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# Surviving Estrangement

The experiences of young people through  
COVID-19 and into a Cost-of-Living crisis







# **Surviving Estrangement: The experiences of young people through COVID-19 and into a Cost-of-Living crisis**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Buttle UK is one of a very few organisations recognising and supporting estranged young people (EYP) as a distinct group. There is no standardised definition used across social services, education and the charitable sector. Nor is there a distinct package of support for this group, such as the one available to young people leaving the care system, although their experiences and needs are very similar. They lack the financial, social or emotional support given to the majority of young people by a family unit, as well as prematurely facing the difficulties of paying for basics and necessities, including their own housing. Their young age and the experiences which lead to estrangement make them vulnerable, yet they seem to fall through the cracks. They may appear in some statistics, such as for homelessness, but equally they may not. However, this is a consequence of their situation, not the cause. They are invisible.

In the UK, due to the invisibility of this group, it is difficult to assess the numbers of young people experiencing estrangement from their parents or carers. We put the number at between **93,000** and **206,000** but this is very likely to be a conservative estimate. With this research, Buttle UK set out to explore the experiences of young people estranged during the pandemic, but ultimately uncovered an extremely complex situation which preceded, was exacerbated by, and has worsened since COVID-19.

The research itself was undertaken with seven young co-producers, all of whom have experienced estrangement and have been supported with a Buttle UK Chances for Children grant. The co-production group contributed to designing the methodology, undertook almost all interviews with 21 frontline workers and 37 EYP, analysed the findings and wrote a good proportion of this report themselves. Buttle UK are very proud to be presenting this collective report and intend to use this methodology as a learning opportunity for co-production in Buttle UK's future activities. 'We', in the sections below, represents Buttle and the young people.

## Findings

We undertook a survey of nearly 100 frontline workers to gain insight into the broad issues that EYP support services faced during COVID-19, and the aftermath. It was clear that during the pandemic, the capacity of frontline services across education, health, housing and financial support were severely reduced, while demand increased at pace. It was more surprising to see how demand has continued to climb after the pandemic, with many frontline workers describing their services as being at capacity and no longer providing adequate support.

The interviews with 37 estranged young people themselves provided an incredibly raw and deep insight into the struggles that young people faced during COVID-19 and beyond. We came to understand the overwhelming systemic issues that compounded these experiences in the interviews with frontline workers. In summary, our findings can be categorised into three overarching themes, with nine sub-themes:



- **Barriers**
  - Education
  - Personal Finance
  - Communication
- **Infrastructure**
  - Housing
  - Safety
  - Funding
- **Wellbeing**
  - Mental Health
  - Relationships
  - Isolation

The young people themselves shared the deep isolation and battles they face to keep their head above water. Many of the circumstances they described transcended the pandemic, as they spoke about their living situations following estrangement. Their responses suggested that they faced many common barriers:

- Access to education worsened during the pandemic due to lacking the resources required for remote learning. Many practices by educational settings unintentionally exclude EYP as they struggle to learn and earn, as well as dealing with unrecognised mental health issues. These are worse now following the pandemic.
- EYP faced exceptional strain on their finances during the pandemic due to lack of work. Many were on Universal Credit and reported that, despite the additional payment during the pandemic, they had been left worse off, especially with the increasing cost of living. This limited and still limits their access to basics.
- They faced low or no communication with the support services they desperately needed because of a technology shortfall. This led to rising isolation. This poor accessibility was reported by frontline workers themselves, who also lacked the technology and capacity to meet demand.

The support sector for estranged young people during the pandemic was criticised by most interviewees. This was, in part, blamed on the typical difficulties in supporting this invisible group, but also on the exceptional strain on the infrastructure in general. These complaints can be summarised as:

- Housing was repeatedly cited as a major issue. The young people described long waiting lists and highly inappropriate living conditions, coupled with huge expenses. Some were forced to live in hotels and refuges for months, if not years, while others could not afford to furnish or heat their home.

- Frontline workers spoke of significant fears for the wellbeing of young people living in housing – or in homelessness – citing the difficult choices they were making at the expense of wellbeing. Trauma, such as sexual assault and domestic abuse, was reported as overlooked when placing vulnerable young people in housing that also held drug users and criminals.
- COVID-19 was rife across the support sector; this had the dual effect of reducing service availability and isolating EYP even further, who lacked the supportive network needed to help them if they too fell ill during this time.
- Low funding, oversubscription, and a breakdown in communication between support services during the pandemic were seen as the biggest barriers in supporting young people. However, frontline workers and young people alike describe how this has worsened now that attention has been diverted or lost following the pandemic.

These external factors were cited as a contributing factor for the overall wellbeing of estranged young people during and after the pandemic. Mental health was referenced as a critical issue for estranged young people. It was referred to more than any single factor, and underpinned the following findings:

- Serious mental illness increased for most young people over the pandemic. For some, the pandemic worsened previous mental health crises, while for others, it developed as a result of the isolation and abandonment that they experienced.
- Worsening mental health continued after lockdown, for example, because of the critically overwhelmed service provision. Waiting lists were described as out of control by frontline workers, who also recognised that support was not adequate in educational settings or housing associations.
- Many EYP felt that they had lost trust in the system and that they did not feel cared for. This increased a sense of isolation and hopelessness, causing low motivation to complete education. Many spoke negatively about the gaps in their education and poor prospects for the future.

## Recommendations

Even now, some time after the COVID-19 restrictions ended, the cost-of-living crisis has replaced or worsened many of the concerns and worries expressed about that period. Most of our participants - young people and frontline workers alike – identified many compounding issues, with COVID-19 acting as the straw that broke the camel's back. The issues they described continue to ripple out today; the pandemic was simply yet another factor in an exceptionally difficult situation.

Buttle UK has decided to act. We have recommendations to make not only to the wider sector, but also internally in our own practices. Change requires a range of different actors to come together, who have key responsibilities and expertise in relation to the various issues. We intend to convene a group of key institutions and stakeholders to work together in addressing the complex issues this report identifies.



This is inspired by previous work in 2006 by Buttle UK on successfully creating a Care-Leavers Quality Mark.

The recommendations we are making are:

### **1. Address barriers to support for estranged young people:**

- We urge the creation of a standardised definition of estrangement, to be used across social care, education, and health sectors. Only when multiple sectors are using the same language can a conversation be had about the specific needs and support that this group require.
- Frontline services must offer face-to-face support for vulnerable young people. The invisibility of estrangement has been compounded by support offered from a distance, which has become the new normal, post-pandemic. We recognise the pressures that services are under to streamline costs and time, but this should not be at the expense of the wellbeing of critically vulnerable young people.
- Educational settings are some of the only places that young people, estranged or otherwise, are required to attend by law up to the age of 18. With this in mind, we call for the education sector, particularly Further Education (FE) colleges, to seek out estranged students more proactively by training staff to recognise the signs and offer more holistic frontline support. We recognise that Higher Education (HE) is already on this journey and hope they can share lessons learned.
- In creating a definition and summary of the impacts of estrangement on young people, the government should create a financial package of benefits that reflects those given to care-leavers, given that their experiences are so closely aligned.

### **2. Improve the infrastructure available to estranged young people:**

- Access to safe, secure housing, with particular attention paid to the vulnerability of the inhabitants, must be a priority for housing associations and local government. Even in the midst of a housing crisis, the urgency of provision for EYP cannot be understated, given their vulnerable age and adverse lived experiences.
- We stand with calls from Crisis<sup>1</sup> for an urgent increase in social housing, along with progressive thinking around the affordability and array of housing necessary to reflect needs.
- National funding and specific assistance for this group must be ring fenced, much in the way that it has been for care-leavers. At Buttle UK, we must also use outreach and our funding for EYPs, to increase the number of Chances for Children grants given to EYP.

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<sup>1</sup> [Crisis - Ending Homelessness: Housing](#)

- More broadly, frontline workers tell us that they are exhausted. There must be a conversation in national government about realistic staffing levels, support and training and increased funding for frontline services.

### **3. Fully support the wellbeing of estranged young people:**

- There needs to be better provision of support and knowledge to help young people make their own choices. These are a group trying to get out of damaging situations; they are willing and able to work hard and be independent but are constrained by social norms around age and family support.
- We stand by charities such as StandAlone in championing the creation of support networks and open conversations, for estranged young people to feel less alone. The interviews with both frontline workers and young people have made it clear that talking with others has helped them with the guilt and stress they feel at having left, or been forced to leave, a difficult and damaging home environment.



# Project overview

## Introduction

Buttle UK's Chances for Children grants provide items and experiences up to the value of £2,000, tailored to the unique needs of the grantees who require them. While these packages of support are available to a range of children and young people, there is a specific group which Buttle UK describes as 'Estranged Young People' (EYP). To summarise their needs and eligibility for a grant from Buttle UK, we define EYP as:

- Aged between 16-20 years old at the time of the grant
- Estranged from their parents or carers, often leaving abusive, neglectful or disruptive homes
- Not receiving financial or social support from parents or carers as a result of this estrangement
- We will only assess an application when an EYP is in formal education, such as attending a secondary, higher or further education setting

Buttle UK grants support EYP living in varying degrees of independence. Many live in supported or emergency accommodation, with some having experienced outright homelessness following the crisis that led to estrangement. Critically, this group lack the financial and emotional support that many in this age group rely on to successfully navigate early adulthood.

There is little understanding of this group; their particular needs are not easily identified by local or national government. Buttle UK grants contribute to helping some of these young people to live independently, access their education and overcome the difficulties caused by poverty and crisis. However, in recent years, the impacts of COVID-19 and the subsequent ripple effect of the cost-of-living crisis have caused additional pressures. This project has been a study of these circumstances and the experiences of EYP living through these challenging times, undertaken by young people who have experienced it, and have themselves been Buttle UK grantees during this period.

2018 research from Stand Alone, just predating the onset of the pandemic, found that a major emotional impact of estrangement for students was isolation and feelings of loneliness, as well as not feeling like anyone cares<sup>2</sup>. This is supported by research from Unite, who gathered perspectives from both estranged and care-experienced students, and found gaps in the financial, institutional, and emotional support available to this group<sup>3</sup>. Even before COVID-19, research was already stressing serious issues facing estranged young people.

It was clear that the rapid turnover and complexity of challenges thrown up by COVID-19 was likely to have compounded and worsened these existing issues. This has been reflected in applications made for grants from Buttle UK across this time. Therefore, we wanted to better understand the barriers to support and the high levels of isolation experienced by these young people, and how these were exacerbated by the circumstances brought about by COVID-19. Focusing both on the historical and the recent significant experiences of young people has been a critical part of this project.

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<sup>2</sup> [StandAlone - Family Matters](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Unite Foundation - Impact Report](#)

## Definition

In the UK, it is difficult to define the numbers of young people experiencing estrangement from their parents or carers. This primarily stems from the diversity of definitions around estrangement. Estranged young people experience many forms of homelessness, such as sofa surfing, staying briefly with friends or relatives, sleeping rough or finding temporary refuge in a hostel. The definition of estrangement varies from organisation to organisation. Some define estrangement to include care-leavers, but they are arguably different from those that are estranged. That is because care-leavers have a more comprehensive entitlement to financial and social support.

Those that become estranged at the age of 16 and over are not entitled to any group specific state-sanctioned benefits, as care-experienced young people are. This leaves two groups of young people with similar lived experiences and equivalent maturity, but with strikingly different entitlement to support. Care-leavers, quite rightly, can access enhanced Universal Credit, dedicated assistance from a specialist team and other housing benefits<sup>4</sup>. Care-experienced young people who became known to the system only in their teenage years are reported as having the most trauma which has been missed, as their age rendered them invisible<sup>5</sup>. It is no surprise therefore that those requiring support from children's social services close to the upper limit of 18 may well be missed or are tipped into adult social services – which do not carry the same support entitlements.

Another key factor is the differing age ranges that the support sector, state system and charities define as a young person. 16 to 20-year-olds are eligible for Chances for Children grants, for example, but many in the Buttle UK referrer network define young people as between 16-25. No doubt in part due to the issues outlined here, there is no standardised measurement of estranged young people in public statistics related to homelessness, education or welfare. The nature of homelessness, particularly sleeping rough, creates some of the most invisible people in our society. This group is difficult to capture in numbers due to the very nature of their living circumstances; they are fluid and mobile. Therefore, information has to be drawn from a number of sources and related to different aspects of estrangement.

## Calculating the number of estranged young people in the UK

An underlying aim of this project was to attempt to calculate the number of estranged young people in the UK today. This was completed through analyses of existing data from charities and educational settings, and exploration of pertinent statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Attempting to identify these young people through analysis of alternative measures, such as figures around housing benefit, Universal Credit and social housing for this age group, cannot provide a reliable estimate. This is due to the inconsistent, and at times absent, descriptors on why certain financial or social support has been granted. Nonetheless, the exploration of this data is available in Appendix A and has framed the discourse created in this report.

Though it is clear that the number of estranged young people is hard to measure through existing public data, work is being done by individual organisations to pull data together into cohesive statistics. Centrepoin focuses on youth homelessness, though this is not the same as estrangement, in that not all homeless young people have become estranged from their

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<sup>4</sup> [DWP - Care Leaver Covenant](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Children's Commissioner - Characteristics of teenagers entering care for the first time](#)



family. They estimated that in 2020-21, 122,000 young people between 16-25 were homeless or on the point of being made homeless<sup>6</sup>. This is an extraordinary number, and the number only captures those that actually reached out to their local council for support, leaving those who didn't, hidden. Homelessness charity Crisis has estimated that as many as 62% of single homeless people do not show up on official figures<sup>7</sup>.

Building on this, the Children's Commissioner suggested that 123,000 13 to 17-year-olds were falling through the gaps in mainstream provision in 2017/18 due to disruptive home circumstances or living on the edge of care<sup>8</sup>. Comparisons can be drawn between this cohort and those who are considered an estranged young person by Buttle UK's criteria. Indeed, four years on, our EYP cohort may well be some of those identified by the Children's Commissioners calculations.

Academic year of application	Number of care-leaver students	Number of estranged students
2017-18	2,735	7,888
2018-19	2,896	8,245
2019-20	3,083	8,899
2020-21	5,002	10,284

*Table 5 - Estranged young people in HE in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and **Scotland (2020-21 only)***

Buttle UK's estimate combines two strands of data. The first is calculated from robust data set out in Table 5. This is data from the Student Loans Company on behalf of the governments for England, Northern Ireland and Wales<sup>9</sup>, with the addition of 2020-21 data from the Student Awards Agency Scotland<sup>10</sup>. Both measure the count of students who apply for means-tested funding on the basis that they are irreconcilably estranged from their parents at the point of application.

Not only are figures high, with over 10,000 young people in HE presenting as estranged in 2020-21, they have risen year-on-year. Whether this is because access to HE for EYP has improved or because estrangement is on the rise is not possible to ascertain. Nevertheless, in 2021, 381,000 UK students aged 20 and under were accepted into higher education institutions<sup>11</sup>. This means that **2.7%** of students are estranged. If that percentage was used against 2021 Census figures for the population of the same age, it would suggest that approximately 56,100 young people aged 18-20 are estranged, and when extrapolated to include 16 and 17-year-olds, this figure becomes **92,800 estranged young people**.

However, this is a figure calculated using proportions of EYP who have gone on to higher education. It is widely acknowledged in the research sector that adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and financial constraints are barriers to opportunities such as higher education. These are typical lived experiences of those experiencing estrangement and indeed, care-experienced young people. Therefore, the second strand of data we have drawn from comes from figures for care-experienced students.

<sup>6</sup> [Centrepint - Databank](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Crisis: The Hidden Truth about Homelessness](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Children's Commissioner - Teenagers Falling Through the Gaps](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Student Loans Company - Estranged Students and Care Leavers 2018-2021](#)

<sup>10</sup> [The Stand Alone Pledge - SAAS 2020-21](#)

<sup>11</sup> [House of Commons Library - Higher Education Student Numbers](#)

The lived experiences of care-leavers align very closely with that of EYP. In 2019/20, only 6% of care-leavers aged 19-21 were reported as having gone on to higher education<sup>12</sup>. Using the assumption that, given their comparative experiences, 10,300 EYP in higher education are only 6% of the EYP population overall, we can calculate that there are approximately 124,700 estranged young people aged 18-20. Using the same Census data to account for the 16 and 17-year-olds, this total becomes **206,200 estranged young people aged 16-20**.

