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Research and analysis

Supporting children aged 16 and 17 who need help when they are homeless

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Applies to England

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Executive summary

In 2022–23, a report by the Children’s Commissioner revealed that approximately 6,500 16- and 17-year-olds reported being homeless.^{[\[footnote 1\]](#)} The true scale of homelessness for 16- and 17-year-olds is, however, a ‘hidden issue’. Many children are living in unstable environments, such as staying with a friend, and may not be known to authorities.

This startling statistic underscores the need for a deep understanding of how local authorities respond to and support these vulnerable children. This research explores how local authorities help 16- and 17-year-olds to make informed decisions about their accommodation options. It looks at how they make sure children are aware of their rights and the choices available to them. It also examines how local authorities collaborate with housing authorities to assess and meet the needs of children who are homeless, and focuses on identifying areas where practices can be improved. It also considers the emerging consequences of our regulation of supported accommodation.

When homeless children approach local authorities, there should be a joint response from social care and housing teams to assess their needs. If children are found to be homeless (that is, they do not have parents or carers that they could reasonably live with), children’s social care must complete a child in need assessment. There are 3 options for accommodating them:

- they can become a looked-after child under section 20 of the Children Act 1989
- they can be accommodated as a child in need (section 17)
- they can be accommodated under the Housing Act 1996 (part 7)

If they are accommodated under section 20, they will receive all the support that comes with becoming a looked-after child, and of being a care leaver once they turn 18 (if they are eligible). Children who are provided with accommodation through section 17 are not entitled to this support. As section 20 is a voluntary arrangement, homeless children are often given a choice between these options.

To understand how local authorities help children to make informed decisions and work with housing authorities to assess their needs, we:

- analysed evidence from inspections of local authority children's services (ILACS)
- carried out focus groups with local authority representatives, housing authority representatives, advocates and Ofsted inspectors from our social care, schools and further education (FE) and skills remits
- commissioned a charity, St Basils, to engage with young people who have experienced homelessness to hear directly what help and support they had or needed

Main findings

Some local authorities work effectively with homeless children. They involve children in co-creating services and information, give them practical support, and structure their teams so that children and staff have access to expertise about youth homelessness. However, the children and young people who took part in our commissioned research reported a lack of information about their accommodation options when they presented as homeless. Some felt they were not given a choice or were not provided with the necessary information to make an informed decision about their next steps.

Government guidance states that young people who present as homeless should have access to independent advocacy to help them understand their rights. However, only 9% of the children and young people surveyed said they had been offered an advocate. Half had not been offered an advocate and 40% were not sure. Most of the local authorities we spoke to told us that take-up of advocacy was very low. There was limited evidence that local authorities were routinely monitoring the uptake and impact of their advocacy. In some local authorities, advocates were always contacted any time a child rejected section 20, but this practice was not widespread.

Advocates' ability to be independent may be compromised due to their funding relationship with the local authority. Some felt uncomfortable challenging decisions made by the authorities that paid for their services. This lack of independence could undermine their ability to advocate effectively for children.

The lack of suitable placements and other resources, such as budget and staff, may influence local authorities' decisions about whether to accommodate children under section 20. Children's advocates and some housing authorities believe that children are 'steered' away from choosing section 20 by children's services, who fail to properly explain the benefits of becoming looked after and overemphasise the potential negatives. Local authorities, however, say that children themselves prefer the section 17 option. Some say they make active efforts to encourage children to opt for section 20.

We heard that assessments of a child's readiness to live alone were rare, and when they did happen, this was mostly on an informal basis. It was also rare for there to be a follow-up system in place to check in on the child and ensure that they were coping in their new accommodation.

Some local authorities were still using inappropriate bed and breakfast (B&B) housing and hostels as temporary or emergency accommodation. While supported accommodation is the most common placement type for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds (regardless of which legislation they are housed under), the levels of support on offer can vary widely, and do not always meet children's needs.

Ofsted began regulating supported accommodation in April 2023, but this

type of provision does not have to be registered for placements made under section 17. It is too early to assess the impact of Ofsted's new regulatory powers. However, some participants voiced concerns that regulation will reduce the number of placements available for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. This is because accommodation providers may choose to offer services that do not require registration with Ofsted. Some participants, however, welcomed the change, saying they felt more secure accommodating children in regulated provision. Any unintended consequences of our new regulatory powers will need to be monitored.

