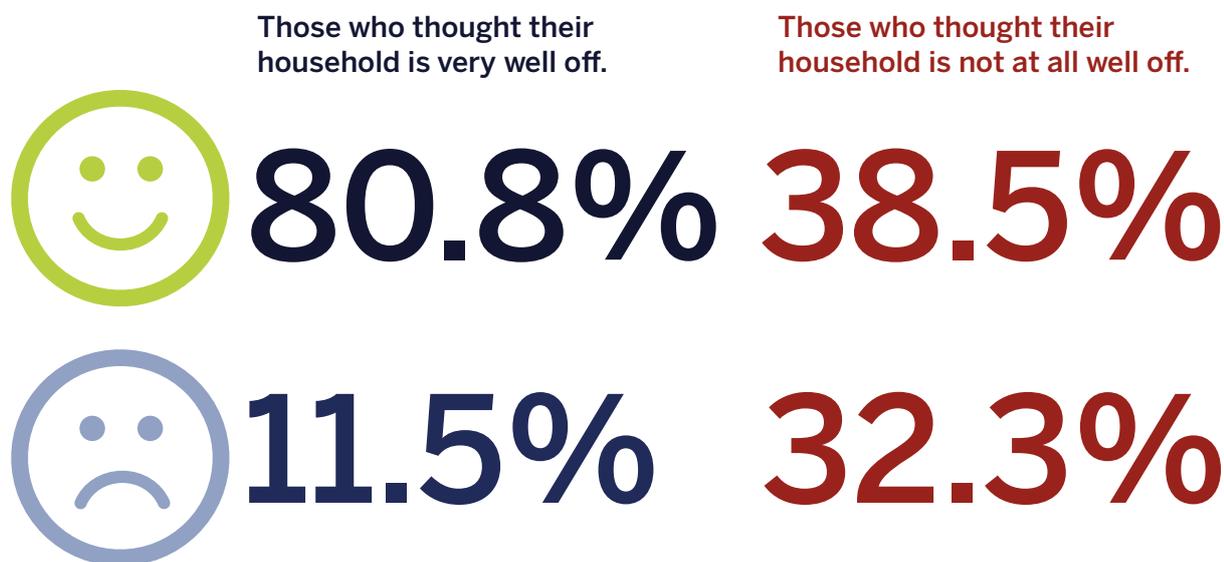
Infographic 7B:
How happy 16–17 year olds are with choices they have made



Table 7C: How happy 16–17 year olds are with different aspects of their lives

	The house/ flat or other place you live	Your work	Your education	How much choice you have in life	Your life as a whole	Your future prospects
Happy	78%	66%	66%	61%	69%	62%
Unhappy	10%	13%	17%	18%	13%	13%
Neither Happy nor Unhappy	11%	18%	16%	20%	16%	20%
Prefer not to say	1%	3%	1%	1%	2%	5%

Infographic 7D: Young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to be positive about their future prospects



7.4 Groups who are more likely to have lower future aspirations

Children in poverty

As our data showed 16–17 from poorer backgrounds are less likely to be positive about their future aspirations than their peers, as discussed earlier in this chapter and in chapter 6.

'It's so hard to get a job. Even if you've got a really impressive resume. And you go to, like, University, there's still no guarantee that you're going to get a job. And sometimes your parents think it's so easy like [claps] you're going to get a job, you know, you're going to hand your resume in to twenty, thirty places and then instantly you're going to get a job. Certainly, my parents were like you need to get a job, you need to get a job, and I was like I'm trying, I'm trying'

Male aged 16–17

Those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

The proportion of 16–18 year olds Not in Education or Employment (NEET) in 2013 was 7.6% (148,000).¹³⁰ The age of participation in education or training is 17,¹³¹ rising to 18 in 2015, and the majority of 16–17 year olds (87%) are indeed participating in full time education or training.¹³² However, for the group who are NEET, the negative consequences for their life prospects are significant. Being NEET is associated with negative outcomes later in life, including unemployment, poor health and depression – as a result, it has been estimated that the life-time public finance cost of young people who are NEET between the ages of 16 and 18 is just short of £12billion. The highest estimate is around £32.5billion. The average individual life-time public finance cost of NEET was estimated at £56,300.¹³³