Buttle UK therefore proposes that the true number is somewhere between the two figures outlined above. We conservatively estimate that **150,000 young people aged between 16 and 20 are estranged in the UK, with the figure likely higher still**.

## Context

This project drew on data from EYP applications to Buttle UK during the period where COVID-19 restrictions were at their peak. As with all grants made by Buttle UK, applications are made on behalf of the grantee by a referrer. Referrers are **frontline workers** who provide the critical support services that young people need and that our grants work in tandem with. We see referrers from housing, social services, education, charities, health care and more. If an application is successful, a number of award reasons are selected which summarise the specific factors contributing to the grantees' needs (see Figure 2 for examples related to EYP). Unsuccessful applications are typically declined because of ineligibility in the circumstances of the applicant, or because the applicant's level of need does not meet the threshold for a grant. The limited budget available can also mean some applications are declined because there is no funding left.

Table 1 shows the significant variations in applications from, and grants issued, to this group. There is a clear drop in proportional spend, applications and number of grants for this group between 2018-2022.

Grants	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Number of grants awarded - all programmes	1,461	1,411	3,010	2,341
Number of grants awarded - EYP	432	358	447	290
Proportion of grants made to EYP	<b>29.5%</b>	<b>25.4%</b>	<b>14.8%</b>	<b>12.3%</b>
Total spend – all programmes	£1,531,258	£1,468,044	£4,009,295	£3,144,150
Total spend on grants - EYP	£394,378	£299,248	£458,103	£298,661
Proportion of spend on EYP	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>20.4%</b>	<b>11.4%</b>	<b>9.5%</b>
Number of applications – all programmes	2,801	2,530	4,298	3,594
Number of applications - EYP	745	588	707	508
Proportion of applications from EYP	<b>26.5%</b>	<b>23.2%</b>	<b>16.5%</b>	<b>14.1%</b>

*Table 1 - Changes in Buttle UK grant spend to EYP*

Figure 1 demonstrates the percentage of applications which have been granted. In both 2018-19 and 2019-20, applications for EYP were more likely than average to be awarded, but this

<sup>12</sup> [GOV.UK - Universities asked to do more to support care leavers](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/universities-asked-to-do-more-to-support-care-leavers)



trend has reversed since the onset of COVID-19. It is important to understand the reasons behind this, particularly the external context and organisational factors which have contributed to the drop.

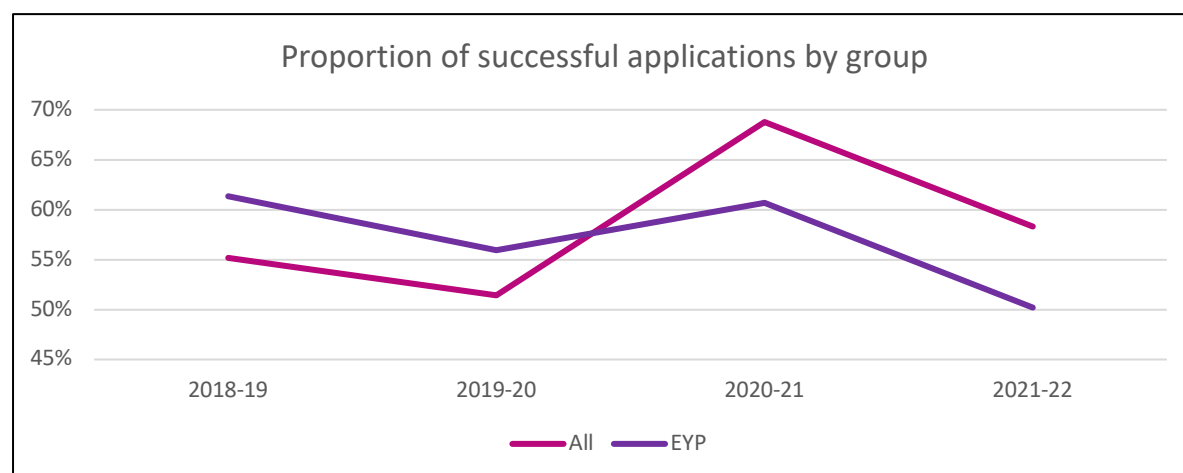


Figure 1 - Changing success of EYP applications at Buttle UK

In summary these are:

- > Though Buttle UK's actual spend on EYP has fluctuated, this has not followed the fluctuations in total spend across all Chances for Children grants.
- > There has been a drop in applications for EYP, which have reduced from over a quarter of all applications to under 15% between 2018-2022. This has resulted in a significant year-on-year drop in the total proportional spend on EYP compared to all other groups that we support.
- > The largest drop was seen in 2020/21, with a 9% drop on the previous financial year. This was the year that COVID-19 restrictions were at their peak.
- > The 2021/22 financial year saw the lowest proportion of grant-making to EYP overall, with under 10% of Buttle UK's total grant spend on this group. This was a year with continuing COVID-19 restrictions.

It was needing to understand what had contributed to this significant drop in applications that led Buttle UK to undertake this research project with young people.

## Research objectives

The objectives we set for this project were to:

1. Map the current referral route and available services for this group by speaking with the referrer network, identifying potential facilities and service changes to better support this group.
2. Understand the experience of estranged young people both during COVID-19 and in the aftermath, by listening directly to them.
3. Define recommendations for further support and changes for estranged young people as a result of this piece of research.

## Methodology

This project's critical aim was an evaluation of the full extent of the issues that estranged young people faced in the COVID-19 pandemic and latterly, the cost-of-living crisis. We wanted to examine how these issues compounded or exacerbated existing problems, such as the availability, suitability and accessibility of broad support for EYP. Furthermore, through undertaking research that builds a better understanding of life as an estranged young person, Buttle UK can adapt and improve its grant giving to this group, as well as contributing to shaping wider systematic support for them. With this in mind, the project also aimed to explore available data that could provide an estimated number of EYP in the UK. This would frame the extent of the issue and steer the necessary action to adequately support this group.

An important aspect of the research project was hearing and amplifying the voice of young people who have experienced estrangement. This overarching aim is linked to Buttle UK's strategic aims around inclusion, co-production and accountability. The project was designed with the intention to involve young people in the evaluation and production of the report and findings. We wanted to advocate for the perspectives of those with lived experience and recognise the significant contribution these perspectives make to building meaningful and actionable results.

## Co-Producers

Co-production is a new and important part of Buttle UK's work. Encouraging participation provides more meaningful and authentic findings, advocating Buttle UK's grantees as both key stakeholders and experts in the field and helping us to be accountable for our actions. Therefore, at the outset of the project, we recruited a set of co-producers. Text invitations were shared with young people who met the following criteria:

- > Had received a grant from Buttle UK within the preceding two years
- > Met the definition of an Estranged Young Person, from the information provided at application
- > Had responded to Buttle UK's standard evaluation survey/text invite

75 invitations were sent out, from which an initial group of 10 young people agreed to take part in a pilot interview to discuss their lived experience, interest in the project and ideas for how best to undertake it. Seven young people requested to take part and, working with Buttle UK's Impact and Evaluation Manager as a facilitator, formed the research team that have subsequently co-designed and co-produced this project.

The core group have been involved in every stage of the project. In addition to discussing ideas and planning actions in regular focus groups, they have received training in research methods prior to completion of research tasks and ongoing support to enhance these new skills. There have been diverse opportunities to take part, including writing the interview script for referrers, interviewing participants, analysing survey data, coding themes and completing analytical writing, and presenting findings.

The extent of participation was voluntary, but all hours were paid using the London Living Wage and all participation was remote. This approach was chosen to work around young people's work and educational commitments, and to remunerate them for the skills and time they offered to the project.



After taking the lead across the interview process and discussions about the findings of the research, the young researchers were given training and encouraged to use their own words to write about what they had discovered. Sections which are marked by the symbol on the left have been written entirely by a young person themselves, in order to champion the extraordinary work and expertise they have contributed to the project. Where their words have been edited it has only been to support concision and legibility.

## Research Design

A mixed-methods design was chosen to fulfil the project aims. The primary data collection was qualitative, gathered from both young people and referrers, to explore the broader aims of the project. The secondary was producing and gathering quantitative data to calculate the number of EYP in the UK.

For the former, two rounds of interviews were scheduled. The first round involved young people aged 16-20, all of whom had received a Chances for Children grant within the preceding two years. Invitations to take part in the telephone/online interviews were sent via text message,

and participants were offered a £15 gift voucher as a thank you for their involvement. Both the method of invitation and the means of undertaking the interviews were chosen to maximise response rates, in line with previous work within Buttle UK which focused on how best to engage young people in research and evaluation practices.

This resulted in interviews with 27 participants by telephone or online. Although more interviews were scheduled, and text reminders sent, attendance rates were unpredictable. Nonetheless, this number exceeded the initial aim, and with the 10 pilot interviews, brought the total participation to 37. The topics covered in the interviews can be summarised broadly as:

- > *If they felt comfortable*, talking about their estrangement and the impact it had on their education and wellbeing
- > How COVID-19 impacted on them financially, educationally, and socially – especially lockdown and isolation as an estranged person
- > What support services they accessed before and during the pandemic, and what changes they experienced to their support network
- > What they thought the support sector needed to do or change, to be the best it could be for estranged young people

Following a focus group discussion, a survey and corresponding semi-structured script was co-written. Both of these methods were chosen to expand on the themes and findings of this initial round of young person interviews. Invitations were sent to all referrers who have applied to Buttle UK for EYP grants in the previous two years. The 92 survey respondents represented a broad cross-section of the many organisations who apply to Buttle UK, providing comprehensive insights to explore the research aims. A further 21 referrers voluntarily participated in a follow-up interview, which was designed to complement the young person interviews more directly. These interviews broadly explored the following:

- > How COVID-19 changed their service and other services for young people, particularly blockages from support to grant
- > How COVID-19 impacted on the relationships and wellbeing of their young people
- > What barriers and difficulties were holding back their organisation(s)
- > What they thought the support sector needed to do or change to be the best it could be for estranged young people

Quantitative data was generated using two separate strands. Freedom of Information requests were sent to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (related to the number of awards for social housing and emergency accommodation to young people aged between 16-20 years old), and to the Department of Work and Pensions (related to the provision of Universal Credit for estranged young people aged 16-20, with a specific focus on the housing element). The secondary strand was through a survey sent to all further education, higher education and secondary educational establishments in the UK, requesting information about the number of estranged young students they had on record. However, the latter survey had limited success, and the response rates were not enough to produce reliable data.

## **EYP Demographics**

The characteristics of the sample are important to consider in light of the findings. The ethnicity of the EYP participants ranged, with a greater number of White participants over Minoritised Ethnic participants. However, statistically, these figures align with the grantee

population supported by Buttle UK. The geographic spread of the participants was broad, with participants from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland living in both urban and rural areas. However, there were no candidates from Scotland. The sample had a heavier weighting of participants identifying as female, which was particularly reflected in the co-producers, of which all 7 are women. This is a long-term issue with grantee participation amongst EYP in routine surveying, with response rates typically lower from young men.

Gender	Number
Female	24
Male	11
Transgender	1
Non-binary	1

*Table 3 - Participant gender*

Ethnicity	Number
White British	19
Black or Black British	10
Asian or Asian British	5
Arab	2
Not Disclosed	1

*Table 2 - Participant ethnicity*

Figure 2 is an examination of the grant award reasons recorded at Buttle UK for the young people's cohort. These are identifying characteristics that demonstrate their lived experiences, forming the context behind their responses. Isolation, homelessness, and family breakdown were referenced as factors in just over half of all cases, though the true extent is most likely greater, due to the reality of estrangement. These factors are not always selected as award reasons in grants to EYP, as they are somewhat self-evident. Therefore, looking at the subsequent most common award reasons reveals a detailed insight into the contexts of the young people's lives. With child abuse, neglect and domestic abuse appearing in between 15-25% of cases respectively, it stands to reason that mental health crises and relationship difficulties were apparent in around a quarter of all cases, with emotional difficulties impacting 40% of this cohort. Just over 20% of participants were young unaccompanied asylum seekers, which added additional significance to the findings and circumstances that this specific group experience. A range of learning disabilities, neurodevelopmental disorders and trauma-related illnesses were represented in this cohort, with 10% of participants also having experienced discrimination due to their race, faith or sexual orientation. Awareness of this trauma has been crucial to supporting and understanding the findings of the research.



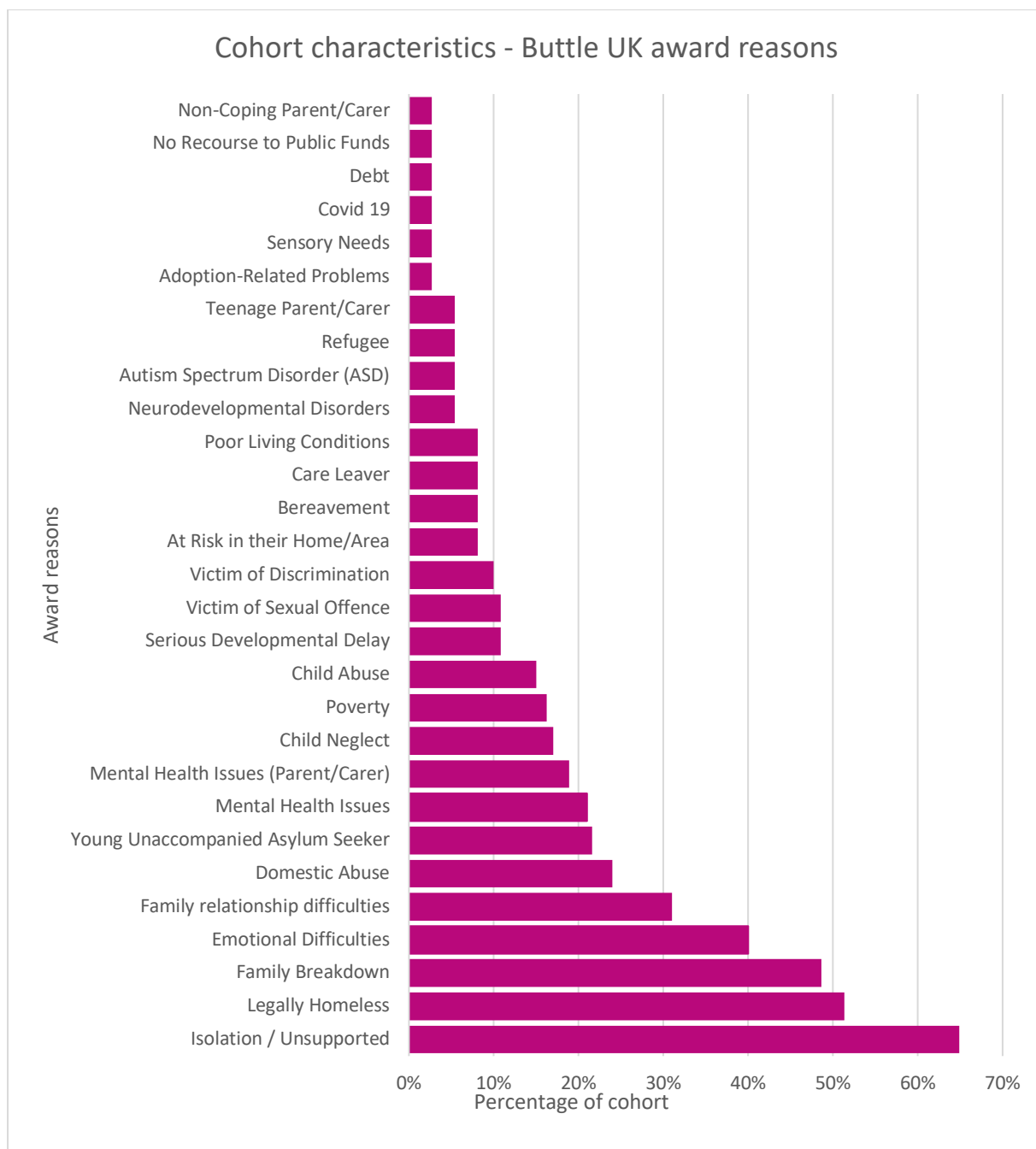


Figure 2 - Summary of participant characteristics

## Aim 1: Mapping the referral route

### Quantitative findings

Responses to the survey sent to referrers provided insights from an array of the referral network available to estranged young people, with responses from housing officers, senior school staff, psychologists/psychotherapists, care advisors, charity workers and student advisors. Of the 92 respondents, 38.9% worked with all age groups, while 61.1% worked within organisations specifically for young people.