Background

When a child aged 16 or 17 presents as homeless to their local authority children's services or local housing authority in England, there should be a joint response from social care and housing services and children's social care must complete an assessment of the child's needs.^[footnote 2] It is good practice for their needs to be assessed through a joint assessment between the 2 authorities. This applies to all young people, including 17-year-olds who are approaching their 18th birthday, and young people who are pregnant or have children in their care.

The child can then either be accommodated as a looked-after child under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 or be provided with accommodation either under section 17 of the Children Act or through housing legislation.^[footnote 3] Children who become looked after are automatically entitled to support while they are looked after. This can include funding for educational courses and priority access to certain types of accommodation. Some children are also eligible for leaving care services, if they have been looked after for the qualifying period.^[footnote 4] Children who are provided with accommodation through section 17 are not entitled to any of this support. Statutory guidance is clear that in most cases a local authority should accommodate a child as a 'looked-after child'. There are only 2 reasons not to do this. One is that the child is not 'a child in need';^[footnote 5] the other is that the child, having been fully advised of the implications and having the capacity to reach a decision, has decided that they do not want to be accommodated under section 20.

A Children's Commissioner report found that, in 2022–23, around 6,500 16- and 17-year-olds reported being homeless.^[footnote 6] Of the 4,870 children who presented as homeless, who were not unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, only 40% were accommodated. Of these, only 39% were accommodated through section 20.

The majority of children not accommodated were either ‘not judged to be homeless’ by the local authority (45%) or ‘supported to remain at home and/or with family’ (45%). Another recent report by Coram found that local authorities were failing to give homeless children the support they are legally entitled to, and that this was still the case 10 years on from earlier research that found the same. [\[footnote 7\]](#)

The Code of Guidance sets out what the government expects local authorities to do in dealing with homelessness. It states that ‘if there is reason to believe that [a child] may be homeless or threatened with homelessness’, the local authority must assess their eligibility for support. [\[footnote 8\]](#) However, data published by Centrepoin in 2022 suggested that only 66% of homeless children who contacted their local authority had a full assessment. This proportion had fallen from 79% in 2018–19. [\[footnote 9\]](#)

Research suggests that supported accommodation is the most common type of placement for homeless 16- and 17- year-olds, regardless of the legislation they are accommodated under. However, these placements can sometimes be ‘inappropriate and dangerous’, making oversight and regulation of this type of provision important and necessary. [\[footnote 10\]](#)

In April 2023, Ofsted began to regulate supported accommodation for looked-after children and care leavers aged 16 to 17. [\[footnote 11\]](#) However, this type of accommodation does not have to be registered for children who are accommodated under section 17. This could mean that children, particularly those housed under section 17, are not receiving the quality of support that is provided through regulated provision, or worse, they may be living in unsuitable or unsafe accommodation.

One of the reasons we looked at this cohort of children is that the introduction of the supported accommodation regulations has raised the issue of possible unintended consequences. These include that providers may prefer to offer services that do not require registration with Ofsted to avoid being regulated, and/or there may be an increase in the number of children who are accommodated through section 17 rather than section 20. Because this research has taken place very soon after the regulations were introduced, we have not made a distinction between supported accommodation that is regulated and wider provision of this nature that does not require regulation.

Helping children make informed decisions

Section 20 or section 17?

The choice between being accommodated under section 20 or under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 is likely to be the most important decision a child will make during the assessment process. It will determine the level of care and support they receive and for how long. A child accommodated under section 20 becomes a 'looked-after' child. This means the local authority is responsible for them as a corporate parent. It monitors their health and education, and puts a care plan in place, which it regularly reviews. The child may be eligible to continue to receive support as a care leaver, including financial support with education and training, until the age of 25. The place they live will also need to be regulated. These duties and safeguards do not exist for children accommodated under section 17.

The Children's Commissioner research showed that only 40% of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are accommodated under section 20.^{[\[footnote 12\]](#)} As part of our research, we heard several reasons for this low rate, which are explained in more detail below.

Local authorities discourage children from choosing section 20

Some of the advocates and housing authorities we spoke to told us that some local authority children's services were discouraging children from choosing section 20. This view was corroborated by some social care inspectors.

Some advocates and some housing authority representatives felt that the option to become a looked-after child was often not explained to children well enough for them to make a fully informed decision. We heard that, in some cases, the benefits of section 20 were intentionally underplayed or, conversely, the 'negatives' were discussed at length:

'Most of the children are steered away from section 20 and told how invasive it can be in their lives – [there's] a lot of coercion about why they shouldn't pick section 20. Many don't understand what is happening, and when they do, it's too late.'