The National Audit Office has highlighted higher NEET status amongst 16–18 year olds who:

- have been in local authority care
- have been affected by health problems or a disability

- have engaged in 'risky behaviours' such as smoking and vandalism by age 13 or 14
- have families with lower levels of social capital and are less confident to advise on educational choices and/or have lower qualification levels themselves.¹³⁴

Young people with learning difficulties or disabilities

Young people with learning difficulties or disabilities are one of the groups most likely not to be in education, employment or training.¹³⁵ Many disabled young people face considerable difficulties continuing into further education and training and experience barriers to entering paid employment. As a result, an estimated 30% of young people who had a statement of special educational needs when they were in Year 11, and 22% of young people with a declared disability, were not in any form of education, employment or training at the age of 18 compared with 13% of their peers.¹³⁶ Research has also found that disabled young people at the age of 16 and 25 were four times as likely not to be in employment as their non-disabled peers.¹³⁷ There is also a lack of specialist career advice for disabled young people – they have experienced low expectations of careers service professionals.

7.5 Protection in law

Table 7E: Protection in law and practice – Future aspirations

What protection is (or is not) offered to 16–17 year olds	
The Education and Skills Act 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased the age to which all young people in England are required to continue in education or training to 18 from 2015. Young people can choose from: full-time education (eg at a school or college); an apprenticeship or traineeship; part-time education or training combined with employment or self-employment for 20 hours or more a week or volunteering for 20 hours or more a week.
Education Maintenance Allowance and the 16–19 Bursary Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In England, 16 – 19 year olds who experience financial hardship may be eligible to claim to help them remain in education. Those who are a member of a Defined Vulnerable Group (DVG) are automatically eligible for a £1,200 grant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are in care or have been in care ▪ Receive Income Support or Universal Credit ▪ Receive Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) plus Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payments (PIPs). In 2012/13, 34,600 16-19 year olds received the grant

7.6 What needs to change

In England, those born after 1st September 1997 are required to remain in education or training until their 18th birthday, however there is no effective enforcement method making the policy largely voluntary. As the Work Foundation has identified, the raising of the participation age is not yet fully benefitting around 10% of 16–17 year olds, which includes some of the most disadvantaged young people. Many of these are NEET.¹³⁸

The National Audit Office noted that “disadvantage in its many forms is a more common feature of early life for 16–17 year olds NEET”. This chimes with our polling and our frontline knowledge from The Children’s Society’s services: 16–17 year olds from poorer backgrounds or who have faced complex needs or family breakdown not only face serious risks to their safety at that age, but also to their future prospects.

‘[When I left foster placement at 16] I had no support with travel costs. Sometimes I had to miss college as I couldn’t afford to get there’

Male with experience of living in care

Since 2010 the government has abolished the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), and significantly cut local authority budgets, resulting in increased barriers for 16–17 year olds to remain in education and training.¹³⁹ The replacement for the EMA – the Bursary Fund – has a third of the EMA budget and only offers guaranteed support to young people leaving care, those claiming Disability Living Allowance along with Employment Support Allowance, and those on income support. Beyond this relatively small group, vulnerable or disadvantaged young people face uncertainty and have to apply for post-16 options without knowing if they are eligible for financial support.

Worrying reductions in financial support for 16–17 year olds from lower socio-economic backgrounds, coupled with a lack of transport assistance which is only offered to those under 16, and limited access to information, advice and guidance means the most vulnerable and disadvantaged 16–17 year olds are not getting the support they need to fully participate in education and training opportunities.¹⁴⁰

It is crucial that the government and local authorities extend access to financial support with the costs of education for 16–17 year olds and also ensure sufficient independent further education and careers advice is in place, particularly for the most vulnerable who do not have this support at home, from family or other adults. In our poll, the second issue 16–17 year olds said they don’t have enough information and support about was their future career.