Very few organisations had one specific purpose, with the majority identifying multiple purposes for their organisation. These organisations are outlined in Figure 3. A very high proportion provide support for homelessness and mental health, closely followed by housing support, young parent support and social services. This demonstrates the needs common to many estranged young people. Specific services for refugees, victims of domestic violence, and those suffering social injustice were also represented in the respondents. A mixture of education staff also responded to the survey, ranging from further, higher and non-mainstream education settings, which was expected given the focus age group of the study.

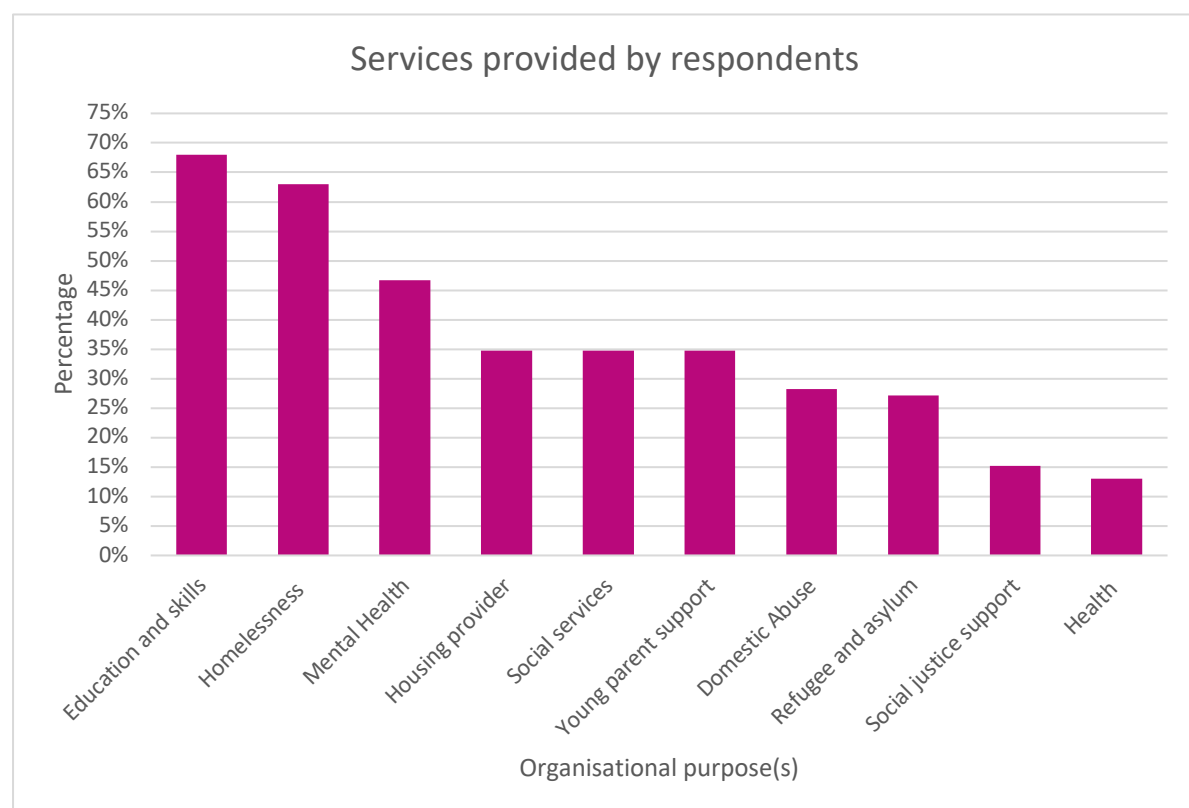


Figure 3 - Organisational purpose of survey respondents

The responses demonstrate that support services have been under immense strain both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Two time periods were defined to help with the analysis, as follows:

- > 'During COVID-19': the first lockdown (March 2020) to the end of the most recent nationwide lockdown (July 2021)

- > 'After COVID-19': the period of fewer or reducing legal restrictions related to isolation and lockdown (August 2021-present)

The numbers of estranged young people reaching out for support during COVID-19 increased or increased a lot for nearly three-quarters of respondents (Figure 4). Concurrently, organisational staffing capacity and ability to see EYP fell drastically in this time, with 65% of respondents stating that their capacity to see young people decreased. This was closely mirrored by estranged young people's *ability* to engage with the services they needed, though their *willingness* actually increased in 43% of respondents' organisations.

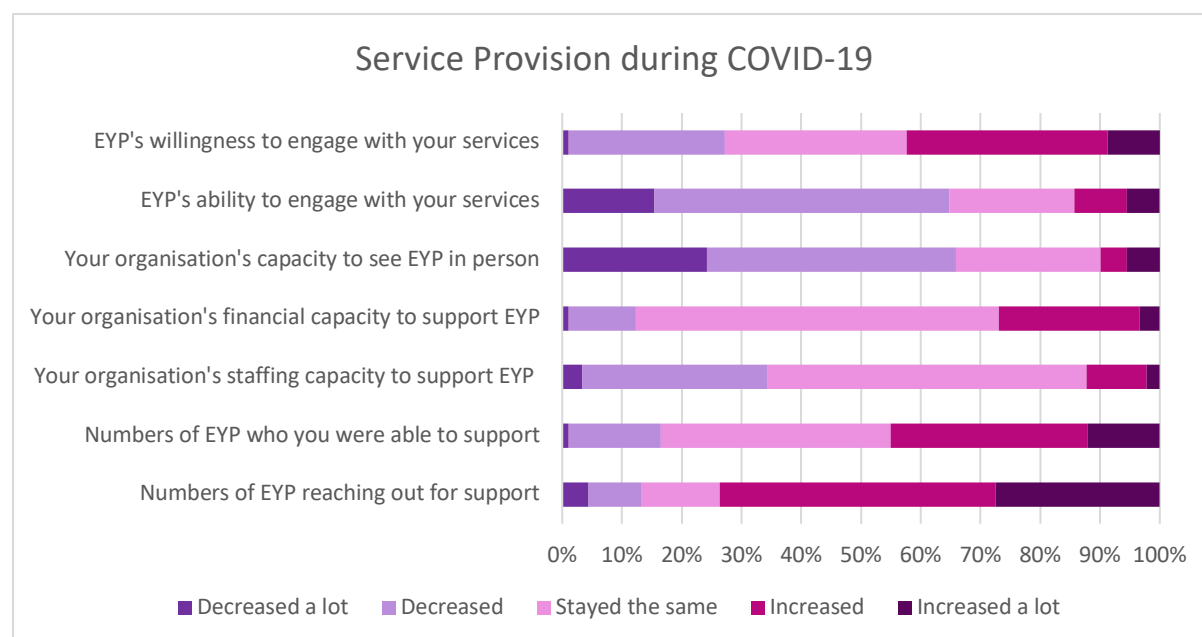


Figure 4 - Changes to support services during COVID-19

Figure 5 shows how these issues changed after the lockdowns and most drastic isolation requirements ended. Notably, staffing capacity was not reported as having increased after COVID-19, with 62% of organisations reporting that staffing capacity remained the same. This could have implications on the strain being placed on the support sector, particularly given that respondents reported another strong increase in demand for their services (70% increase overall), EYP's ability to engage increased by 66% and willingness to engage with services by 62%. These figures are once again mirrored by the increased ability of organisations to see EYP in person, which demonstrates the relationship between in-person support and the success of said support in engaging young people. The factor which saw least change was financial capacity. The majority of respondents reported that their financial capacity to support stayed the same during and after COVID-19.

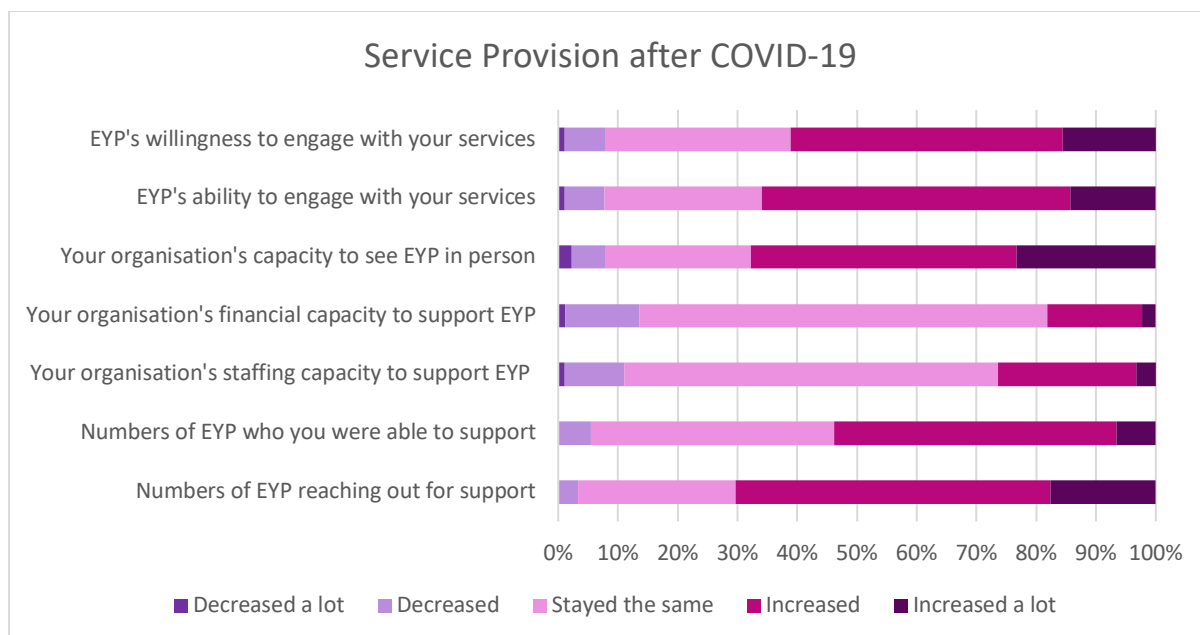


Figure 5 - Changes to support services after COVID-19

Overall, the figures demonstrate gaps between demand and provision during COVID-19, and long-term impact after the pandemic which is reflected in increased engagement and demand for support services. The qualitative responses to the survey from both young people and referrers help us understand the reasons for this.

## Qualitative findings

**Question:** *Can you describe any challenges of being in a sector supporting Estranged Young People throughout the pandemic?*



One of the biggest reported issues around COVID-19 was the inability for charities and organisations to access young people. Due to the regulations, sectors had to arrange meet ups in parks or via online channels. This then raised the question of sufficient support being offered and safety for young people perhaps not being paramount. One referrer stated that relationships were prevented at many points in the duration of the pandemic, with many referrers implying that the quality of care and support diminished as a result of new methods of contact. This also impacted the revisitation or set up of support plans for young people which left them vulnerable and feeling alone due to the lack of places and opportunities to meet.

*Failing to offer appropriate support was a challenge, as we could not visit them in their respective placements (Referrer)*

*A large part of our role is face-to-face interactions to build relationships in order to support young people...as this was limited, it became hard to reach out and offer full support during the pandemic (Referrer)*

Some responses referred to their service not being equipped to go fully online. One referrer stated that their sector did not get work laptops until nine months into the pandemic and only then could they fully work from home. This lack of equipment slowed down the

communication to estranged young people and any processes they may have been relying on, such as housing registers or financial help. On top of material resources being required, referrers reported that staffing issues due to the pandemic slowed processes down and this did not bode well with the rising workload for the sector. This resulted in longer wait times and an inability to efficiently monitor young people as had been possible prior to COVID-19.

*Often online sessions would be cut short due to technical difficulties and poor internet connections. We faced increased workload due to increased needs and deteriorating mental health in young people too (Referrer)*

*Our IT systems weren't fit for purpose, we had to use our personal laptops for 9 months before we got work ones (Referrer)*

*There were difficulties getting in touch with colleagues who could put in place financial support, as the only method of communication was email (Referrer)*

*I think the biggest challenges were managing staffing and implementing greater infection control measures, as well as ensuring that YP still had access to a quality and consistent level of support from our services (Referrer)*

The new reliance on phones, online meetings and email to access young people meant EYP didn't get an alternative setting to see support workers and talk openly. Referrers stated that talking on Teams or Zoom openly about issues such as domestic violence was not a possibility because of their living conditions and lack of privacy. Survey respondents shared that some EYP would only partake in certain aspects of the meetings online. Also, there was a lack of visibility and reduced safeguarding which resulted in vulnerable persons not being monitored and protected from outside harm.

*Being able to see all EYP in face-to-face meetings led to a decrease in emotional and physical wellbeing and a decrease in engagement in support plans (Referrer)*

*Not being able to see an EYP in person was difficult as a holistic picture of them and their surroundings is impossible to see. Also, preventing EYP from disengaging at this time was difficult (Referrer)*

Survey respondents frequently referenced the lack of external support. This was made worse by the apparent rising levels of vulnerable young people being in contact with councils and being put into emergency housing. There was also a rise in the need for grants, which some referrers reported as becoming overly restricted. This was because of a lack of funding, as well as the long waiting lists. This reduced young people's faith in the system and made them further withdraw from much needed support. Fewer people, including social services, were able to be 'on the ground' for EYP and this further reduced their ability to access grants when vulnerable, particularly for items such as essential items, housing, food etc.

*It was difficult to maintain staffing levels and we had many members of permanent staff off, so we were using lots of bank staff. It also became very difficult to get the necessary external support for YP from other agencies (Referrer)*

*Engaging with other professionals who were working from home and not allowed to do any face-to-face work was difficult (Referrer)*



*Social care, police and health developed an overreliance on charities, because their services were overrun (Referrer)*

*We couldn't get help from housing or social services to safeguard people. EYP's financial situation got worse and it was harder to get community support (Referrer)*

As 68% of the survey respondents worked in the education and skills sector, engagement with education and coursework became a theme in many of the responses. Education was described as a huge issue during the pandemic, with issues accessing lessons and materials. One referrer indicated that EYP have lower attention spans because of the trauma they have experienced and therefore they had many students who were missing classes or simply putting them on mute. This did not improve after the pandemic, because students had a reluctance to get back into the routine resulting in poor attendance and again, an inability for the sector to sufficiently monitor their wellbeing day-to-day. This was attributed to a lack of motivation to get back into education and also fear of the virus, especially after months of media coverage.

*Many don't have their own computer, or a decent phone which many YP who live with their family have and this caused our EYP to fall behind with their coursework and their IT skills (Referrer)*

*COVID disrupted education, which is a lifeline for most of the young people we work with. Many did not have a laptop or are not computer literate (Referrer)*

*Exposure to false narratives spread on social media along with heightened exposure to screentime [lead to] a decrease in learning, particularly due to being online which a lot of EYP found less engaging (Referrer)*

## Aim 2: Understanding the experiences of estranged young people

### Summary of themes

The size of the sample, and expansive nature of qualitative data, led to a very broad spectrum of findings. This section assesses the themes through the interviews carried out with both the young people, and the adult referrers. It includes quotations from the interviewees and presents the patterns, common denominators and issues throughout the data relating to the circumstances of young people during COVID-19. The co-production team members each completed a deep dive into two themes, exploring the data to analyse the unique perspectives of young people, enhanced by comparisons to those of referrers. Figure 6 summarises the three major themes and corresponding sub-themes. They are interlinked, and therefore compound and reinforce one another.