Advocate

Some of the social care inspectors we spoke to had seen evidence of social workers persuading children away from section 20. In addition, evidence that

children had been informed of their right to section 20 was often missing from local authorities' records when these were checked on inspection. One inspector told us that in the local authorities that are better at explaining rights and entitlements to children, children are more likely to opt for section 20.

Section 17 is an easier and less expensive process

Some housing authority representatives saw section 17 as an easier option for local authorities to pursue. This is because when a child becomes looked after under section 20, the local authority becomes the corporate parent and must put in place all the care, support and plans that looked-after children are entitled to.

Some of the advocates we spoke to were sympathetic with local authorities and recognised that there were likely reasons why this 'steering' was happening:

'I don't think local authorities are not putting people down section 20 because they don't want to do the right thing for young people. I think finance is the biggest driver as to why they're not doing it – they're worried about what section 20 will cost them.'

Advocate

Children prefer not to become looked after

We heard that some children preferred the section 17 option because they thought it was 'less intrusive', or they did not want the 'identity' of being a child in care. This was sometimes because of negative experiences with social care or social workers in the past.

Some of the local authorities we spoke to told us that they were making active efforts to encourage children to choose section 20, but that children still often refused it.

In some cases, children chose section 20 with the support of an advocate. Some of the advocates we spoke to told us that they had been accused by local authorities of 'steering' children towards section 20:

'[We've had] a lot of pushback from local authorities that we steer children and young people heavily to section 20, where in fact we are just checking if

they have made an informed decision – how they arrived at this decision, and if they are still happy with it. I feel that sometimes social workers are being very process-led and lacking empathy when doing assessments for section 20.'

Advocate

We also heard from an advocate that some of the referrals they received into their advocacy service came from housing authorities who disagreed with the local authority's decision for the child not to become looked after. One housing authority representative said:

'From my point of view, I don't think we [housing authorities] should be dealing with 16- and 17-year-olds personally, because they can't hold a tenancy... They're still under 18, they should be dealt with by social care until they're 18.'

Housing authority representative

Making the assessment process easier

Government guidance sets out the expectation that local authorities will help children to make informed decisions about their accommodation options, and take the child's wishes and feelings into consideration.^{[\[footnote 13\]](#)} It also states that information should be provided in a 'young-person-friendly' format.

Some of the authorities we spoke to had developed different ways to help children understand the complex set of laws and duties and make the assessment process more accessible. These generally involved either providing key information in an accessible format, or reducing the stress in the process for the child so that they could make better-informed decisions. For example, some authorities created leaflets that explained the assessment process and the options available in easy-read language with plenty of visual detail.

‘It’s a really confusing time for those children who are presenting at that moment. We found that the leaflet does work. It encourages them to review those decisions as well as again later on whilst assessments are taking place.’

Local authority representative

This kind of leaflet was available in many of the local areas covered in our research. Some were highly visual and focused on the available pathways. Others went into more detail about the protocols and processes for each option, including the support available through each option before and after the child turned 18.

Some local authorities had designed their materials in consultation with children and young people, as well as other professionals such as clinical psychologists and speech and language therapists. A couple of authorities had benefited from visits from Youth Homeless and Support Team (HAST) advisers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.^{[[footnote 14](#)]} These advisers had helped them to rethink their communication strategy with children and young people. This had encouraged them to think more creatively about how to engage with children and make sure they had access to information they could understand.

The social care inspectors we spoke to told us that they had seen good examples of these types of communications with children on inspection. In the strongest cases, the leaflets were followed up with a discussion with case workers to check children’s understanding:

‘Where this is being done really well, children are given packs of information that is clearly written to help them understand and look back at. It might be recorded that it’s been discussed... but it’s whether the child has understood as well – that can be more difficult to unpick. In better examples, you’ll see that social workers have re-visited and that there’s been a discussion. It’s been revisited either later that day or the next week, so children have an opportunity to test out their knowledge.’

Social care inspector

This follow-up discussion is beneficial because it lets children know they can change their mind. It also offers them the opportunity to digest their options and make an informed decision once they are out of immediate crisis. In some local authorities, children were offered a choice about where they would like their assessment conversation to take place. Local authorities felt that this reduced anxiety for the child. It meant that the interview did not have to take place in an overwhelming, bureaucratic environment such as a town hall.

One local authority said they provided questions to the child before the assessment interview. This helped to reduce anxiety and enabled the child to prepare their answers in a less pressured environment.

