

Assessments of Homeless 16/17 year olds – a practice guide

(To be read in conjunction with the Protocol with Housing - above)

The importance of the Single Assessment of homeless 16/17 year olds.

The single assessment in the case of homeless 16 /17 year olds is a particularly important process for two main reasons. Firstly the decision for a young person to become Looked After at such a late age is a very significant one, particularly if this is not a young person the department is currently working with. Young people who come into Care at such a late stage often do not do well in care, and Government guidance is clear that:

“It is in the best interests of most young people aged 16 or 17 to live in the family home or, where this is not safe or appropriate, with responsible adults in their wider family and friends network”¹

It is therefore important that the decision to accommodate a 16/17 year old is only made after a very thorough assessment has been made which has explored all the possible alternatives.

Secondly, many young people who become homeless do so because of some kind of crisis in their lives. The 45 day period of the Single Assessment is an important opportunity to intervene and affect improvement in the life of the young person and their family.

Key Principles

Work within the Protocol should be carried out according to the following principles:

- The safety and welfare of the young person is paramount
- It is usually best practice to prevent a young person from leaving home in the first place by dealing with the causes that are leading to the threat of homelessness
- The threat of homelessness can affect a young person’s self esteem, confidence and identity. It is important that the Council’s response to young people who are at risk of homelessness is quick and effective.
- Staff will work in an open, honest and accountable way with young people and their families.
- Social Care and Housing staff will collaborate to deliver an integrated service response to the young person so that the young person is not passed back and forward between services. Where disagreements occur they will be dealt with quickly and they will not be allowed to affect the service offered to the young person.
- For young people who do need it, the council will provide suitable accommodation with sufficient support to meet the levels of assessed need
- If the young person is provided with accommodation and or looked after this placement will initially be agreed for 4 weeks only whilst the young person’s needs and skills for independent living are further assessed. This must be made clear to the young person at the point of admission.
- This placement needs review must be discussed with the placement service to determine whether alternative provision is required

¹ Department of Children Schools and Families guidance. Sect 2.1. 2010

- Young people who request a service will be expected to agree to arrangements to share information with other agencies for the purposes of delivering an appropriate service to the young person. They will also be expected to co-operate with assessments and attend meetings as appropriate.
- The Council will continue to develop a range of long term housing options for those young people who are assessed as needing to access independent housing. Young people should be encouraged to access these on a planned basis rather than presenting as homeless.

What the Assessment needs to cover

The assessment should cover all the usual dimensions of the young person's life in the same way as all assessments. It is important that the issues like the young person's health and learning needs are not overlooked in an assessment concentrating exclusively on the homelessness issue. Likewise, the needs of any siblings in the family home should not be overlooked, if only because younger siblings may in turn be at risk of homelessness as they get older. It will be important for the assessment to cover the independence skills the young person. If they have lived at home up til now, how will they be able to manage without the supports of the family. The ability to budget, cook, seek work, or access training will need careful analysis. When addressing the homelessness issue, the assessment must address the basic questions that have arisen within legal Case Lore:

1. Is the applicant a child?

Obviously the young person must be under 18 years. You may need to check passport, birth certificate, immigration documents.

2. Is the applicant a Child in Need?

A 16 or 17 year old is deemed a Child in Need under section 17(10) of the Children Act 1989 if:

- He/she is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health and development, unless the local authority (that is Children Social Care) provides services
- His/her health and development is likely to be significantly impaired, unless the local authority provides services
- He/she is disabled

Nearly all young people who are genuinely homeless are clearly "children in need". This children excluded from home who are sofa surfing, sleeping in cars or surviving on the streets.

Many homeless assessments hinge on whether the young person does have a home that they can reasonably access. If a young person is able to return home or live with a relative, but chooses not to then a careful assessment needs to be made about whether it is reasonable for the young person to refuse. Clearly if the young person was afraid to go home (and there was evidence to support this) it would be unreasonable to expect them to do so. On the other hand if the young person was merely fed up with the house rules at home whereby they need to be home by midnight on schooldays, then it could well be deemed that they are not homeless, and may not therefore be a child in need.

This is therefore an area which needs careful exploration of the facts to establish whether the child is a Child in Need as a result of homelessness.

3. Is the applicant in the Local Authority's area?

If the young person presents in Islington then the ultimate responsibility for assessment rests with Islington. However, if the young person has links elsewhere or has only just come to the borough we should contact the originating Local Authority and request that they carry out the assessment. (See Homelessness

procedures 2.11.13 for details). In the absence of any other LA doing the assessment, it must be done by Islington.