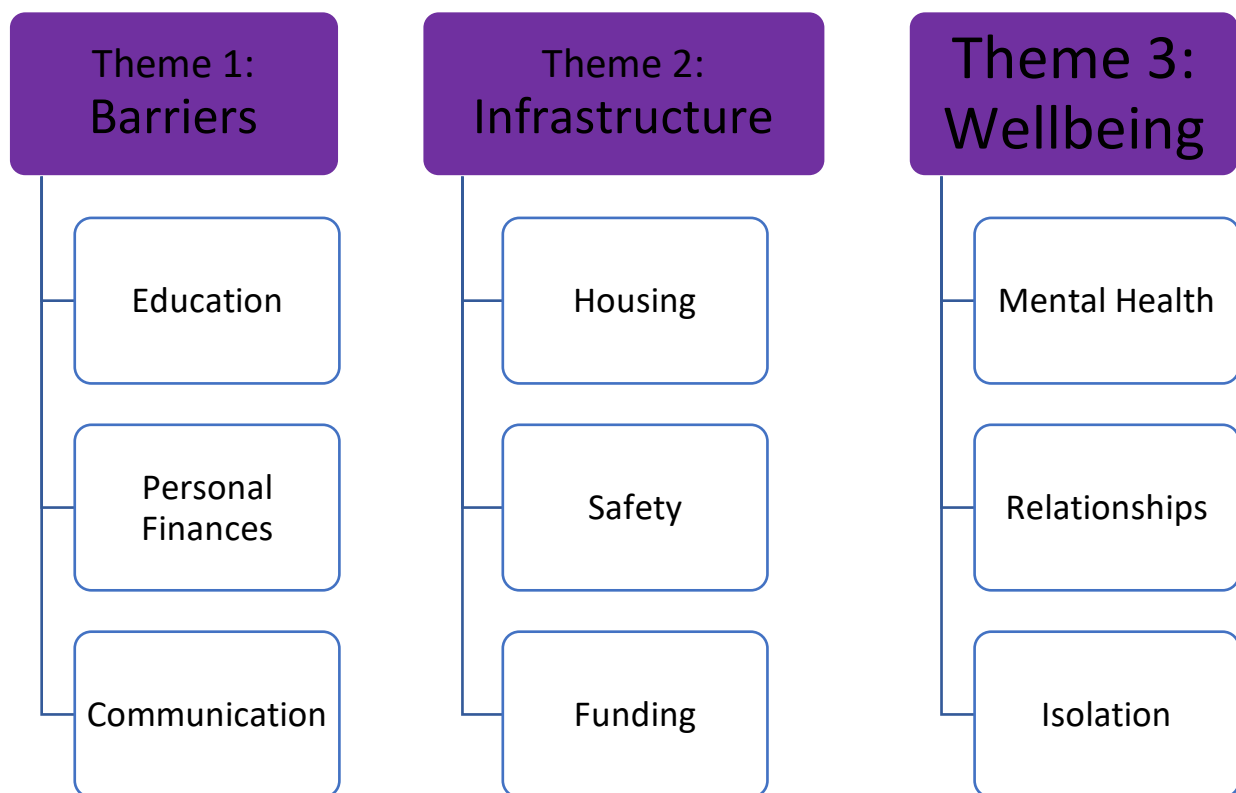


Figure 6 - Themes and sub-themes

## Theme 1: Barriers



### Education

The effect of COVID-19 on education for young people was immense and many estranged young people were deeply affected due to an inability to access remote learning. Some education types, such as practical or vocational courses, were particularly difficult to grasp without face-to-face learning. Without exception, every young person agreed that virtual lessons did not offer the same type of education or support as face-to-face learning. Many interviewees referenced the difficulty in not becoming distracted at home, or being unable to transition from their laptop into doing other things at home. Some young people stated that they decided to drop out of mainstream education in order to complete an apprenticeship, just so that they could afford to support themselves financially. This was an unseen aspect of COVID-19, that estranged young people were suddenly thrown into independence and had to find ways to make ends meet. It was clear that education was often the first thing to fall off a young person's radar during COVID-19. because they were trying to find housing and money to pay for rent.

*[Tutor] said that I needed to part prioritise college over work, and it really annoyed me because she was talking about it in front of the whole class. So I kind of snapped at her...I said "well, if you're willing to pay for my rent, and my food for the month, I'll be more than happy to do whatever you want" (EYP)*

*I'm more of a practical guy, so I like to interpret my work through actions instead of a lot of the written, a lot of the time you're just sitting down listening into these meetings and the lessons and there's not much physically to do (EYP)*

*It was very hard to concentrate. Most of the lessons were online which was very hard. I felt like I was losing a lot of my motivation to finish the course and I was procrastinating a lot (EYP)*

*We were able to provide funding towards laptops and training, but also a lot of young people stopped doing education during lockdown altogether (Referrer)*

Many young people admitted that their attendance slipped due to COVID-19 and therefore they missed out on the opportunity for grades and a fair chance to attend university. This was also clear in the referrer interviews, with one referrer reporting that college attendance had slipped subsequent to the pandemic. This illustrates that COVID-19 interrupted teaching as well as safeguarding, as teachers could not see the signs of neglect or abuse. One of the biggest concerns was not being able to reach EYP about attendance or the parents who weren't letting their young person into school due to the virus, which contributed to estrangement. Many interviewees working in education expressed a concern about young people having nowhere to go for the holidays and being away from a safe environment with food, counselling, support and the wider activities on offer.

*I think there's a lot of young people who are more anxious. I have actually noticed this year that people are absent a lot more. There's this inconsistency of attendance following the pandemic, I wonder if people are giving up a little (Referrer)*

*[For our] traumatised young people...a lot of that anxiety and trauma was triggered by the school environment. I'm finding the transition back to school is where a lot of those things came back out (Referrer)*

*Young people's wellbeing was really reduced. [This raised] risks and safeguarding concerns and worries, you know, someone not coming into their virtual session, whereas before we might have gone out and visited them and seeing what's going on for them or what's happening in their home (Referrer)*

*Some of my young people were missing out on university because they weren't able to do exams...also there's a lot of extra factors that come with education, like the young person being able to access sports or extracurricular activities, which they really enjoy and need, which they missed out on (Referrer)*

On top of this, not all young people had access to laptops or technology to engage with virtual learning. Colleges and schools gave out some laptops to help, but this wasn't universal support. It became a stress on estranged young people amid a huge rise in anxiety because of the virus and the unknown future. Therefore, many estranged young people stopped attending virtual education altogether as there was a lack of support and a lack of hope. This led to an overall lack of motivation and even when young people were allowed to go back into face-to-face education, many still didn't go back. This became a huge concern for teachers and support staff.

*I basically just gave up on it. I decided I can't do it. It's just disruptive to myself....I decided, I'm just going to wait until lockdown's over and just try and figure something out later on because it will just make me feel worse and worse. I couldn't focus on the exams. So I basically stopped doing it, it was a complete collapse of doing college work (EYP)*

*When it comes to lesson support and stuff it was hard because lots of services were down so I had to wait for a really long time. You couldn't just walk into as many places and get help the same way you could before (EYP)*

*I was in a college course but I'm restarting it next year because of my situation along with COVID, being in temporary accommodation. It's not the best foundation to really start something, it's a bit rocky (EYP)*

*As time went on, the students became less engaged and I think a lot of them really suffered with their mental health because they were just alone. And you're frankly, bored (Referrer)*

*I would say the biggest [problem] I noticed was probably attendance at college...the Zoom things, I just don't think were working. I don't think it was very easy for young people to feel that they could focus when they were just on a video call. They would log in and then not be listening. I've got some young people with ADHD where it was just impossible to focus on having a lesson or several lessons a day, you know, doing it online (Referrer)*



## Personal Finance

One of the most difficult aspects of estranged young people leaving home is finding their feet in the financial world. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, finances grew even tighter and accessing support became a struggle. Referrers suggested that those who were struggling financially became harder to reach; these young people didn't have access to laptops for online calls or phones for calls, and therefore those trying to offer support could not obtain important data or fulfil safeguarding checks. This consequently led to a drop in accessing bursaries and grants. For instance, Buttle UK require a social worker or someone of a similar status to make the application on behalf of the young person, which wouldn't be possible without initial contact between worker and young person.

Therefore, there were gaps in what provision they were entitled to, such as the items and experiences they needed.

*I didn't really have the money to pay for a phone or anything like that. Like when I was living in the hostel when everything was online. I had really bad WiFi there, really really bad, like I had to miss out on so many lessons because I couldn't connect to them (EYP)*

*Their choices would be just taking donated furniture that isn't necessarily going to be clean or working, and it just really devalues their position, I suppose. It says to them that you're not really worth investing anything in (Referrer)*

*So few of them have enough funds to cope, I guess when you're an estranged person, you don't have that sort of safety net behind you. So actually, if you don't have enough money for food today, there is no one to go to (Referrer)*

Another issue that became apparent from the interviews was that those young people on benefits could not afford to go to work. This sounds strange but in essence, working a job would earn less money than the young person relying on the state system to pay rent. On the flip side of this, although young people couldn't balance a job and benefits due to the overall financial gain, benefits did supposedly become easier to access during COVID. Some young people said it was harder after the pandemic, when additional Universal Credit and emergency funds dried up. One referrer indicated that their sector allowed young people to access grants / bursaries more readily than previously so that lack of money didn't coincide with their other struggles. Nonetheless, underemployment and low pay was a factor in some young people falling behind in paying their rent. One referrer suggested that rents should be lowered for estranged young people to help them find their feet and seek independence, as rent was seen as a huge barrier to financial independence.

*I'm working that much at paying my own rent, I was missing out on college and then having to stay up all night, which is affecting my mental health and then no one's gonna help because I'm working (EYP)*

*I tried to look for a job but they said if you're working while you're studying and as well having the benefits, I think they take it off you and you might not be able to find the work, it make it complicated (EYP)*

*I was in education itself, so I was claiming Universal Credit at the time. So that was actually at a higher rate than it is now! It's more of a struggle now, if anything, rather than it was back then (EYP)*

*Employment was a big concern, some were able to access the furlough scheme but some of them do rely on benefits. Some companies that they worked for just cut their losses and stopped trading, which created unemployment for our young people (Referrer)*

The referrers' interviews sometimes indicated that young people were exploited during the pandemic. If a young person was working prior to COVID-19 and not furloughed as a result of the virus, they were offered zero-hour contracts to reduce pay-outs which resulted in uncertainty and even more reliance on the state system. Although most financial situations revolved around being able to pay for food and rent, referrers also referenced the importance of wider financial support. Examples included young people accessing gym memberships or other social settings where they could find an escape and integrate with others their age. This became impossible during COVID-19 because social settings were closed, but coming out the



other side, this is still an issue where young people can't afford simple luxuries to merely escape a challenging reality.

*But with money, I think it's a lot worse for young people...I think that they have used COVID-19 to be able to put maybe some, some less positive systems into place. That penalise benefit claimants, I think (Referrer)*

*They don't get the same rights basically, holidays, pay increases and so on with a zero hour contract. And that was all worse with COVID (Referrer)*

*Our young people were getting the increase in benefit. And then for them to lose that was a massive blow for them, particularly as they were going back out into socialising. I don't think was necessary and shouldn't have happened personally (Referrer)*

As a result of COVID-19, some estranged young people who had nowhere else to go were put into hotels; this led to high expenses related to food and self-care, especially as the lockdown continued. This resulted in young people having financial debt, without the correct support to deal with it. It appears that estranged young people felt side-lined and as the financial support diminished, left vulnerable teens at risk. An example of this is where one young person said they had been put into a women's refuge at the personal cost of £300 a week. Therefore, although the support was there and suitable for her needs, the financial restraint brought new worries and concerns for the future. Subsequently, some young people are now working off debts.

*I feel like they've obviously tried to help us in the pandemic but in the long run, it's kind of made us a lot more financially unstable (EYP)*

*I was left with £300 to live on for the whole month. That's nothing, especially now that I'm in my own flat (EYP)*

*Often, they're then placed into like a hotel and you still need to buy food but you can't even cook, which is the cheapest way to cope. So actually, if you're living in a hotel for three months, it's really expensive. And Universal Credit is not a great deal of money (Referrer)*

*It's bad with temporary accommodation. Often you're put into really expensive flats that you can't afford, can't afford the council tax, practical stuff, utilities (Referrer)*



## Communication

Without exception, the young person interviews highlighted barriers of communication which impacted these young people in many different ways.

The majority of the young people found it difficult to see their support worker due to COVID-19 guidelines at the time. If it wasn't for these restrictions, they felt they could have got the specific support that they needed. Not being able to see a support worker or any sort of service to speak face-to-face made it difficult for many young people to talk openly about their issues. They felt that being able to speak face-to-face was critical in helping them feel comfortable to open up and to speak about many situations, especially about their mental health. It created a sense of being closed off and being unable to overcome their issues. Some suggested that if they had been able to have a conversation with an individual that they trust, it would have made them feel at ease, knowing that they have someone that cares about their mental health.

*When I call her, she's not always there, it's not like someone with supportive parents (EYP)*

*All my counselling stopped and it went online. Which I really hated. Because it just wasn't the same. It wasn't the same as going to someone and I didn't have that connection (EYP)*

*The support was just so different, like it was only over the phone. Or it was in a place with masks on, walking around a couple of metres from each other. And it was just, it was horrible. It's just made everyone feel a lot more distant (EYP)*

*I still haven't seen from my extended family since the pandemic so I think with my support worker not seeing me face-to-face when the pandemic was on, it affected me emotionally and psychologically (EYP)*

*I'd have students crying on the phone saying "All I want is to see someone face-to-face". I couldn't even do that because we weren't allowed at that time (Referrer)*

*When you have not even had one face-to-face, it can be a struggle. You know, to tell anybody anything, never mind anything that's very personal and private to a young person, is really really difficult (Referrer)*

Some young people had to complete forms independently as there was no support worker to help them fill in the paperwork. Many reported that communication from a supportive individual would have helped them more confidently access grants, financial support, or emotional/mental health support. Even the young people who were able to contact their support worker highlighted the specific communication barriers due to COVID-19, such as finding it hard to find suitable times to call or not being able to get through on the phone with them. More than one young individual pointed out that having practical interactions could have helped them understand things more if they were able to do functional tasks or be shown physically. This was particularly pertinent with refugees or individuals new to speaking English. They reported that understanding the English language was hard to them, particularly only being able to have online lessons and over-the-phone meetings. All these barriers mentioned by the young people could have affected their ability to grow and improve through their education and also speed up the process with their housing issues.

*A lot of meetings, we had to delay. That delayed [us] catching up so waiting to get our houses took much longer than they expected it to be and I had to wait more than a year in the hostel (EYP)*

*I was lonely, no knowing the English language (EYP)*

*All the lessons were online and for someone that didn't know much English, it was quite hard to understand (EYP)*

*[Refugees] didn't have access to their tutors on a face-to-face level, they had to do that virtually. It was a massive barrier, especially with their new language, the mental health needs on top of everything else just meant that they weren't engaging and therefore becoming much more isolated (Referrer)*

*I have a phone and a laptop and I can read and write and I still found services incredibly difficult to access, so I don't know what young people were supposed to do (Referrer)*

Due to financial and technological difficulties, it was hard for some young people to access their lessons online or communicate with their teachers and mentors. Many suggested that

they could not contact their school as their phone bills ran out, which set further difficulties to getting support. As well as some estranged young students experiencing these broader barriers to communicating with their college/school, nearly all of them found it hard to concentrate due to the online learning. Many felt that they could not communicate well in the online learning context and did not feel able to ask questions to help them understand the learning. This had a particular impact on refugees, who had the additional difficulties of joining their setting mid-term. One young person, who had never used a laptop and did not speak English, was excluded from his college because of his poor attendance, simply because he didn't know how to attend.