Advocacy services

Government guidance states that homeless children aged 16 and 17 should have access to advocacy services to help them navigate the assessment process.^[footnote 15] Most local authorities that we spoke to were offering some form of advocacy, but this varied. Some offered fully independent advocacy from external providers, some offered in-house advocacy services and others had a combination of both for children to choose from.

A couple of local authorities also told us that they welcomed informal advocacy options alongside the formal advocacy offer. This meant children could be supported in an advocate-style relationship by a trusted person, for example a professional such as a teacher or a clinical psychologist. One local authority gave an example of a child who was supported by their headteacher throughout the process, who spoke on their behalf in meetings and provided other support when necessary.

Most local authorities we spoke to confirmed that they were offering advocacy to children presenting as homeless. But many were not actively monitoring their advocacy offer, and were unclear about its impact and levels of take-up.

Some participants from local authorities were more aware of uptake levels in their area. But when this was the case, most told us that uptake was very low. When we spoke to advocates themselves, and inspectors, they voiced concerns that this was because of the way the offer itself is presented to children.

Inspectors also told us that information about whether advocacy has been offered is often missing from local authorities' records. This makes it difficult for them to judge the strength of the advocacy offer – or if it is even being offered at all. However, a

couple of local authorities said they had included advocacy as a compulsory part of the ‘first contact script’ – that is, the checklist they work through with a child when they first present as homeless. In these cases, it was mandatory for this box to be ticked for the process to proceed – although, again, the ‘tick box’ did not give any further detail about exactly how the offer was presented.

One key role of advocates is to challenge local authorities on behalf of children. This might be when the outcome of the joint assessment between children’s services and housing goes against the wishes of the child and the child wants to appeal, or when the child’s wishes or circumstances change, meaning they wish to reverse the original outcome. For advocacy to operate effectively, the advocacy service needs to have a certain level of independence from the local authority. A couple of the local authorities we spoke to explicitly mentioned their efforts to make sure the advocacy service was completely independent. One advocacy service said that they ‘always’ acted independently.

Conversely, though, some advocates told us that they felt the commissioning relationship between themselves and the local authority meant that, at times, it was difficult to remain fully independent and challenge local authority decisions:

‘You’re still getting money from the people that you could be challenging.’

Advocate

This, of course, could have negative implications for homeless children who need someone to support them in challenging the local authority on its decisions.

Children’s experiences of receiving information and advocacy

As part of this research, we commissioned St Basils to gather information from children and young people. St Basils is a charity and registered provider of social housing with extensive experience in supporting children and young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. On our behalf, they conducted a focus group with 10 children and young people from their Youth Advisory Board. They also ran a survey of 96 children and young people. The focus group and survey asked these

children and young people about their experiences of presenting as homeless, being assessed and being accommodated.

The views of the children and young people who spoke to St Basils echoed the findings we have presented. Many of the focus group participants told us that they would have liked more information about their options. Some of the young people said they were not given the option to become a looked-after child under section 20. Some said that they were not given any options at all but simply told what was going to happen to them.

We heard about other ways the young people would have appreciated information about the homelessness process. For example, they would have liked information to be provided in different formats, such as apps that could be downloaded, social media posts, campaigns to raise awareness and posters in public spaces about what to do and who to call.

One young person said they would like to see:

‘Social media posts or campaigns to raise awareness for homelessness so you don’t feel like you are alone in the situation.’

Young person, St Basils focus group participant

Some said they would have liked leaflets or something they could take away that explained their options. They would also have liked to have some time to go away and think about it. It was important that the information helped children make informed decisions:

‘I think definitely, if more things are done to make sure everyone is given the right information, and all make sure that the information shared is consistent, so we all know what our options are and so future young people know what they are too, then it means everyone gets more choice and more say in their future. Most of the time it is not a young person’s fault when they become homeless.’

Young person, St Basils focus group participant

Although we heard that advocacy is usually offered in one form or another, this was not the experience of the young people we heard from. Only 9% of the young people surveyed said they had been offered an advocate. Half of respondents (51%) said they hadn't been offered an advocate, and 40% weren't sure. In many cases, young people were not aware of what an advocate does, which suggests that children's rights to advocacy are not being properly explained to them. Most young people we spoke to in the focus group said they had not been offered an advocate, and one young person who was not offered an advocate said:

'I think if I had known about advocacy services that sounds like it would have been helpful to me.'