7.7 Recommendations

The government should extend eligibility for the Bursary Fund so it benefits more 16–17 year olds who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or face vulnerabilities beyond the current group. Automatic entitlement should be extended to those living in families with an income below £16,000 and those known to the Local Authority as a 'child in need'.

Local authorities should extend current arrangements to provide transport assistance in line with the raised participation age, ensuring everyone up to 18 from low income households receives free home to school travel.

The National Careers Service should extend face to face appointments to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable 16–17 year olds, specifically, those who are NEET and/or who are known to their local authority as a 'child in need'. The government should ensure sufficient funding is in place to facilitate this in order to ensure all 16–17 year olds can make informed choices about their future and to reduce the number of 16–17s NEET.

Local authorities should support schools to ensure they can offer independent advice and guidance to all young people and develop mechanisms to ensure more intensive support is offered to 16–17 year olds known to the Local Authority as a 'child in need'.



Chapter 8: Conclusions and recommendations

It is usual to feel apprehension as you approach adulthood. 16–17 is an awkward age for anyone. That anxiety can be eased with the help, guidance, love, care and encouragement that most young people receive from their families and close social networks.

But our report shows that for some young people, the journey to adulthood can be traumatic and beset with challenges. It is particularly true for teenagers whose family life is plagued with conflict, abuse or neglect, who live in poverty, or who are affected by issues outside their families, such as pressures from peers or older adults seeking to exploit young people, or who are living in places that are not safe. Such experiences have a hugely detrimental impact on older teenagers' well-being and mental health and their future prospects.

The Children's Society works with thousands of 16–17 year olds each year, helping them deal with the difficulties they face. We know that without support, a traumatic journey through teenage years will only lead to an equally traumatic journey through adult life. We believe that with help these young people can succeed – but there needs to be a helping hand to steady them when they

stumble. Unfortunately for many of them, such help is not available either because they are seen as old enough and resilient enough to manage, or because legislation and services treats them as adults and denies them support or protection.

This situation is not just awkward – it's seriously awkward. Which is why The Children's Society is campaigning for change: to ensure that the legislative framework offers as much protection to older teenagers as it does to younger children; that service provision matches the level of need and is age appropriate; and that young people are supported to have their voices heard and make informed choices about their future.

What needs to change to keep vulnerable teenagers safe and help them move into adulthood?

We all have a role to play to improve the situation for older teenagers, including parents and charities like The Children’s Society. In particular, in this report we are calling for:

Better legal protection for 16–17 year olds

The legal framework treats 16–17 year olds inconsistently as **Table 8A** shows. Isn’t it seriously awkward that the law is strict with parents who are prepared to jeopardise the health of their 16–17 year olds by smoking in the car, while parents who treat their 16–17 year olds with cruelty and neglect can not be prosecuted under criminal law?

The issue is not just awkward but it is also very complex. Indeed, 16–17 year olds have greater capacity to make independent decisions and greater capabilities to take care of many issues in their lives. But they are still in a transition period and those whose capacity and capabilities are affected by experiences of neglect, poor well-being or who are under pressure and at risk of harm – in other words teenagers who are vulnerable – need protections and support in place. Yet the law currently is not on their side.

There isn’t a simple quick win in legal terms. Yet just because the

issue is awkward and complex, it shouldn’t be ignored. The government, local government, and service providers all have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in our society, and the law needs to recognise the emerging developmental vulnerabilities of this age and ensure that 16–17 year olds receive the same protection as younger children.