*Because I was in like different B&B's and Travelodge, you have to pay for internet. So a lot of the time I missed a lot of lessons because I just couldn't afford it. Which made me go really really behind. So then when lockdown did ease, I had to do a lot of extra work which was really difficult as well (EYP)*

*My social worker asked [the college]...she said it's hard for them to stay without education and also, they need to learn the language because they don't know how to speak English. But they said well, we can't do nothing now because they came in the middle of the year (EYP)*

*The online virtual learning so for a lot of our young people English is not their first language and so the medium for connecting on online learning for their college or their English lessons being really, really difficult. So we found that they were dropping out, they weren't attending (Referrer)*

*We did have a lot of texting, a lot of emailing. But sometimes it was difficult if the young person didn't have any credit for their texts, their Wi-Fi, that was a big barrier (Referrer)*

## **Barriers: Conclusions**

Many barriers outlined above have been worsened by COVID-19. However, it is emphatically clear that the pandemic restrictions only exacerbated existing systemic issues. In conclusion to this section, we summarise that:

- The invisibility of estrangement has been compounded by support offered from a distance, which has become the new normal post-pandemic. Frontline services are under pressure to streamline costs and time, which has sustained distanced practices beyond the pandemic. This comes at the expense of take-up and results in poor outcomes that said support is designed to improve.
- The lack of a standardised definition of estrangement across social care, education, and health sectors means that opportunities for cross sector working and data sharing is lost. Some sectors are failing to grasp the needs of estranged young people because they simply don't know what estrangement is.
- Education settings are some of the only places that young people, estranged or otherwise, are required to attend by law up to the age of 18. Yet many settings are not trained to recognise EYP and do not have holistic or academic support available to help this vulnerable group take up their education. Those that do have support available don't always promote it to students, who don't know how to access it and wouldn't know to define themselves as estranged. This includes setting specific bursaries or financial support to attend or receive adequate technology.
- A major barrier for estranged young people is the lack of a financial package of benefits that reflects those given to care-leavers. Given that their experiences are so closely aligned, EYP are being severely disadvantaged.

## Case study: P's story

I left home at 16 from my adoptive family due to a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with my adoptive mum. The abuse started when I was 8 years old and progressively got worse when I grew up. When I left home, I was very vulnerable, diagnosed with anxiety and depression within a week of leaving. My parents met with me but offered little reassurance and cut off financial support. My mum pushed me to go to counselling saying I would need to fix myself and basically put everything on my shoulders as my fault, I did believe that back then, that I deserved how she treated me. On top of the abuse at home, I was sexually assaulted early in secondary school and I didn't tell anyone. When I left home, my parents told me I probably deserved it or had acted in a way to lead him on.

My school had known about my home life but on both occasions, I was dismissed. On the first occasion the school counsellor contacted my parents and disclosed what I had said in confidence. On the other occasion, the deputy head told me I should wait until after GCSEs to get police involved because my exams were so important. So I stopped talking about it. When I left home social services got involved but did little to help. There was the idea that I had reached an age where I had every right to leave home but was not old enough to make parental decisions. So for the next two years I fought for my college to not notify my parents about issues and I tried to find my feet financially with the help of Universal Credit and a grant from Buttle. I was attending CAMHs by 17 and it did sort of help just to vent, though no resolutions were given. But as soon as I turned 18 that support was switched off and I ended up having emergency mental health intervention by my GPs.

I now have nothing to do with my adoptive parents, they broke me down in several ways but I have rebuilt my life. I am engaged, working from home and happy living a control-free life. I think the biggest struggle for estranged young people is moving on and finding our feet again. It is looked down on that we leave home early as it's not seen as socially acceptable. More money is needed in the system because no one should have to live in a violent household and be made to feel that there's no other choice.

## Theme 2: Infrastructure



### Housing

An issue faced by interviewees was that, even if they had found a shelter or housing, they still did not have access to basic necessities. Many interviewees mentioned that although they managed to eventually find a house, it was only partly furnished or lacked essentials like carpet and curtains. The concern of sudden unmanageable costs and the lack of equipment to cook and make sustainable meals was brought up several times both by young people and referrers. It seemed in particular that temporary housing did not have basic equipment that could be used sustainably. For example, one young person stayed in a Travelodge for 6 months, without cooking facilities; therefore, they could not prepare and cook meals, driving up the cost of living as they always had to buy ready-made food or takeaways.

*Council [housing], it's completely empty. There's nothing. I had my baby Wednesday and by Sunday I was moved in, no boiling water, no heating, electric, anything (EYP)*

*I went like three months without an oven. Three months without heating. I've only just got a sofa! (EYP)*

*Often, they're placed into like a hotel and still need to buy food, but you can't even cook...getting a takeaway every day is extortionate. Especially for estranged young people. It's the same with temporary accommodation. Often, you're put into really expensive flats that you can't afford, can't afford the council tax, practical stuff, utilities (Referrer)*

Following on from this point, several interviewees stated that they were homeless up to a year and had to resort to sofa surfing. One had been moved from foster care to university, then had no accommodation over the summer and had to move into council housing. This instability was indicative of the issues that many estranged young people faced. Some interviewees found that the temporary housing was too far from their institution/education or work. Another mentioned that they could not find a place to stay in council housing, so they had to move some place farther away. Not only does this make it physically difficult to attend classes and work, but impacts on social and emotional wellbeing. Being uprooted from an area that one is familiar with and being placed in a completely new area may add new trauma to the pre-existing trauma of being homeless and estranged from family.

*The antisocial behaviour got really bad...I had to move, so now I'm in private rented accommodation (EYP)*

*I had to stay in like a hotel for like five days...it was the only room they had... it was so far for me (EYP)*

*The hostel that they moved me to was a new location that I've never been before. I mean, I was 19, I had no experience in like a place by myself like that. I had no idea what to expect and the fact that they didn't give me the support as well at the place, just made it worse (EYP)*

*Since I was 16, I've not been settled in a house I've moved 11 times. I've been in B&Bs to hotels, different friends' flats and sofa surfing and then this is a proper home for me (EYP)*

*They offered me - well after questioning and kind of getting on at them a bit - they did offer me a flat to stay in for the time being, but it was really inconvenient because it was way too far out to travel to college (EYP)*



*I had to stay in like a hotel for like five days. It was a really far, it was the only room they had and it was all the way in [withheld] and it was so far for me. So I was moved twice (EYP)*

This reflects a wider pattern of inappropriate housing, particularly accommodation reserved for emergencies. Vulnerable and abused young people are being placed in harmful and inappropriate temporary accommodations due to a lack of space and housing. This could even further traumatise them. Several shocking examples given across the interviews show that the government/councils overlook the needs of young people and do not provide suitable accommodation. Unfortunately, several young people shared that if they refused particular housing – on the basis of not feeling safe, or it not being appropriate – they were marked as making themselves homeless.

*It was hell...probably the worst time of my life...there are strange people in supported housing (EYP)*

*I'm autistic and one instance where I really didn't feel safe, is when I was trying to do an exam, some guy was kicking the door down. I'm noticing frequently that people forget the keypad codes. So he decided to try and kick the door down (EYP)*

*My hostel, it's really horrible. I had a friend here and he actually killed himself. I feel like the staff members didn't really care. They see it happen a million times. So they have to become at least a bit numb to it. This building is just really negative. And toxic. I wish I was out sooner (EYP)*

*Even in children's home, you'd have had a victim of rape in the next bedroom to a perpetrator of rape (Referrer)*

*I've had young people put into accommodation that just wasn't appropriate, like there were people there intravenously using drugs, there was a lot of domestic violence, there were bedbugs in her bedding that she just couldn't get rid of (Referrer)*

*You're homeless and traumatised, okay, yet you just go into a hostel. It's 150 people and you can share a room with someone and we know we'll only give you two hours session, once a week or whatever, which often doesn't really happen (Referrer)*

The referrers were particularly vocal about the fact that young people were often left with little or no choices. Many referrer interviews suggested that a much broader variety of accommodation was necessary, in order to reflect the diverse needs of its users. It wasn't simply limited to having more options, such as one-bedroom flats or accommodation closer to the applicant's local area, but important and essential services available through said housing, such as an onsite warden or mental health support.

*Estranged young people are not just one homogenous group. You know, there's very, very vulnerable young people and there's very, very exploitative young people, and we throw them all in together. And that's really unfair to them. Again, we need to be a bit more thoughtful about where young people live, and what those accommodations look like (Referrer)*

*A lot of the people I work with who have maybe been in serious violence can't move into shared housing but the government says no, you're under 35 - you have to live in shared housing. So, I think it's not just about the investment, it is about understanding the different needs of different groups of young people (Referrer)*

*The options need to be improved; more social housing being put in place. It's stopping us from being able to do our best (Referrer)*

*They had issues with hygiene and cleanliness, and they were facing long term difficulties...think facilities should also be built for long term persons who have mental health issues who are unlikely to ever be homed independently, with a warden on site (Referrer)*

The relationship between housing and financial barriers was clear throughout the interviews. It is extremely difficult and costly for young people, especially estranged young people, to find a house. Many found that they were on the waiting list for accommodation for a longer period than expected; some had to remain sofa-surfing or completely homeless, as there was simply nowhere to go. It was clear that many referrers felt that the backlog caused by the pandemic had not only increased waiting lists but had also increased the pressure on their services because they could not realistically move young people on – even if this is what they knew was best for them. This was often attributed to the cost of living, with the rents putting young people out of reach of achieving independence. This was compounded by the issue that many referrers brought to light, namely the problem of estranged, young people being unable to find guarantors.

*Waiting, because waiting on the housing list is just such a long process now, especially if you don't have the points...one person every three years get nominated (EYP)*

*It's very difficult now to get housing and to even be able to afford that, never mind to afford the deposit on a rented place (EYP)*

*The waiting lists are just horrendous. Like you wouldn't believe (Referrer)*

*We've got some young people who are in our supported housing project for well over two years and they're so ready to move on, but they can't (Referrer)*

*There's two years' worth of backlog that they're trying to catch up in terms of getting a house...the whole housing process just stopped for ages (Referrer)*



## Safety

During the pandemic, a lot of estranged young people struggled not just physically, but mentally too. Having to stay in the same unsafe or unhappy house or accommodation was exceedingly difficult for some of the young people. This caused some to disobey the rules, leading to risky behaviours and greater exposure to COVID-19. With a lot of young people going out, the virus was still being spread, making it not just unsafe for the young people but also some of the vulnerable carers and referrers supporting them. Some of the young people in the interviews also commented on the fact they did not want the vaccinations and didn't believe they would be of any help. A few young people interviewed had come to the UK from a different place in the world and did not speak English confidently; they expressed concern that social workers and support sectors were trying to harm them with the injections and refused to take them.

*They asked me to have an injection...I don't want this (EYP)*

*Staying at home even though I should of was really, really hard (EYP)*

*I didn't really follow the rules, I mean I just couldn't – I had to look after myself (EYP)*

*Some young people didn't really want to stick to the social distancing. And it did become a little bit of a problem because the person they were living with had some health issues and were meant to be shielding and what have you, that was tricky (Referrer)*

*We recognised that a young person's view of what was acceptable and householder's view of what was acceptable around COVID could have been very, very different (Referrer)*

This was reflected in the referrer interviews, with many expressing fears for their own safety and that of the estranged young people. During the national lockdown, many support workers found it extremely difficult to keep the young people safe and out of danger; they referenced being unsure what was happening to their young people and how they didn't feel they could help. Support workers weren't able to stop all the estranged young people from leaving and it meant they found it hard to keep everyone safe.

*Places of safety weren't as open. Hospitals weren't accessible. Doctors weren't as accessible. So often the places where people go in crisis or for help just weren't there and that meant a lot more young people faced a lot more risk and for a lot longer (Referrer)*

*I felt for the safety of frontline workers...I imagine those working in child protection, social workers having to go into unknown environments. It was really frightening (Referrer)*

*Social workers didn't come into school, social workers didn't go out to see anyone. Universities were locked down (Referrer)*

*Quite a few of them didn't follow the rules because they found it too hard (Referrer)*

For many estranged young people, it is important to remember the extremely concerning and unsafe environments they were coming from. Some of the brave young people spoke out in the interviews about their previous experiences and trauma which led to them being unsafe and becoming estranged. It was clear that some faced hard choices between staying in an abusive, neglectful or highly stressful home, or taking a real risk by potentially making themselves homeless through estrangement. This lack of safety and security was described over and over as a contributor to very poor mental health and wellbeing.

*He was abusing me...Sexually assaulted me...tried to take my money...attacked me with blades...broke my jaw and nose (EYP)*

*My mother was emotionally and verbally abusive (EYP)*

*She was in an abusive relationship...it would get taken out on me (EYP)*

Therefore, it was concerning to see how many comments were shared across the interviews regarding safety in their homes following estrangement, particularly around their living circumstances. For many estranged young people who had been through a lot of trauma, living in an environment which was unsafe in new and different ways was very detrimental to their mental wellbeing. Supported housing should be a place where the young people can relax and take time to process things, but many of the young people placed there described the difficulty of doing so. A common response from young people was around the exceedingly high drug use, which was especially difficult for those trying to get away from drug use and get their life back together. Some people placed in this accommodation are in recovery, which can make them more sensitive to arguments, crime, and susceptibility from

others to become involved. This also compounded wider issues such as high levels of crime and financial desperation. One vulnerable young person with learning disabilities received a bike from Buttle UK, which unfortunately ended up getting stolen very quickly. This is another prime example of how unsafe supported living is for estranged young people. A further young person spoke about their desperation, mentioning that their only choice was to be housed by strangers. This is extremely unsafe.

*Being in temporary accommodation is not the best, it's really not. Pretty traumatic (EYP)*

*People excessively taking drugs...it's crazy (EYP)*

*My bike was stolen...the place I was living wasn't ideal (EYP)*

*So I spent a couple of nights on the streets because I didn't really know where else to go...Really, really hard. Really cold. And yeah, I almost went back, and I was like, Oh, my God, you know, what if the abuse was actually better? (EYP)*

*I signed up for a programme where you could get a bed for the night but with random locals who were kind enough to let you in (EYP)*

Referrers recognised the additional risks that estranged young people faced during lockdown. They referenced the trauma that many had historically faced behind closed doors and their increasing safeguarding concerns as they lost face-to-face contact with their clients. The latter was something that many referrers reported as the most worrying aspect of working with EYP during COVID-19, namely the capacity for issues to take root in isolation without a support worker being able to see or do anything about it. They often described EYP as becoming invisible, unseen, and unreachable over the pandemic. This was a major safeguarding concern.

*Well, you really didn't know what was going on in people's lives. I had one young person who was made homeless, she was put in a garden shed. All during the first lockdown and she was there without electricity, and her parents wouldn't let her in to use the toilet. And we didn't know this for weeks and months on end (Referrer)*

*If you're doing house visits, you go and see anyone, you think oh...the place is untidy, you think that's normal but if you go in and the person hasn't showered or washed and they're usually keeping on top of that, it's bad. You can just fake online. But you can't do it when it's in person (Referrer)*

*I'll be in that flat and they'll say to me "can you have a look at this, I think I could really do with the pots and pans" or something for the flat or things along those lines. So not having had that opportunity during COVID and just having to do things over the phone, it means things were missed (Referrer)*

On the topic of caring for others, the estranged young people commented on being let down by different support sectors. They found it extremely hard to speak out, and even when they managed to, they often reported that they did not feel listened to or nothing was done about the difficulties they present. This made the young people feel very unsafe and not listened to. Two of the reoccurring sectors that were mentioned across the young people interviews were the police and CAMHS. A lot of estranged young people had reached out when their safety felt jeopardised and they got no response, or they had faced long delays to hear back at all. Examples included young people being stalked by their estranged parents, having their belongings stolen or destroyed in the family home, and long-term abuse and neglect.

Furthermore, CAMHS was repeatedly reported as being at capacity. This affected their mental health and self-esteem, with the long waiting lists leaving estranged young people in unsafe situations. Unfortunately, having to go through this at such a young age affects their entire life and upbringing.