4. Does s/he appear to the LA to require accommodation.....?

The assessment should distinguish between young people who need “help with accommodation” and young people who need “accommodation”. A young person who has a home to go to but who needs help getting there or making it habitable or safe is deemed to require “help with accommodation”. Assistance would be provided under sect 17.

5. Is the need for accommodation the result of:

- a) there being no person with parental responsibility for him/her, or because:
- b) s/he is lost or abandoned, or because:
- c) the person who has been caring for him/her is prevented, for whatever reason, from providing suitable accommodation or care;

If the young person requires accommodation, and it is for one of the above 3 reasons, then the Local Authority has a duty under sect 20(1) to provide them with accommodation. The courts have interpreted condition c) quite broadly. A young person who has been excluded from home by their family would fall into this category. A young person who refuses to go home without a good reason would not meet the criteria for sect 20 as they would not be deemed to be homeless.

6. Even if the young person is not homeless, does the Local Authority consider that his/her welfare is likely to be seriously prejudiced if they do not provide him with accommodation?

A young person who requests accommodation because they feel unsafe or are neglected at home even though they may in theory be able to return there, should be assessed against this criterion. If met, the young person must be provided with accommodation under sect 20 (3).

7. Does the young person agree to the provision of sect 20 accommodation?

This is a very important aspect of the assessment. The young person’s wishes and feelings need to be ascertained and the social worker will need to give due consideration (having regard to age and understanding) to those wishes and feelings. The implications of becoming Looked After, both positive and negative need to be carefully explained to the young person, who should be offered access to independent advice. A Local Authority cannot force a competent 16 or 17 year old to accept Sect 20 accommodation. If the young person wants accommodation but does not want to become Looked After and they are assessed as competent to make that decision, then, as long as the assessment is thorough, and is properly recorded, then this should be sufficient. It would be open to the LA to assist the young person via sect 17 or via Housing legislation as an alternative.

Work to be done alongside the assessment.

The assessment should explore the accommodation options for the young person. Where have they been living up until now? Why can they not continue to live there? The social worker should consider what it is that needs to happen for the young person to live in stable, secure accommodation. For most young people this is likely to be the family home, or, where this is not safe or appropriate, with responsible adults in their wider family and friends’ network. The social worker should recognise this and work pro-actively with young people and their families to identify and resolve the issues which have led to the homelessness crisis. Tools to be considered are:

- **A mediation session** with the family to work out what needs to happen for the young person to return home. One possibility could be a written agreement between the young person and the family to address the behaviour which have led to conflict and the threat of homelessness.
- **A family group conference** involving the wider family could be arranged to explore whether there are any family members who may be able to offer the young person a home. This arrangement could be supported by sect 17 payments eg to fund setting up arrangements.
- **Advice and information.** Alternative pathways to access independent accommodation, eg through the New Generations scheme need to be explained carefully
- **A mentor** could be considered for the young person as an independent source of advice and support
- **Parenting advice/support.** Is there a need for some wider support for the parents. Parenting troubled, or troubling adolescents can be very challenging, there may be need for some specialist parenting support for the family. This would be particularly important if there are younger siblings who may encounter similar problems as they get older.
- **Respite care.** Would a period of “time out” help diffuse the crisis and reduce the chance of recurrence.

There may be other sources of support for the family. AMASS provide therapeutic intervention for families with children between 10 and 15. They could get involved in homelessness cases where there are younger siblings. IFIT provide services under the “stronger families” programme. CAMHS provide a range of services which can also be considered.

The importance of timescale

For many young people the threat of homelessness comes in the form of a crisis. Timely intervention in a crisis is recognised as a good way of achieving change. Therefore it is important that the assessment and the accompanying interventions happen with pace and momentum. For young people who have become Looked After due to homelessness, it is very important that the situation is not allowed to stagnate. Any Accommodation should be offered pending the completion of the assessment, and it is important that the assessment is carried out with pace and purpose.

For young people who become Looked After post 16, once they have been looked after for 13 weeks they acquire the full range of Leaving Care rights. Clearly for those who need to be in Care and who, in turn, will benefit from further support post 18, this is entirely appropriate. However where it is considered that the young person would be better off returning to the family home it is therefore important that any return home is achieved within the 13 week period.