We recommend:

- The new government should rectify and streamline the legislative framework which currently fails to protect the most vulnerable older teenagers, by conducting a full review of relevant legislation and ensuring that vulnerable 16–17 year olds are fully protected from risk of harm and exploitation.
- There are also specific legal changes that we would like to see introduced to ensure that 16–17 year olds are protected the same way as younger children, as set out below.

Better and more flexible service provision for vulnerable 16–17 year olds

As well as eliminating the inconsistencies in the legislative framework, changes are needed to ensure that older teenagers

have access to services that can meet their needs in a way that is flexible, reliable and accessible. It is widely recognised that the current safeguarding response often fails older teenagers as it does not sufficiently recognise their emerging capabilities and also new emerging risks they face outside the family environment. This issue needs to be addressed by changes to both national policies and local responses.

In particular we recommend that:

- The government should change the law to recognise the specific vulnerabilities faced by older teenagers and create a new status specifically for vulnerable 16–17 year olds, which would entitle them to additional and flexible support during these late childhood years and post-18, to ensure that they are not abandoned when they are most at risk.
- The government should produce a strategy on vulnerable 16–17 year olds, outlining actions that need to be taken to deal with the high level of vulnerability among 16–17 year olds, and ensure that necessary data is collected which would help establish the true level of need among older teenagers.

Greater involvement and participation in decisions that affect their lives

Our report shows that young people believe that access to information and support to make informed decisions about their lives are essential to helping them stay safe and make positive choices in all aspects of their lives. This is not always reflected in practice and changes are needed to ensure young people's rights to participate in decisions that affect them are fulfilled, so they can make informed choices about their lives and their futures.

We recommend:

- The government and local authorities should ensure vulnerable 16–17 year olds have a right to advocacy, so they are supported to make fully informed decisions.
- The government and local authorities should ensure that older teenagers have access to good quality information on all aspects of their lives, including education, mental health, how to stay safe and physical health.

- Local authorities and service providers should fulfil their duties to involve 16–17 year olds in both individual decisions about their own care and collective decisions around service provision.

We would also like to see a number of specific changes related to those themes highlighted in this report:

1. Protective relationships

1a) The government should change the law to ensure inconsistencies are addressed and the vulnerability of 16–17 year olds is explicitly recognised. In particular:

- The age of a victim should be raised to 18 for the offence of child cruelty under Section 1 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 to protect all those young people aged 16–17 who live at home and are as vulnerable to abuse as younger children.
- The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become 'intentionally homeless'.

1b) Local authorities should intervene early to support relationships with teenagers and their families, through family mediation and relationship and parenting support services specifically available for families of older adolescents. Much of the breakdown in relationships between 16–17 year olds and their families is linked to long term issues within families.

1c) Where vulnerable 16–17 year olds clearly do not have reliable family support or have experienced abuse and neglect in families, a specific category of support should be placed around that young person for consistent and additional provision from that moment and into adulthood. Local authorities must ensure that such support is provided via the development of stable, consistent and trusted relationships that would enable the young person to have the support they need.

2. Health and well-being

2a) The government should establish a right for 16–17 year olds to be entitled to support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHs) when needed, which is available as early as possible and long before mental health needs turn acute.

2b) The government and clinical commissioning groups should gather consistent and comprehensive data on the mental health needs of 16–17 year olds, particularly vulnerable groups of older teenagers, to inform the development of services and ensure that these needs are accounted for in children's and adults' provision to ensure smooth transition to adulthood.

2c) Local authorities and Health & Wellbeing Boards should ensure older teenagers and their parents have better access to information on mental health needs and support available in their area.

2d) Access to mental health support for vulnerable groups should be improved with better referral pathways in place between safeguarding and mental health services.

3. Risks of exploitation

3a) The government should raise the age for Child Abduction Warning Notices from 16 to 18, to ensure that the police can intervene where vulnerable 16–17 year olds are targeted by predatory adults for the purposes of exploitation, either of a sexual or criminal nature.

