

Vulnerable Teens – a summary of risks, current activity and next steps

Summary

Government has committed to ensure the safety and protection of vulnerable children and young people. Throughout the pandemic, there has been ongoing concerns about the vulnerability of adolescents as they are not in school and exposed to risks both inside and outside the home. In particular, there are concerns about the mental health challenges, safeguarding risks (criminal exploitation, serious violence, exposure to domestic abuse), and reduced employment opportunities facing adolescents.

This cover paper summarises the detailed returns from government colleagues to assess the adequacy of government response to safeguarding and protection of vulnerable teens (focused on age 14+), and poses key questions to the board:

1. Are there other headline/ key risks facing vulnerable teens that have not been captured here?
2. Which of the opportunities for action should be prioritised?
3. What can you/your department commit to now to take action to better support vulnerable teens?

Current situation

Broadly, concerns about the risks facing vulnerable teens fall into two categories – an increase or change in the harms they are facing and limited capacity of services to support them during the pandemic. In the current lockdown, this includes:

Harms

- Significant **increase in those identified as having a ‘probable mental health disorder’** in 2020, including anecdotal reports of increased self-harm and eating disorders.
- Risk that **‘hidden harms’ will not be properly identified** while education settings are closed to the majority – particularly worrying for teens as lowest attendance rates are in secondary schools and AP (in secondary only 25% of known vulnerable children are attending and a similar rate for AP)
- Concerns about **rising online risks in current lockdown** and reports of increased use of online platforms to groom children for criminal and sexual exploitation
- Increased risk of **current Year 11s not making a successful transition to post-16**, particularly for those in AP, linked to current lockdown, cancellation of exams, and expected higher attrition rate as young people disengage.
- **NEET (and wider unemployment) rates are likely to increase** and likely to disproportionately impact groups who face disadvantages including those with SEND and those with a social worker.
- **Concerns about young people in custody** who are on their own for more hours with limited contact and likely to face mental health deterioration.

Service capacity

- **Variable local capacity** including for specialist CYP mental health services, children’s social care services, youth services
- **Voluntary sector capacity:** as they respond to and cope with rising demand during (and after) lockdowns and financial challenges if lockdown persists.
- **Alternative Provision delivery:** reports of reduced funding, increased C-19 related staff absence, and struggle to apply for devices where there are dual registration issues.
- **Confidence in safeguarding practice:** evidence there is a lack of confidence to

implement safeguarding practices among youth work professions (increased calls to the National Youth Agency asking for safeguarding advice).

- **Delays in court processes:** increasing proportion of young people on remand (although fewer absolute numbers) and ongoing concern about backlogs in the family courts impacting the children's social care system

While there are significant risks facing vulnerable teens, it is worth reflecting that there have been some positives in the current lockdown. Existing services have been able to continue as they are set up for online provision and there have been some anecdotal reports of CYP and families accessing support online that they would have been unlikely to engage with face-to-face.

Response

Government has undertaken a range of activity to date to support vulnerable teens in this and previous lockdowns. However, there continue to be concerns about the safety of this cohort and our ambition is to strengthen the government response.

Activity to respond to the current context include: (note not an exhaustive list or intended to cover full suite of government activity to support teens since the start of the pandemic)

- Campaigns, working with VCS organisations such as Barnardo's, Childline and the Children's Society, to raise awareness and support victims of child sexual abuse, domestic abuse and modern child slavery.
- Strengthen focus at national and local levels including through an Education Secretary convened task force on the impact on vulnerable children, specific consideration of mental health support provision in the context of the SEND review, and learn from areas making good progress (e.g. on the green paper) and embed good practice through place-based approaches.
- Joint DfE/HO project currently underway to improve the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding partnerships for children at risk of criminal exploitation and serious violence.
- Funding to provide additional support to young people facing specific risks including £2m for those at risk of serious violence, up to £860k to support those at risk of/involved in county lines activity,
- Exploring option to repeat the Y11 Transition Fund for those in AP.

Gaps and opportunities to go further

There is scope to go further in our response and we have identified the following issues/ areas as gaps in current activity and plans:

- Go further to work more closely with and consider need to provide additional funding to VCS and community safeguarding partners to get 'eyes on' vulnerable teens (and more broadly vulnerable children)
- Take rapid and collective action to respond to the recent rise in online grooming including messaging to key services (social workers, schools, police etc.) and potentially comms posted online such as on web platforms used for teaching
- Boost efforts to re-engage vulnerable teens back into education to reduce extra-familial risks including serious violence, potentially through delivery of Education and Engagement Taskforces (currently unfunded).
- Develop a clear support package for vulnerable teens, especially those with an EHCP, to access training and employment opportunities.