Young person, St Basils focus group participant

Assessing children's needs

Once a child has presented as homeless, there should be a joint response from social care and housing services. The process to be followed in this situation should be laid out clearly in a joint protocol for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, as detailed in the statutory guidance.^[footnote 16] The purpose of the joint protocol is to define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the assessment process to avoid children being 'passed between' various services. The intended outcome is a unified, coherent response to children who present as homeless.

The joint protocol

We heard from some representatives from local authority children's services and housing authorities that their joint protocols were working well and helped professionals to work together effectively.

We also heard examples of co-creation of joint protocols. Some authorities had included external agencies and professionals, including advocates, in developing their joint protocol. They had also consulted with children and young people. This meant that their processes worked better for all involved.

However, others we spoke to felt that the joint protocol was more of a tool to support the process when there was disagreement between the 2 agencies:

‘The joint protocol only really gets used when things go wrong! I think I would say it’s helpful. The protocol works, most of the time you don’t need it because it all works as agreed with the right outcome. The document comes out when someone goes awry or makes a difficult decision.’

Housing authority representative

For the social care inspectors we spoke to, the joint protocol was a useful tool to understand the intention behind a local authority’s approach to homeless children, and whether partners were working well together to assess the child’s holistic needs. Inspectors told us that the quality of joint protocols varied, and that staff members had different levels of familiarity with them. How well the protocol was applied helped inspectors to understand the quality of a local area’s response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds:

‘... whether the people know what the protocol actually says and how closely or not they’re following it. And that’s where you get quite a lot of variation.’

Social care inspector

Cross-team collaboration

The joint protocol was only one of the ways that local authorities were working collaboratively to assess and support homeless children in their area.

Some authorities had actively worked to improve joint working practices and relationships between children’s services and housing. One authority, for example, held a joint team day to discuss their strategy and ways of working. This had been effective in improving their collaborative working.

We also heard how the structure of teams could facilitate stronger collaborative working. Some authorities had 'linchpin' teams or individual workers who acted as a link between children's services and housing teams, or who specialised in working with homeless children and young people.

For the authorities with dedicated youth homelessness teams or workers, having a single point of contact for issues relating to homeless children was helpful. Those working specifically with homeless children had a strong understanding of the legislative context. This meant that colleagues could rely on their expertise to navigate a complex area of duties and guidance. Participants told us that it fostered collaboration not only between themselves and these teams/workers, but also with the children themselves, as those with specialist experience in youth homelessness were often good at understanding how best to support a child through the process.

Some participants told us that the size of their authority acted as a barrier to effective working relationships. Those in unitary authorities generally mentioned having closer working relationships, while those working in larger ones felt this could be more difficult.[\[footnote 17\]](#)

'Because we're a small, unitary authority, working relationships are pretty positive. Where there's different housing authorities in bigger areas it adds layers of complexity. If there's a problem, staff in both services know each other and know who to contact and that does ease things, especially when children present on day one. It isn't a long-winded process, the assessment is done quite quickly and workers are galvanised fairly quickly into that joint working.'

Local authority representative (from a unitary authority)

'[Name of council] has multiple housing authorities – lots and lots. It's different in each area, some areas have really good relationships with their housing authorities, in [name of area] we're not as lucky as that.'

Local authority representative (from a large authority)

Multi-agency approaches and working with external partners

We heard from participants in local authorities about the various agencies they worked with during the assessment process and beyond. Many of the authority representatives we spoke to mentioned regular multi-agency meetings. These featured partners in schools and education providers, as well as professionals in healthcare, other local authority teams and advocates.

Multi-agency meetings were held for a number of reasons. In some areas, they were held so that leaders had oversight of what placements were available. In others, they focused more on looking back at individual children's experiences to identify any areas for improvement.

Some of the local authorities we spoke to had strong links with accommodation providers in their area, and considered the ongoing support children would need when moving into different types of accommodation. One local authority organised a 'getting to know you' conversation between children and supported accommodation providers. Others had specific teams or processes designed to support children with skills such as budgeting, finance and practical life skills. These worked closely with children's social care teams during and after the assessment process to ensure a smooth transition into accommodation for the child.

We heard how some local authorities involved healthcare professionals during the assessment process. This helped them to understand children's health needs, including their mental health needs. One local authority told us that they would generally involve healthcare and mental health services after the assessment, unless the child had asked for it before that point. Another said that they did their best to involve mental health services, particularly when there was a significant mental health need, but that this was not always easy given resource constraints:

'Mental health are just so under-resourced, trying to get appropriate mental health support for some 16- and-17-year-olds which we know would help them – it's just so hard to get hold of, especially in a timely manner.'

Housing authority representative

How were children supported through the assessment process?