3b) The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year old at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become intentionally homeless. Often those in unsuitable accommodation, such as unregulated supported accommodation or hostels and B&Bs, are at very high risk of being targeted for exploitation.

3c) The government should ensure the new Victims Law recognises 16–17 year olds as a particularly vulnerable group of victims and establish a new status with associated protections. This should ensure that they get additional support when their cases are being investigated and going through the court process, and ensure that they have access to support to overcome their experiences.

3d) The government should develop a Register of Missing Children and a system for police to flag older teenagers who may be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, which would allow the police to more easily identify older teenagers at risk and ensure they are treated as with due priority and urgency.

4. Poverty and inequality

4a) The government should change the law so that families are automatically entitled to continue to receive child benefit and child tax credit for children living with them until they reach 18.

4b) 16–17 year olds in apprenticeships are paid at an exceptionally poor rate of £2.73 per hour. This is despite evidence that where apprentices are paid at a decent rate they are more likely to complete their training. The government should change the law so that the minimum Apprenticeship rate is aligned with the National Minimum Wage Rate for under 18s of £3.79 per hour.

4c) The government should increase rates of Asylum Support for 16–17 year olds, so that they get the same level of assistance as younger children.

5. Future prospects

5a) The government should extend eligibility for the Bursary Fund so it benefits more 16–17 year olds who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or face vulnerabilities beyond the current group. Automatic entitlement should be extended to those living in families with an income below £16,000 and to all those known to the local authority as a 'child in need'.

5b) Local authorities should extend current arrangements to provide transport assistance in line with the raised participation age, ensuring everyone up to 18 from low income households receives free home to school travel.

5c) The National Careers Service should extend face to face appointments to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable 16–17 year olds, specifically, those who are NEET and/or who are known to their local authority as a 'child in need'. The government should ensure sufficient funding is in place to facilitate this in order to ensure all 16–17 year olds can make informed choices about their future and to reduce the number of 16–17s NEET.

5d) Local Authorities should support schools to ensure they can offer independent advice and guidance to all young people and develop mechanisms to ensure more intensive support is offered to 16–17 year olds known to the Local Authority as a 'child in need'.

Appendix

How the legislative framework defines a child

This is not an exhaustive list, but gives a snapshot of some of the inconsistencies that exist and currently mean vulnerable 16–17 year olds are not fully protected from harm and neglect.

O = it's awkward – the legislative framework is complex and treats 16–17 year olds in some cases as a child and in some cases as an adult, or only provides protection or eligibility for certain narrowly-defined groups, even within one piece of legislation or guidance.

Legislative framework	A child is up to 16	A child is up to 18	(we will need to add in page number link for more information?)
United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child	Yes	Yes	Ratified by the UK in 1990
The Children Act 1989			
Section 17: Duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children	Yes	Yes	Civil law does recognise a child as anyone under 18
Section 25: Restriction of liberty if they are likely to cause significant harm to themselves or injure others.	Yes	Yes	A person under 18 can be kept in secure accommodation
Section 47: Duty on local authorities to investigate where they are informed that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm	Yes	Yes	
The Children and Young Persons Act 1933			
Section 1: Criminal offence of child cruelty	Yes	No	Criminal law only recognises a child as under 16 An adult cannot be prosecuted for cruelty to a child aged who is 16 or 17
Section 7: Use of tobacco products	Yes	No	16–17 year olds can use tobacco products, but under the Licencing Act it is illegal to sell them these products
The Marriage Act 1949	Yes	O	16–17 year olds can only get married with consent of responsible adults

