

Homeless Young People aged 16-17

Practice Guidance

Final Version 2.1

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Background & Introduction

This guidance sets out the principles that will be applied whenever a young person aged 16 – 17 presents as homeless and who is not currently looked after.

Practitioners should also refer to the Joint Protocol for the Assessment of Homeless Young People which has been agreed by both Housing and Children’s Services.

A number of High Court Judgements [principally the ‘Southwark Judgement’] have clarified that where a young person presents as homeless, they should be considered principally as a ‘Child in Need’ under the Children Act 1989, and if they require accommodation, that this should usually be provided under Section 20 of the Children Act [as opposed to under legislation relating to Homelessness].

This is in recognition that in reality any single young person who is homeless is likely to be vulnerable and therefore likely to be a child in need who requires the support of children’s services.

There are some exceptions, most commonly:

- Where a young person declines S20 accommodation – many young people do not want to be ‘in care’. Where they do so [and understand the consequences of their decision in relation to leaving and aftercare services] then it is appropriate that their homeless application is managed through the Housing Service;
- Where an initial assessment has been completed and this has established that a homeless young person is not a ‘child in need’ it is again appropriate that their needs are met through the Housing Service. Examples of this situation include where a young person has been living independently of their family prior to their presentation as homeless.

Full details of the legislative framework and on joint working with Housing Services can be found in the Joint Protocol for the Assessment of Homeless Young People which has been agreed by both Housing and Children’s Services. The purpose of this guidance is not to repeat the content of the protocol; it is to help provide guidance to social workers where a homeless young person is asking for support under S20 of the Children Act 1989.

Preventing Young People from Becoming Homeless

Situations that are presented as in crisis because a young person has been asked to leave the home or is refusing to return will often have been developing for some time. It is therefore important for social workers working with families where there are clear risks that a young person may become homeless to work pro-actively at the first signs of difficulties.

Options that can be considered include:

- Referral to the Adolescent Intervention Service for support to the family around parenting and conflict resolution;

- A family group meeting to engage the extended family and/or friendship network in supporting the family and young person and avoiding a risk of homelessness.

Some young people can have an overly romanticised view of life outside of their family, while some families may see homelessness as a means of reducing their responsibilities for the young person. It is important that workers do everything they can to dispel these myths. Young people who are homeless are much more likely to encounter significant difficulties that persist into later life, including:

- Severe poverty;
- Loneliness;
- Worklessness;
- Alcohol/substance misuse difficulties;
- Mental health difficulties.

Families will often find that difficulties which they thought would be solved when a young person leaves home in crisis are simply replaced by new problems, often including:

- Worrying about their child and their wellbeing;
- Worsening behaviour among any younger siblings;
- Difficult contact between the young person and family continuing after the young person has left the home.

All the evidence indicates that outcomes for young people are best where they leave home in a planned way, at a point in their life where they have acquired the maturity to be able to cope with the stresses of living independently.

Social workers should therefore encourage young people to make applications to resources such as the Foyer, while supporting them to remain within their families in the meantime.

Meeting the needs of Homeless Young People

The first priority whenever a young person presents as homeless is to seek to support them to return home to their family or extended family network. It will almost always be in the best interests of young person to help them to repair and/or maintain relationships with their families rather than for them to come into the care system.

While relationships may be very strained in the here and now, it remains the case that older young people who come into the care system almost always end up gravitating back to their families at some point in their young adulthoods. However good leaving and after care services are, support from local authorities will come to an end, with the result that young people frequently turn back to their families. It is therefore better to help them to avoid a separation in the first place than for them to have to renegotiate relationships at a later date and without support being available.

There are a number of ways in which support can be offered to young people and their families, including:

- Through the Adolescent Intervention Service. A referral must always be made to this service in the case of a young person presenting as homeless even in the event that they decide to return home;
- Through High Level Family Support – which may be of benefit in crisis situations where feelings are running very high and/or there is a considerable amount of conflict within the family. This service can offer out of hours support and intervene to prevent situations from escalating.

Social workers should always make it clear that the expectation is that families and the young person will agree to accept support in the first instance before there will be any agreement for a young person to become looked after.