*I hope the police are taking it seriously...I haven't had any contact (EYP)*

*I contacted the police they said they were not going to do anything...they weren't helpful (EYP)*

*I went somewhere...they weren't helpful...my guardians were told to lock me in my room to quit me from committing suicide (EYP)*

*I was with CAMHS...one week I could talk to a counsellor... the next they were seeing other people (EYP)*

*Services need to be massively improved. Especially CAMHS. Young people desperately need some robust clinical therapeutic support beyond what I can offer and then districts just bounce them backwards and forwards (Referrer)*

*I think we need better links with the police as well and social services. There always seems to be a conflict of interest between social services and the police! (Referrer)*

There were many other similar comments across the referrer interviews. One issue that was raised on multiple accounts was regarding young people's mental health being left seriously unsupported, causing extreme safety concerns. While the estranged young people with mental health issues were on the waiting list for professional support, referrers described them as being abandoned and left to wait.

*You can't have...somebody that is struggling with mental health, self-harming and possibly is even suicidal waiting for eight months to see a professional... it's not on (Referrer)*

*They were scared to go out, they were very scared to start meeting with us. They didn't want to go back to college because they were still scared that they would get COVID. I found that it was a really scary time for them (Referrer)*

*Our young people didn't know how it will affect them - will they get really ill? Will some of their friends or family die from it? Will they die, you know? It stopped them engaging with us (Referrer)*

## Case study: A's story

My father was an extremely controlling and abusive alcoholic and when I turned 14, he tried to kill me in his car. This was an incredibly hard and traumatic experience for me. I really enjoyed school to start with and was doing really well. Sadly, after he got arrested, I finally felt free and I began to gain my confidence. This led me to break rules and I got into the wrong crowd where I started doing drugs, hanging around with older people and my grades fell. I found it hard to accept what was going on, constantly being pulled into questioning by the police and therapists - I felt like I was telling my life story hundreds of times. Sadly, I was getting the male attention I craved after my dad left and became a victim of rape, from someone I loved and thought I could trust. My family started to notice that I was acting differently and when the police and school found out, I started to get heavily bullied by the older girls. I felt so embarrassed and ashamed. The school said I was too unsafe to be in the school and I had to move. This impacted my mental health and wellbeing; I had already had to move schools after my dad was arrested so to have to do it again in such short spaces of time was difficult.

It spiralled quite quickly. I was still very much in a self-destructive period and sadly this led to overdosing and suicide attempts. I was 16 years old when my mum made me officially homeless. I was sat in the council for hours and hours with all my belongings. They would then tell me to walk to social services to house me, going back and forth until the council agreed to put us in a hotel. I was there for 6 months and it was hell. I had no money, no friends, and no family. I ended up getting pregnant and after being admitted to hospital due to the extreme sickness, nobody came to see me or message me. I felt so alone and scared. I got referred to CAMHS, but after taking over a year for any support, I felt like I did not receive the support I needed. The police failed me and did nothing for the trauma I went through. It made me feel like I would never want to speak up about anything again and I felt completely trapped. I felt as if I had finally escaped the domestic abuse and finally had a voice again, only to get shut back down, straight away.

Thankfully, the St Basil's charity helped me massively! I would not be here today if it were not for them. They applied for me to get a Buttle UK grant for furniture, white goods, carpeting and a cot for my daughter in my flat. I felt really accepted by my support workers and they really helped me with my budgeting also. I decided I wanted to find my voice again and by doing this project, it is helping me do so. I want to make a change and if I can help a young person not suffer like I did then I would have succeeded. I have met good friends along the way that I talk to daily and it has made me realise I really was not as alone as I thought. I have learnt that there just is not enough help for estrangement in young people. I want to help increase the government's budget to help the people that are not only estranged and in care but are also estranged and not in care.





## Funding

Many of the interviews with young people illustrated how they had desperately needed the Buttle UK grant, expressing the idea that the sectors trying to help young people had no money due to government cuts and poor funding. This was a theme that arose repeatedly, with young people sharing the impact of low funding and referrers reporting their frustrations at a system under a great deal of pressure. While some referrers shared that their organisation's financial position had actually improved in the height of COVID-19 due to emergency funding and public donations, this was seen as a short-term solution to a long-term problem. Many referrers alluded to continuing high levels of applications for their support and decreased state involvement following the pandemic.

*We've put into loads of different other like charities to help with carpets and not a single one got back and said they could help, though they just said that there was no grants available at the moment (EYP)*

*I thought, I'll ask for some help now because it's getting a bit bad here. And then you're on the call for like 25 minutes and I was like, I can't be bothered now, I'm gonna try and see if I could do it myself...it's like 2am in the morning, so you think, why is no one on the 24 hour service? (EYP)*

*We had all those austerity measures and it was pulled back and a lot of those services just went...All you've got is the basics - basic accommodation services, basic counselling services and so on (Referrer)*

*Local welfare schemes that will just give you three items. For our estranged young people, not everybody has leaving care status...they haven't got entitlement to anything (Referrer)*

*During COVID, little pockets of extra funding that you could apply for. Even though the needs kind of continue, the funding didn't continue on and then it was gone (Referrer)*

Funding specifically for estrangement in young people was described as non-existent, or vastly underperforming against demand. Referrers often drew connections between poor funding and much wider systemic issues that they could not overcome, particularly the lack of housing, high cost-of-living increases without complementary increases in Universal Credit and most of all, the disconnection of services. The latter was described across the referrer interviews as a symptom of overloaded caseloads and reductions in frontline staffing or resources; there simply isn't capacity to sustain helpful relationships between various supportive networks such as social work, mental health support, education settings and family mediators. This is all compounded by high staff turnover following the pandemic. This disconnect was seen by both young people and their referrers as a major factor in their poor recovery from trauma.

*I've not really had the support worker...they just use whoever they can because at the moment it's hard to guarantee whether people are in or can come out or the services they can provide. It's a bit difficult (EYP)*

*Now I can't access the other support worker. So that's really stressful. It's been a really big obstacle. I have some quite specific needs, like I don't really tend to like talking to male support workers, or you know, having males in the house and stuff like that because of the trauma that I've been through (EYP)*

*[A barrier] is them actually listening or changing support workers multiple times...and if so, make sure they read your files instead of opening up everything over and over again. Because that's what they did with me. They opened my past up over and over again. Yeah, I've had like four support workers in the space of a year (EYP)*

*The demand on resources became much more obvious for social services in terms of the time they had for the young people and being able to get out, not just because of the COVID restrictions and so forth, but in terms of the demand on those services...I really found that they were hit quite badly, which then trickle down to our young people, they weren't able to have as much access to their key workers (Referrer)*

Even where funding was available, many referrers spoke of the immense strains they were under to save money by cutting corners, even against their better judgement. This had led to early dismissal of some young people from the system before the referrer felt they were ready, particularly in the field of mental health support – such as cuts to numbers and length of counselling sessions – and prematurely pushing young people into independent living without ongoing support or training. This was reflected by the young people themselves, with some alluding to feeling that they still had little concept of money and how to take care of themselves in their newly found independence. This was a recurrent theme in many of the young people's interviews – that even where there were grants and benefits, there was not a lot of knowledge on how to save or how best to spend it.

*And if it was up to me, I'd still have them in my life, but I get that it's for a duration only. I understand that there's people going through worse situations, more dangerous situations and that having me on the system is...I don't want to take up space, but there's people with more urgency (EYP)*

*We're working on 8-week sustainability when the young person gets support, but we don't just shut them off. The resettlement team from the council should step in but I know I've just closed 6 young people but nobody's even touched based with them. Nobody. But we always say, we're here in the background - on the quiet - but the local authorities are letting this young person down (Referrer)*

*We have to kind of use a quite a lot of our resources and our energy in areas that potentially I would like to be seen taken on properly by statutory service (Referrer)*

## **Infrastructure: Conclusions**

Young people experiencing estrangement have particular care needs, which are not being met by the welfare system. The infrastructure available to this group needs overhauling. The key conclusions of this section are:

- There is a shortfall in safe, secure housing for this very vulnerable group. EYP are not seen as a priority group, and the housing they are allocated is often unsuitable for multiple reasons; either due to the quality of the home itself, lack of furnishing or unsuitable location, away from education and friends.
- EYP are vulnerable people. Their age and adverse lived experiences mean that caution should be heeded regarding the suitability of co-inhabitants. EYP are regularly being exposed to crime and anti-social behaviour which worsens their circumstances.
- Frontline workers report that there is a lack of progressive thinking around the affordability and array of housing necessary to reflect needs.

- It is very clear that many frontline workers define their own wellbeing and capacity to support as being exhausted. They face high turnover, low staffing levels, a lack of training and poor funding. This leaves their services at breaking point.

## Case study: M's story

My estrangement started when I turned 17. It happened on my 17th birthday, I returned home from college and had to stay with my neighbours while my mom returned from where she was. I was waiting there for 5 hours. When she finally got home and we went inside, my stepdad told me that my bags were packed and I had 1 hour to gather any other stuff I wanted and needed. After that my mom called me a taxi and hugged me goodbye and said happy birthday to me for the first time that day. Before this happened, mine and my parents' relationship was really rocky and I didn't feel like myself when I used to live there. I went into a really bad depression from the age of 12 and went on antidepressants when I was 17 and it really started to help. As well as having really bad depression, I also had an unhealthy relationship with food because of the comments I used to receive when I was there. I would go a whole day without eating, then go to get something to eat and get a comment like "are you really going to eat that?" or "you're eating something else again!". If it wasn't me not eating, all I would do is binge eat and it never felt like I was truly full. We didn't get along at all. We used to always argue and shout. I would be scared to come out of my room in case something would explode between us, so I always felt like I was walking on eggshells.

It was really hard to be estranged and get a job to help me out while I was in college full-time. I had to stay at a family friend's house, and they helped me apply for Universal Credit while I was staying there. Then thankfully I got offered a temporary accommodation to stay in by a charity that my social worker referred me to. And now that I'm 18, I'm on the city council housing system, went back to college to do another course and looked into getting a part-time job to help me work and attend education. Last winter, I got help from Buttle UK that helped me to get some clothes and kitchen items and also a laptop for college. Then I joined them to help them reach out to other estranged young people to get an insight into what they are going through. It is really wonderful to know that I'm able to help other people that are going through what I went through. It's important for support those that want help and reaching out to get it.

## Theme 3: Wellbeing



### Mental Health

One of the prevailing themes throughout the young interviewees was the feeling of loneliness. The reasons for this often being that they didn't have friends to begin with and could not relate to others due to their situation, or conversely, that others could not understand or relate to them. Some had lost friends while going through hardships or due to a lack of resources to contact them with, such as phones or internet. These factors were a cause of lost confidence and ambition after experiencing traumatic events. Many purposely withdrew away from people and social events due to their circumstances, not having a social support network due to being estranged and for some, this was compounded because they were autistic or had ADHD (or were neurodivergent in general).

*I wasn't being able to see my support worker, I wasn't being able to go to my friends. I was just on my own the whole time. So obviously it was quite lonely (EYP)*

*I don't really have many friends. Because going through all those family issues I did lose quite a lot of people. And it was very public (EYP)*

*I stopped seeing counsellors and obviously we didn't go to college [during lockdown]. So I stopped seeing people. It was really lonely...it felt like I couldn't breathe (EYP)*

*I don't really know people here. I'm a very difficult person to mingle with others, so I was really feeling lonely. It was hard for me, mentally and physically was very hard (EYP)*

*A lot of them, their mental health declined because they were feeling lonely...a lot of them do rely on us for a lot of support because we're the only person they see day in, day out and not being able to just pop up to the office to have a cup of tea with us was did affect their mental health and how they were feeling (Referrer)*

Many young people we interviewed bravely shared the more specific mental health issues they suffer as a result of their estrangement. Some had endured eating disorders, linked to self-image and poor self-esteem caused by the abuse they had suffered at home; when they moved out, they found the sudden freedom, low money and poor cooking resources actually led to the worsening of their illness. Over half of the young people we interviewed referenced depression and/or anxiety issues. While becoming estranged had removed them from the toxic environment they were living in, the enormity of what they had been through and the challenges ahead of them contributed to feelings they described as 'overwhelming' and 'horrible'. This led to wider mental health issues, such as addictions to gambling and substance abuse, and even suicidal ideation.

*I didn't want to go out. I would like, shelter myself away from people. I thought about self-harming and committing suicide (EYP)*

*It was just microwave meals all the time. I got really sick of it at one point and then it caused my eating to get quite bad, which I suffered from anorexia during lockdown quite badly and in secondary school as well. So it kind of relapsed me a little bit, which wasn't great (EYP)*  
*It was hell. It was hell. It was probably the worst time of my life...because if I was at my family's or something like that, it would be okay, but when you're homeless there are some strange people in supported housing. It makes you feel so isolated. I think I was really depressed at one point because of it (EYP)*

*I did have a problem with gambling online...and I went to the support for that...then you're on the call for like 25 minutes and I was like, I can't be bothered now...you can't afford to do and then I got in the loophole again (EYP)*

*I was diagnosed with multiple personality disorder... basically, I had trauma when I was really young. That stopped my personalities from merging like you have. So I have separate identities that can switch out. My Mum didn't agree with it, I had to move to the YMCA (EYP)*

After estrangement, one of the major factors that affected estranged young people's mental health was a poor housing environment, or no housing at all. Interviewees – both EYP and frontline workers – described financial pressures, being at physical risk, being triggered by a school or housing environment and enduring frightening co-habitants in refuges, hostels and supported accommodation. As for education settings, some young people felt that it was a haven where they could socialise and seek support, meaning that lockdown compounded their complete isolation. Others felt that they were either passively or actively discriminated against because of their estrangement, contributing to worsening mental health.

*We have rules saying visitors can come from 9am to 9pm, which isn't very great because my friends live far. I think this building is very, very isolated already - you need to have a key to get in any walkway (EYP)*

*I have some quite specific needs, like I don't really tend to like talking to male support workers, or you know, having males in the house and stuff like that because of the trauma that I've been through (EYP)*

*And they had a new property coming up and they knew my housing situation...but because I have autism and bipolar, and it was getting quite overcrowded, last year, I went slightly off the rails and ended up in a hospital for a bit (EYP)*

*People in the complex, on the compound, we had people screaming and that sort of stuff, so it was just not ideal for me to do [university] work at home and it reinforced the flashbacks from my mum. I was basically stuck in this isolated place. The only thing I could think about was what was in my brain because I had nothing else distracting me. So I was just stuck in this cycle of having flashbacks and trying to do work. Can't do work, feel down, have flashbacks (EYP)*

*I was kind of quite anxious about going into education [after estrangement], because of past bad experiences with education and just dealing with mental health while in secondary school and college (EYP)*

*They weren't able to cook properly in supported housing, they had issues with hygiene and cleanliness, and were facing long term difficulties. So some facilities, I think facilities should also be built for long term persons who have mental health issues who are unlikely to ever be homed independently, with a warden on site (Referrer)*

There were several accessibility issues to accessing mental health services. One adult referrer commented that some estranged young people feel too embarrassed to ask for help, and a young, estranged student admitted that they previously saw depression and bad mental health as just an 'emo' issue. Access to mental health services have also been limited due to the pandemic, and some support workers reportedly did not keep in contact with the estranged young people. Interviewees with frontline workers suggested that this access has continued to decline going forwards from the pandemic, with low funding and higher demand than ever. Interviews with young people endorsed this view. Both frontline workers and EYP interviews made suggestions for solutions, primarily that funding needed to be prioritised to reduce waiting lists.