Legislative framework	A child is up to 16	A child is up to 18	(we will need to add in page number link for more information?)
<p>The Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014</p> <p>Section 121: Offence of forced marriage</p> <p>Section 103: Sexual Harm Prevention Orders</p> <p>Child Abduction Warning Notices – Section 2: Child Abduction Act</p> <p>– Section 49: Children Act 1989</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>No</p> <p>0</p>	<p>Protecting all children under 18 and vulnerable adults from harm and risk of sexual exploitation</p> <p>These tools cannot be used to protect 16–17 year olds who are at risk</p> <p>Only applies to 16–17 year olds who are in the care of local authority – this protects a very small group</p>
<p>The Housing Act 1996</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>Helps 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness get access to housing but does not offer any additional protections</p>
<p>Mental Health Act 2007</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Stipulates that children under the age of 18 who need to stay in inpatient settings for mental health reasons should stay in age appropriate environment</p>
<p>The Mental Capacity Act</p>	<p>X</p>	<p>0</p>	<p>Allows 16–17 year olds who are deemed to have capacity, to be able to consent or refuse informal admission in the same way as adults</p>
<p>The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2012</p> <p>Section 1: Offence of causing or allowing the death or serious physical harm to a child or a vulnerable adult.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Only protects children under 16 and “vulnerable adults” who cannot protect themselves due to disability, illness or old age, leaving most 16–17s unprotected</p>
<p>The Sexual Offences Act 2003</p> <p>Sections 9 – 12: Sexual Offences against children</p> <p>Sections 16 – 19: Incitement to engage in sexual activities by a person in a position of trust</p> <p>Sections 25 – 27: Protection from sexual abuse within the family</p> <p>Section 45: Provision around indecent photographs of a child</p> <p>Sections 47 – 50: Involving a child in sexual exploitation</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p>	<p>No</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>0</p> <p>Yes</p>	<p>Due to the age of consent being 16, this is a complex and grey area. Children aged 13-16 are only protected if the defendant could not reasonably believe the child was 16, so protection for those aged 16–17 is even less clear.</p> <p>In married relationships photos may be taken but only with consent and not shared</p>

Legislative framework	A child is up to 16	A child is up to 18	(we will need to add in page number link for more information?)
<p>Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment Offenders Act 2012 (LAPSO)</p> <p>Looked after status to remanded young people</p>	Yes	Yes	17 year olds are subject to the same remand framework as 12 to 16 year olds
<p>Licensing Act 2003</p> <p>Section 146: Selling alcohol</p> <p>Buying cigarettes or tobacco products</p>	Yes Yes	Yes Yes	New powers in the Children and Families Act 2014 allow for the introduction of a ban on selling e-cigarettes to under 18s. These regulations are subject to future consultation.
<p>Welfare Act 2012</p> <p>Basic condition of entitlement for Universal Credit</p>	Yes	0	In exceptional circumstances where 16–17 year olds can claim benefits their entitlements are different to those of other age groups (see table below for details).
<p>The Children and Families Act 2014</p> <p>Parents can receive a penalty notice if they smoke in the car with their children.</p>	Yes	Yes	Regulations were approved in February 2015 and the law will enter into force on 1st October 2015.

Benefits system

Benefits	Applies to under 16	Applies to 16–17	Applies to adults over 18
Job Seekers Allowance	No	0	Yes
Income Support	No	0	Yes
Working Tax Credits	No	0	Yes
Bursary Fund (replacement for Education Maintenance Allowance)	No	Yes – but only those leaving care or claiming certain benefits	No
Employment Support Allowance	No	0	Yes
Housing benefit	No	0	Yes

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Seriously Awkward

How vulnerable 16–17 year olds are falling through the cracks

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Notes

**The Children's Society is a national charity
that runs local projects and campaigns
for change, helping children and young
people when they are at their most
vulnerable and have nowhere else to turn.**

We work with some of the most vulnerable teenagers, facing issues like child sexual exploitation, family neglect, domestic abuse or mental health problems.

Help us change the law to protect 16–17 year olds
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Society**

For more information on this report,
please contact:
Iryna Pona
Youth at Risk Policy Adviser
e. iryna.pona@childrenssociety.org.uk
t. 020 7841 4400

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Names used in this report have been changed to maintain anonymity. All photographs posed by models.

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