Offer of Accommodation under S.20

In emergency situations, agreement for S20 Accommodation must be sought from the Assistant Director [Commissioning] or the Head of Service [Specialist Commissioning], having first been discussed with your own Head of Service.

Where homelessness is a clear risk but a crisis has not yet occurred, agreement to S20 Accommodation should be sought through PASP in the usual way.

Young people will be offered a foster placement in the first instance unless there are exceptional circumstances arising from an individual assessment of their needs. However, it is important that workers working with any young person who is homeless or is at risk of homelessness are very clear about the fact that in almost all circumstances, it is a foster placement that will be offered, and that the young person understands that this is generally the only type of provision open to them.

Because of the shortage of foster placements, there is often no choice of placement and young people should also be helped to understand that any placement offered may not be in the area that they want and may not be within the City. However where this is the case, we will do all we can to ensure that the young person is supported to continue attend any courses, training or appointments they may have.

Rationale for offering foster placements

Young people presenting as homeless will often ask to be provided with a flat or similar, perhaps with some limited floating support. Requests of this nature will always be turned down.

The Southwark Judgement above is based on the reasonable assumption that any young person who is homeless is by definition likely to be vulnerable. Very often, their experience of parenting will have been poor or chaotic, and they are unlikely to have been in an environment where they will have had the opportunity to learn basic independent living skills.

When a young person asks the local authority to provide them with accommodation under S20, they are effectively asking us to share parental responsibility for them. It is not the act of a responsible parent to offer a flat with minimal support to a young person who has limited or at best untested independent living skills.

Where young people are offered such accommodation, the lack of boundaries, combined with their vulnerabilities and lack of independent living skills usually means that they are unable to cope and often become at risk of exploitation by others or experience other very significant problems.

For this reason, we expect a young person who is asking us to look after them to agree to a period of time with a foster family, while we assess their abilities to live independently and provide support to them to acquire the skills they need. They will not be supported to move on into semi-supported living until they have demonstrated that they are ready to do so.

Where a foster placement is accepted

Placement planning meetings in this situation are very important. In particular, the young person must be clear about the boundaries within the placement and understand, for example, that if they go missing from the placement they have effectively discharged themselves from care.

It is also important that the young person is able to hear the benefits of the placement in terms of offering them a nurturing environment within which they can begin to learn independent living skills.

A referral should still be made to the Adolescent Intervention Service where this has not been done previously. The focus of their work will be to facilitate relationships between the young person and their family. The fact that a young person has become looked after must not prevent work taking place to secure them returning home to their family as this will almost always remain the best scenario in terms of longer term outcomes for the young person.

An appointment will be made at PASP and continued use of the resource will be monitored through PASP in the usual way. Where all parties agree that a young person has reached the point where a more independent form of accommodation is appropriate, an application for agreement to change placement should be made to PASP having been discussed within the reviewing process.

Where a foster placement is declined

Wherever a young person declines a foster placement, this must be clearly recorded in their case file on Liquid Logic.

It is also essential that workers have fully explained the advantages of being looked after to the young person, including that a foster placement offers them the best opportunity to experience a period of stability while they acquire the skills they need to live outside of a family, and that they will qualify for leaving and after care support post 18 assuming that they spend more than 13 weeks as a looked after young person. Workers must record that they have discussed this fully with the young person on Liquid Logic.

Where young people decline a foster placement they are still entitled to access other services; the Adolescent Intervention Service should continue to work with them with the aim of facilitating their return home, alongside social workers where the case remains open to children's social care.

Young people who have declined a foster placement may be able to access housing support through the Housing Service. Referrals can also be made to projects such as the Foyer.

Young people are entitled to change their minds and again request a foster placement. Such requests will be considered in accordance with the principles set out in this guidance.

Where the young person's social worker is considering a recommendation for a young person to become looked after but considering a resource that is different from a foster placement, they must discuss this in advance with Head of Specialist Commissioning or Director of Commissioning **before** any discussion about alternative options with the young person.

Reviewing this Guidance

This Guidance will be reviewed annually, or in the event of any substantive change of legislation or guidance in relation to this issue.