*Maybe they need to put more money for mental health. Because the lockdown had a very, very big, bad impact on young people, [and] asylum seeker, don't have family (EYP)*

*So many things seem to be getting missed by the time they come towards 16, 17, 18 year olds. Like issues at home, relationship breakdowns, neurodivergency or mental health issues...then leads to anxiety, depression and all the things as well, as well as your educational difficulties, and by the time we get the right people coming towards those things, it becomes so overwhelming (Referrer)*

*One of my young people has got a very high level of anxiety, he was waiting for an assessment of mental health...this has been going on now, eight months, and it was only last week that they were able to finally put him on the waiting list. Let's face it, it's massively affected mental health overall (Referrer)*

*So for mental health, I think just really, there's a lot of hopelessness. I'm still shocked by some services that just haven't started face to face stuff again, that I would have thought was pretty essential. Like somehow these services are still completely remote (Referrer)*

*[Mental health] always has been an issue but it's even bigger now and waiting lists are much longer for CAMHS, support services and some of the young people that we work with turn 18 - once you turn 18, we know that a lot of services drop off as well. So yeah, mental health is a big issue for us (Referrer)*

Clearly, there were major gaps in the provision that young people needed. Lacking the state support or the financial means to seek private support, many responses circled back to isolation and loneliness. Given their circumstances, having to live independently ahead of their years, the wider upheaval caused by changing familial relationships was mentioned more rarely. However, those that did refer to it spoke of the devastation they experienced and continue to experience as a result of their estrangement. Most of all, it was clear that there were no two people who had exactly the same experience, but would likely have benefitted from knowing that they are not alone in going through it.

*Estrangement from your parents, it's sort of like...those two people are the only two people that are meant to ever be there for you. Regardless and obviously for me, that shattered and, yeah, it's just, it breaks you and it takes a long time to heal (EYP)*

*I was just very discombobulated. So it wasn't processing, that I just moved out. I'm still not able to see my siblings for some reason. Obviously, they're not children anymore. That they've grown up now. That's so hard to deal with, missing birthdays and stuff like that (EYP)*

*So from my peers, they had a family. They had people to interact with. They weren't just stuck in alone. They weren't stuck with, like PTSD. They don't have autism. They handled it differently because they had support in place from home and stuff. I didn't. So that's how it was different from me, too. Well, it's just basically, I had zero support, essentially. Forever (EYP)*

*I feel like it's different with every young person. Like they all have a different story and I never expected like how quickly a young child can be estranged because of family view and just problems at home. I feel like it happened really quickly. And I never expected it (EYP)*

*We have lots of estranged young people who have suffered a lot of trauma and attachment issues, a lot of loss obviously. As well as a lot of identity issues. And the support services are extremely limited. So nearly all of the children that I work with are on a list. I think it's sometimes just luck of the draw. Which is terrifying (Referrer)*





## Relationships

Supportive relationships are essential for wellbeing. Sadly, some estranged young people don't have the advantage of being in contact even with wider family because of their circumstances, so the only stable relationship they can count on is the trust they have with social or support workers that offer them support during their transition. The pandemic caused widening barriers. Going from being in a family home to a shared accommodation can be lonely and put a strain on mental health and well-being, as evidenced across the interviews with young people. However, it was a positive thing for some young people to get out of a home that they didn't feel welcome or wanted in and be able to get that freedom, or financial freedom, to gain access to things they couldn't before. Some referenced that it helped them find themselves in a way they never could with the amount of stress and pressure being put on them from an unhealthy environment. Nonetheless, many young people and referrers alike alluded to the lack of, or breakdown of, supportive relationships to get through the pandemic.

*Before my estrangement -it forced me to stay at home with my parents. I couldn't really do much. But after my estrangement from my parents, I just feel like I didn't really have support since obviously no one's able to travel between places (EYP)*

*Those two people are the only two people that are meant to ever be there for you. Regardless for me, that shattered and, yeah, it just breaks you and it takes a long time to heal (EYP)*

*When you're estranged, it's more about the people you surround yourself with. I wouldn't have got through this if it wasn't for my partner (EYP)*

*I think during this time I was just very discombobulated, so it wasn't processing, that I just moved out, I'm still not to see my sibling for some reason (EYP)*

*They are on their own a lot of the time anyway. They don't have the support of friends and family. So, yeah, that's hard that they lose out with the personal contact and there was hardly any support over here - only in case of emergencies (Referrer)*

*When we were working entirely remotely, there was some people it strengthened the relationship and with some people they just backed off. Like it was really uncomfortable for them (Referrer)*

Not every estranged young person is able to get accommodation, or somewhere to be housed for a while, so they have to turn to friends or sometimes even work colleagues because they don't know where to go. This leads to some very vulnerable young people developing negative relationships, which added to the issues they were already going through. When going through experiences like that, travelling from one house to another and never having that stability, never knowing where you're going to go next, can make it hard to build relationships with people and to trust them when going through something like this. This was also sometimes reflected in the relationships young people had within the support sector during the pandemic, with bad experiences reducing much needed trust. From the alternative perspective, referrers often spoke about their desire to do what was needed to build trust, but were hampered by the ongoing circumstances.

*I managed to get out using my employers, who had a flat above the work I was in. I stayed there for a couple of nights but I fell pregnant, and he didn't want me anymore (EYP)*

*The counsellor had actually called my parents and kind of said what I'd said and stuff. I never went back into counselling after that for a long time (EYP)*

*She thought she hung up the phone. And she said to my key worker, "she sounds off, she sounds funny" to him and I hear him saying "leave her to it". I hear them laughing, so that really was really difficult for me to deal with (EYP)*

*I really think the social workers, if they're going to work with young people, they need to really get to know that young person and they need to be around with that young person's life for a very long time (EYP)*

*No in-person classes meant that it was difficult to have relationships with my peers and my teachers. So to not have those relationships to kind of push me to do better made it difficult. I was just sitting in my bed all day, like what am I working for? (EYP)*

*If we're sharing records, it's highly emotive, it's massive. We also had a huge delay, so we had young people that had been waiting for years for access to their records...you can't emotionally support the young person in the same way as being able to sit in a room with them and get to know them properly (Referrer)*

*Young people that had moved in just before COVID, they didn't know us and we didn't really know them. So it was even harder to try and give support over the phone...why would you speak and give personal information to somebody that you hardly met? (Referrer)*

Interviews with refugees, and referrers who supported refugees, revealed that a lack of supportive relationships was a contributing factor in the poor settlement of those new to the UK during the pandemic. Many described intense feelings of abandonment and acute homesickness because they lacked not only familial relationships but the important relationships within the community, such as in their place of worship or local area, that they had come to rely on to feel supported. This was compounded by the availability of housing in particular areas, with one refugee placed in emergency accommodation over 100 miles away from his religious community. Lockdown reduced the social spheres in which we all exist, down to those in your immediate household. This presented a language barrier for many refugees who were unable to communicate with their peers, even in shared housing, in a shared language. Referrer interviews expanded on this, with several referrers reporting the intense difficulties of supporting their young person to feel included and established in their new life, when they were completely without the in-person services and community spaces they usually relied on.

*We didn't have our papers so we became asylum seekers...and you have to wait for [Home Office] to reply. And it took us four months to stay home, without going to college or anything, without anyone, I was so depressed (EYP)*

*The whole environment was new, everything was new for me, even the language. So I really wanted to explore and wanted to see what everything is like. They're telling you, you have to stay home....it was quite lonely and depressing to be honest (EYP)*

*Lots of our interactions with refugees are face-to-face and we've found that the best way to get to know young people and to begin to build a trusting relationship is with one-to-one interactions and a lot of those didn't happen (Referrer)*

*It was a massive barrier, especially with their language and then language on top of the mental health needs on top of everything else just meant that they weren't engaging and therefore becoming much more isolated (Referrer)*



## Isolation

The majority of young people experienced some type of isolation. They collectively mentioned that due to COVID-19 restrictions, staying indoors made them feel lonely as they could not see friends or family at all; in fact, many reported that they were much more isolated than their peers and friends who still lived at home. It was clear that a source of sadness came from their friends and peers having families to support them in their time of sickness, while they had to look after themselves. This caused feelings of jealousy and anger at their own situation, with comparisons to peers contributing to their isolation.

*They weren't as isolated as I was. They were still like, joining college classes, they still were kind of socialising...in a way, they were still doing everything they'd normally do. Well, I wasn't being able to do anything I could normally do, even having dinner (EYP)*

*I haven't been experiencing normal teenage life the same way that most people that I know have. They're in uni and going out clubbing and eating meals and stuff like that. And with COVID, I just couldn't do that...getting jobs, becoming estranged and stuff...it's just been a roadblock (EYP)*

*When they had COVID, their parents would send them food and they would look after them and check in on them and send them takeaway or money (EYP)*

*A lot of my friends have lots of financial backing from both parents...whereas I just had to keep grinding. That's a struggle [when] you've got the COVID (EYP)*

*It was a very uncertain time for everyone, especially for them when they're stuck in their flats and they don't have anyone else to go to. And a lot of them do rely on us for a lot of support because we're the only person they see day in, day out (Referrer)*

*A big issue was isolation for a lot of our asylum-seeking young people and refugees that do not have family here. For the estranged, you know, friendships, their friends mean a lot to them or certain people that they used to see on a regular basis that they were then cut off from (Referrer)*

Some estranged young people mentioned that due to the pandemic, they didn't experience the same activities that most young individuals do, like going clubbing and socialising with friends. While this was the experience of most young people in the UK, interviews with the estranged young people demonstrated that they faced the additional barrier of lacking the technology or money required for contracts and internet to even keep in touch digitally with their peers. This left them feeling very trapped in their supported accommodation. Not being able to see family members or even their support worker affected some young people's mental health and led them to feel extra lonely during self-isolation. Across the interviews, this was often expressed as frustration and bitterness at their difficult circumstances.

*I'm on my own, I was so, I always had to meet my friends at least once a week. But then I couldn't meet them, it got really lonely (EYP)*

*I lost a lot of friends when I was kicked out. I lost any form of connection because they took away my phone and any form social media. I didn't have anyone to talk to for the whole of summer. Yeah, it was just very isolating (EYP)*

*I missed a lot of my childhood. I didn't really go out a lot because I was looking after my siblings...then when lockdown happened, I didn't really go out. I do feel like I have really, really missed out, like I don't really have friends (EYP)*

*And my life has just been one thing after another, it was like I couldn't just leave home. We had to go into a global pandemic as well (EYP)*

An interesting point raised in the interviews is the difficulty of not having anyone to communicate with leading to estranged young people having to distract themselves through social media. This took an additional toll on their mental health as videos on social media included family videos, which made them feel left out. Furthermore, not being able to go out meant that they could not do certain activities to improve their mental health such as going on walks, meeting friends, going to the gym or seeing their support worker, which many shared would have improved their mood. Not being able to go to school or college also meant that they weren't able to socialise which was viewed as important when coming through this critical age. Referrers reported this as having negative impacts well after the end of restrictions.

*I was just on my own the whole time. So obviously it was quite lonely. So I just was like, well, I can't go out so I'm not gonna do anything. I'm not going to do my hair, to get out of bed. I'm not going to look after myself (EYP)*

*I felt very isolated from my friends. I wasn't really speaking to all my friends that I had from secondary school (EYP)*

*I used to go to the gym five, six times a week. And I've not really been to the gym, ever since then...I never seem to get back into a routine. Even still today. I still haven't found a passion back for it (EYP)*

*If their mental health wasn't affected before COVID-19, it definitely was after. I think isolation played a really, really big part (Referrer)*

*The isolation...going back to going back outside again, attending benefits appointments and all the rest of it, was so hard (Referrer)*

*They were scared to go out, they were very scared to start meeting with us. They didn't want to go back to college because they were still scared that they would get COVID (Referrer)*

*Isolation was a huge issue for young estranged people, so alone. Food banks were at least delivering to my young people...that was some of their only human contact (Referrer)*

## **Wellbeing: Conclusions**

It was clear that poor wellbeing was a cause of *and* caused by young people's estrangement. COVID-19 may have exacerbated many of the factors that contributed to overall poor health, but we are only now seeing the long-term crisis that it has fed into. This section can be summarised as:

- There is not enough support and knowledge to help young people make their own choices after estrangement. This is a group trying to get out of damaging situations; they are willing and able to work hard and be independent but are constrained by social norms around age and family support.
- As with other young people, the waiting lists for mental health support are threatening the wellbeing of EYP. They simply cannot wait for months, or years, at a time for

intervention. This is leading to the worsening of many mental health issues, resulting in crisis.

- Frontline workers report that the success of their work in supporting young people is being hampered by the lack of corresponding mental health support in schools or through the NHS; they are unable to create better outcomes without wider cross-sector support.
- There are few visible support networks for estranged young people, and very little national conversation around estrangement. This makes young people feel extremely isolated and alone. The interviews with both frontline workers and young people have made it clear that talking with others has helped them with the guilt and stress they feel at having left, or been forced to leave, a difficult and damaging home environment.

### **Aim 3: Make recommendations for support and changes for estranged young people**

As the project grew and developed, it became clear that it was never going to be as simple as focusing on the experiences of EYP during COVID-19. Too many other systemic issues prior to the pandemic, and afterwards, are tangibly linked to the experiences of many young people. The interviewees repeatedly demonstrated that the link between gaps in the support sector and COVID-19 have grown as time has gone on. Even now, some time after the last restrictions ended, the cost-of-living crisis has replaced or worsened many of the concerns and worries expressed about COVID-19. Most of our participants - young people and referrers alike – tied together many compounding issues, with COVID-19 acting as the straw that broke the camel's back. The issues they described continue to ripple out today; the pandemic was simply yet another factor in an exceptionally difficult situation.

While determining a single number of estranged young people living in the UK today proved difficult, Buttle UK's conservative estimate that between **93,000-206,200** young people aged 16-20 are experiencing estrangement demonstrates that this is a significant issue. It deserves focus. This is approximately 4.4% of 16-20 year olds in the UK.

What this report also demonstrates is that this group have a common set of challenges, which have their roots in their childhoods. In this, they have much in common with children that have entered the care system. The reasons they have not entered care is largely a matter of their age and particular circumstances. Those aged 18 and over haven't got entitlement, but research shows that even those aged 16 and 17 are sometimes invisible to care services by their age and conduct. For Care Leavers, it is recognised that a package of support is necessary in order for them to have a chance of successfully transitioning to the adult world. While EYP might access a range of services, a common understanding of their circumstances and access to a coherent package of support, is missing.

For those who experience true estrangement, their voices are echoed through the 35 young people who agreed to be interviewed for this project. Not only did many expand on issues that Buttle UK and the wider sector are aware of, they also provided tangible, evidenced and often emotive insights into the gaps in support that are more subtle and easily missed.

Therefore, Buttle UK has changes to make as well as recommendations to the wider sector. The issues that this report identifies are complex and will require careful consideration to be able to meaningfully address them. They also require a range of different sectors to come together, who have key responsibilities and expertise in relation to the various issues involved.

Buttle UK has experience of addressing a similar situation in the past. In 2006 we published a piece of research called 'By Degrees'. This looked at the experiences of care leavers in higher education. It found that the barriers started long before students reached this stage in their education, and it led to the forming of the Quality Mark for Care Leavers. This initiative recognised that the institutions best placed to improve the situation of care leavers in higher education were the universities and colleges themselves. But it started by bringing these institutions together to help them recognise the nature of the issue, and their ability and responsibility to affect a change. By establishing a common understanding of the challenges, and the practical interventions that were possible, real progress was achieved.

We therefore believe a similar approach may be possible for EYP, by which we mean that we need to start by bringing together key institutions and stakeholders and create a common recognition:

- That this is a group that should be identified as such
- They have a common set of challenges that can be addressed collectively
- Agree who is best placed to support a process of addressing these challenges

Buttle UK will convene this group and begin the process.

At the same time, it is recognised that we will be attempting this during a period of severe economic challenges, where support services are stretched to breaking point and the demands on the care sector are significant, complex, and growing. And that all of this is underpinned by incredible pressure on public funding over the coming years. However, given what this report has uncovered we feel it is our duty to ensure that the findings are shared widely and acted upon.

There is a summary of the recommendations that we would want this group to consider below. We propose that key stakeholders and institutions that make up this group are drawn from:

- Estranged young people
- Stand Alone
- FE and HE institutions
- Youth homelessness Charities
- Organisations providing supported housing
- DWP
- Local authorities, specifically teams providing youth services
- Funders with an interest in this area
- NHS service providers for young people

## Recommendations

### 1. Address barriers to support for estranged young people:

- We urge the creation of a standardised definition of estrangement, to be used across social care, education, and health sectors. Only when multiple sectors are using the same language can a conversation be had about the specific needs and support that this group require.
- Frontline services must offer face-to-face support for vulnerable young people. The invisibility of estrangement has been compounded by support offered from a distance, which has become the new normal post-pandemic. We recognise the pressures that services are under to streamline costs and time, but this should not be at the expense of the wellbeing of critically vulnerable young people.
- Educational settings are some of the only places that young people, estranged or otherwise, are required to attend by law up to the age of 18. With this in



mind, we call for the education sector, particularly Further Education (FE) colleges, to seek out estranged students more proactively by training staff to recognise the signs and offer more holistic frontline support. We recognise that Higher Education (HE) is already on this journey and hope they can share lessons learned.

- In creating a definition and summary of the impacts of estrangement on young people, the government should create a financial package of benefits that reflects those given to care-leavers, given that their experiences are so closely aligned.

## **2. Improve the infrastructure available to estranged young people:**

- Access to safe, secure housing, with particular attention paid to the vulnerability of the inhabitants, must be a priority for housing associations and local government. Even in the midst of a housing crisis, the urgency of provision for EYP cannot be understated, given their vulnerable age and adverse lived experiences.
- We stand with calls from Crisis<sup>13</sup> for an urgent increase in social housing, along with progressive thinking around the affordability and array of housing necessary to reflect needs.
- National funding and specific assistance for this group must be ring fenced, much in the way that it has been for care-leavers. At Buttle UK, we must also use outreach and our funding for EYPs, to increase the number of Chances for Children grants given to EYP.
- More broadly, frontline workers tell us that they are exhausted. There must be a conversation at national government level about realistic staffing levels, support and training and increased funding for frontline services.

## **3. Fully support the wellbeing of estranged young people:**

- There needs to be better provision of support and knowledge to help young people make their own choices. These are a group trying to get out of damaging situations; they are willing and able to work hard and be independent but are constrained by social norms around age and family support.
- We stand by charities such as StandAlone in championing the creation of support networks and open conversations, for estranged young people to feel less alone. The interviews with both frontline workers and young people have made it clear that talking with others has helped them with the guilt and stress they feel at having left, or been forced to leave, a difficult and damaging home environment.

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<sup>13</sup> [Crisis - Ending Homelessness: Housing](#)

## Positive reflections

It was important to all in the co-production group – being estranged themselves - to accurately paint the picture of life for estranged young people, giving them a platform, and making sure their voices were heard with honesty and authenticity. Much of what was discussed in the interviews and presented here makes for challenging reading. However, it was a privilege to also hear countless stories of bravery and persistence in the face of adversity. These often arose from an inner strength and powerful determination, but also the role outstanding individuals and organisations played in their recovery and achievements. While it is clear that there is work to do and some way to go, it was important to end with some of the positive highlights of the interviews.

*It was all from you guys, from my community, they helped me a lot. You know, I love these people. This woman from [organisation], I think she's the one that introduced me to you. She saved my life (EYP)*

*We have teachers from a university and colleges here. They volunteer their time to help me do English and all of that. And we used to go there on Fridays, to do my English and maths. They helped me pass everything. The next thing that I went to was the ESOL level one and GCSEs, I never would have been able to do that before. They pushed me forward (EYP)*

*Honestly, [hostel support worker] was only there for the last few months of when I was there. She's absolutely amazing. Whereas everyone else is good but she was above and beyond because she saw my situation and sort of knew where I was coming from (EYP)*

*I'm so lucky, the amount of support that I got and the amount of support that I still get is unreal. I could name some really good support workers that deserve praise and they literally do not get the praise that they deserve. No one made any decisions for me. I was given options and advice. And I was just shown how to be independent with it. A lot of people, they just gave me their experiences, things that they've done, told me what was available, and I made my own choices (EYP)*

*I really enjoy such a lovely relationship with all my young people and they are very appreciative. So that's where I feel very fortunate is that I'm able to see the best in young people and so we do try and educate all the adults maybe who seem to forget that they were teenagers themselves. I do think on the whole teenagers are kind, caring, intelligent. And I think they just want to be heard, and they want to be seen and they want to be respected (Referrer)*

*I might be able to give a bit of guidance and support but ultimately, it's them that makes changes. You are the person that will make that choice and you are the person that will make positive choices, positive changes. When you work with a young person and you see that you've been able to guide them through that and sometimes it's a tiny little thing, but it doesn't matter because something is something and that just is amazing! You couldn't ask for any anymore (Referrer)*

## APPENDIX A

The following is a summary of the data collected and analysed to illustrate the numbers of estranged young people in the UK.

### Homelessness

During COVID-19, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) reported not only a fall in estimates of those sleeping rough, but a corresponding fall in those living in emergency or short-term accommodation between May 2020-December 2021. This is reflected in a cumulative rise in individuals moving into settled accommodation<sup>14</sup> and was a direct result of the government's 'Everyone In' scheme. Unfortunately, these statistics are not broken down by age or circumstance. Furthermore, no further data has yet been released to suggest what has happened now the majority of pandemic support has ended. Nonetheless, it is clear that some EYP have had to historically sleep rough and therefore, it may be projected that this group benefited in kind from the scheme at the time. Unfortunately, the DLUHC's definition of homelessness does not include those living in hostels or refuges, though some charities and organisations do categorise living this way as homelessness.

Age of lead tenant	Number
16	855
17	2467
18	6018
19	6473
20	6809

*Table 4 - Awards of social housing, 2019-20*

While the DLUHC does not collect data on the number of applications, they do provide data on the number of awards of social housing broken down by age. The 2019-20 figures are available in Table 4. Bearing in mind the very high demand for and low availability of social housing, **22,622** young people were granted social housing that year alone. This demonstrates that their needs must have been viewed as urgent and high-level. This could include homelessness, poverty, leaving care or young parenthood, all of which could indicate estrangement. However, without corresponding data to explore the actual reasons for being granted social housing, it is impossible to make firm conclusions. Furthermore, this data still excludes those that applied who did not get social housing, as well as others who may have found housing solutions privately, or remained homeless and sofa-surfed.

### Universal Credit

Though information about Universal Credit (UC) claims is available through the Department for Work and Pensions, the data does not help our understanding of youth estrangement. This is because the Universal Credit administration system does not readily identify those

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<sup>14</sup> [Annex A: Support for people sleeping rough in England, 2021 \[NOT OFFICIAL STATISTICS\] - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/support-for-people-sleeping-rough-in-england-2021)

who are homeless as part of the application and grant process. The available data is outlined in Figure 7. In the interests of clarity, the data is **not** inclusive of claims under the furlough scheme, meaning it shows demand exclusive of furlough under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

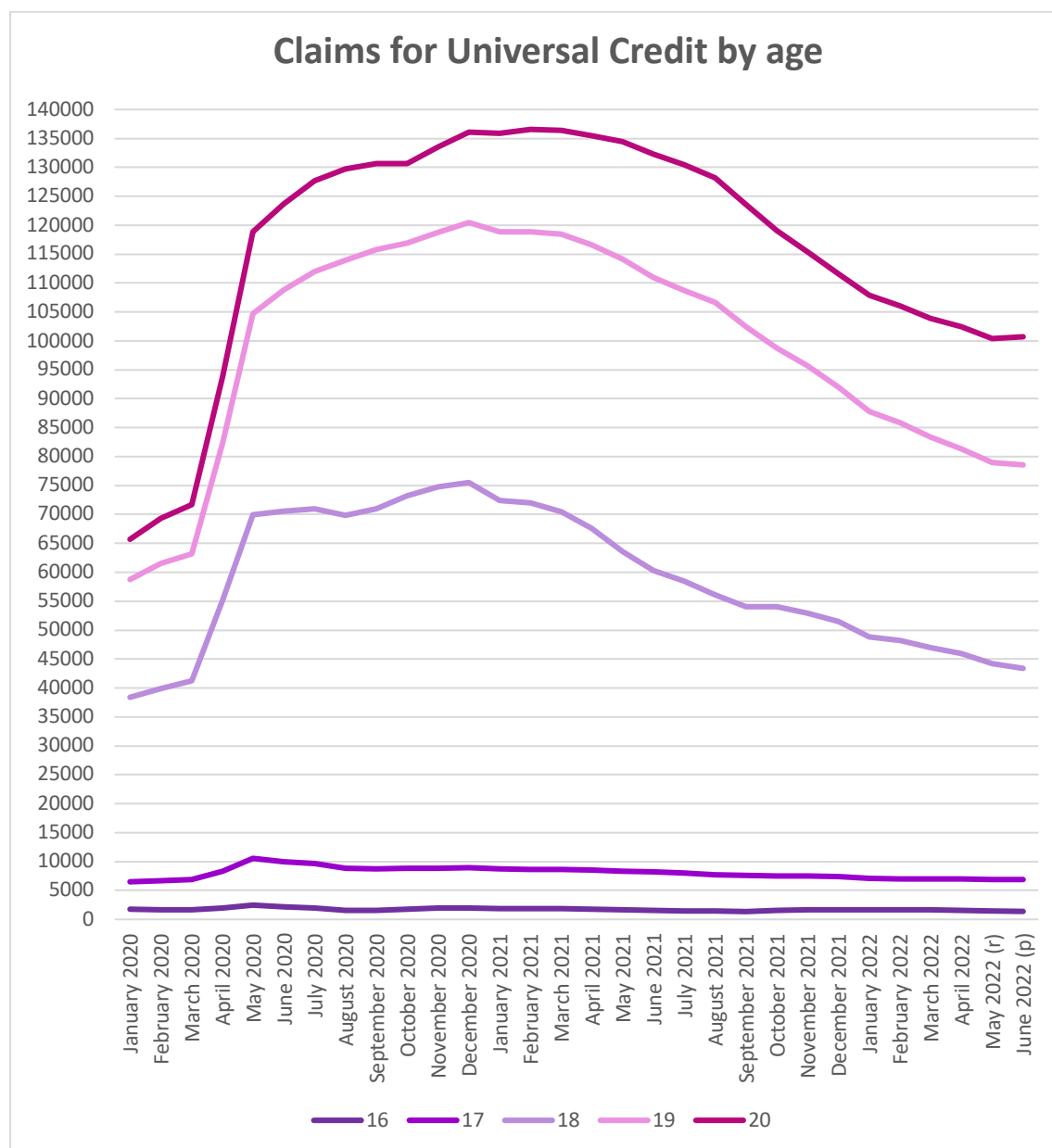


Figure 7 - Tracking claims for UC by age since COVID-19

Broadly speaking, and unsurprisingly, claims for Universal Credit saw sustained peaks around the time of the first lockdown (April 2020) which only began to fall nearing the end of national lockdown restrictions in summer 2021. This trend was not reflected as strongly in changing numbers of claimants aged 16, which remained steady throughout the lockdown period. However, on the whole, it is clear that demand for UC exists within the young people age bracket, climbing year-on-year with increased age. Of course, conclusions on estrangement cannot be drawn on claims for UC alone, because UC is claimed by individuals, not households. Therefore, a better measure is claims for the housing benefit element. These build on the available data from the DLUHC, because this better shows the numbers of young people requiring support for rent whether they are in social housing or not.

Figure 8 demonstrates the high level of demand for housing benefit for 16–20-year-olds. For the purposes of this dataset, young people with dependents are excluded. While it is clear that estrangement can happen alongside young parenthood, the data would be skewed by inclusion of young parents, as this group are more likely to require their own housing regardless of the status of their relationship with their parents/carers.

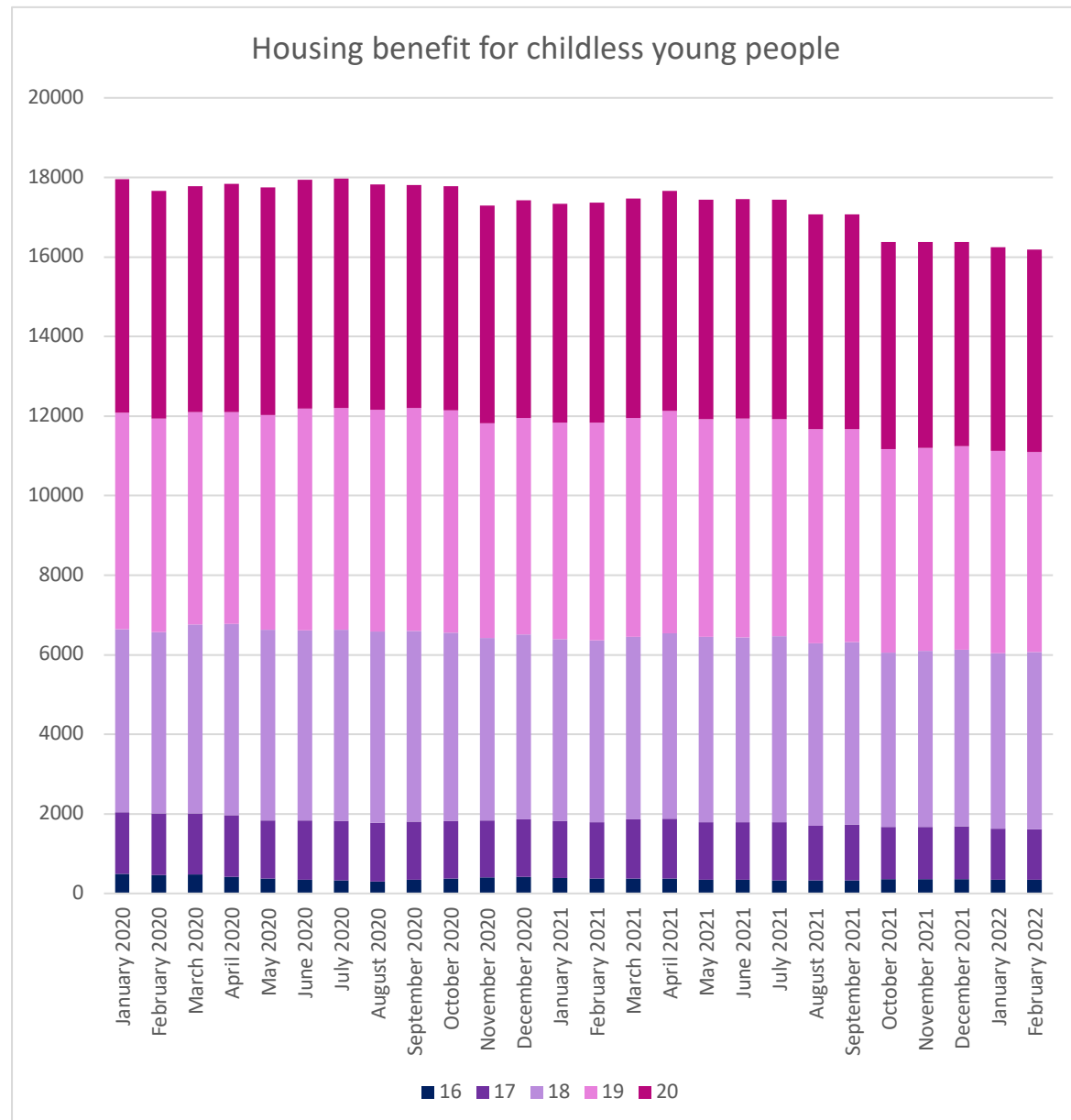


Figure 8 – Housing benefit for childless young people

On a monthly basis, between **16,000–18,000** young people required housing benefit between 2020 and 2022. These recipients are living alone and experiencing financial hardship. While it is hard to truly know what circumstances contributed to these young people living alone, including the inclusion of those that are care-leavers, the very fact of their financial independence (and struggles) suggests poor support from their immediate network. Though the approximate figure is close to that of young people granted social housing, it is important to note that the two do not necessarily have a relationship; social housing can be paid for directly by councils for struggling tenants rather than through housing benefit.



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