Children and young people responding to the St Basils survey were asked an open question about things they would like Ofsted to know about their experience. The most consistent point participants made was about the skills and expertise of staff. Young people said that staff members who are the first point of access must have skills and knowledge in all relevant areas so that they can give young people all the information they need. This supports the idea that developing expertise in this area, whether through dedicated youth homelessness teams or workers, or generally among all staff who work with homeless children, can be beneficial to children.

Finding the right place for children to live

Local authorities have a duty to find appropriate accommodation for children presenting as homeless. For those who are accommodated under section 20 of the 1989 Act, this should be regulated settings such as foster care, children's homes and supported accommodation.^[footnote 18] For children provided with accommodation under section 17, guidance states that accommodation should be assessed in light of the needs of the child, considering factors such as safety, fitness of the landlord and affordability. This type of accommodation does not have to be regulated by Ofsted.

Guidance is unequivocal in stating that B&B, hotel and nightly let accommodation with shared facilities are not suitable for any 16- or 17-year-old. Before a child is accommodated in any of these types of placements, local authorities are expected to look into the feasibility of children returning home or being placed with other family or friends.^[footnote 19]

Exploring family and friends options

Participants working in children's services and housing told us that they would always try to support children staying at home or returning home if possible. One participant from children's services told us that they saw the assessment process as an opportunity to get an understanding of why the child is homeless, and whether it is feasible for them to return home.

‘You can be guilty of going heavy-handed with multi-agency meetings when actually it can be resolved at home with a very quick conversation.’

Housing authority representative

Many local authorities had extra support in place, such as family mediation and family group conferences, for children returning to their family or staying at home. One had a dedicated team that carried out intensive edge-of-care work and home visits and supported the family to reconcile wherever possible. One local authority told us about a youth homelessness prevention programme they were part of, which was paid for with funding from central government. This looked at providing negotiation services for families, as well as additional in-home support. Another local authority said that they would always refer children and their families to a family well-being centre as part of the joint assessment process.

For some local authorities, this mediation work did not end when a child was judged to be homeless and accommodated away from their family. Some told us that they continued the family work to see if the child could eventually return home:

‘Even when they’re accommodated, it’s not just set in stone that they’re going to remain in care until they’re 18 – we are doing quite a lot of follow-up work, continuing that work to see if we can get those young people back with their families. That doesn’t stop – even when the pathway decision is made, that work continues... we’re consistently thinking about the future and how we can make things better for young people. We often end up reversing the situation, where they’re coming into care and they actually end up leaving care because of the work we’ve done with them.’

Local authority representative

Social care inspectors told us that the quality of a local authority’s approach to family and kinship is one way to assess the quality of its overall approach to supporting homeless children.

Types of accommodation

Ultimately, despite attempts to reconcile families or place children with other family members or friends, children will sometimes unavoidably need to be placed in accommodation through section 20 or section 17.

Emergency and temporary accommodation

For children in the most urgent situations, emergency accommodation is necessary to make sure that they have a safe place to sleep.

Despite guidance being very clear, some local authorities felt they had to resort to using B&B and hostel provision. They said this was sometimes 'unavoidable':

'If they're homeless on the day, they've got no friends, no family, we've spoken to everyone and there's no one that will take them, then we'd have to do an emergency accommodation. So, it's usually our bed and breakfast which is all we have available, which is not ideal for young people.'

Housing authority representative

Local authorities generally told us that emergency accommodation was used as a temporary measure while children were being assessed. However, we did also hear some examples of children, particularly those accommodated under section 17, staying in these types of inappropriate provision for longer than the assessment period.

Alarmingly, one local authority said the hostel they used for emergency accommodation was 'basically a mattress in a big room with other young people and their belongings in a bag'.

In contrast, one housing authority told us that in an emergency they placed children in hostels with keyworkers that were available 24/7. These keyworkers would start working with children as soon as they arrived and continued to help them when permanent accommodation became available. This was for children who were not assessed as section 20 to help prepare them for independence.

In a couple of the local authorities we spoke to, the first option considered for emergency accommodation was a host family option. This was where the child

would be placed for a short amount of time, usually up to a fortnight, while a more permanent arrangement could be put in place.

The length of stay in emergency accommodation varied widely across different local authorities. For some, 'temporary' provision lasts a night or 2 but for other children this could last for up to 2 years. An inspector commented:

'Some local authorities are clear that an emergency bed is an emergency bed and there's a time limit on that which is measured in hours. Others can be there until they move to the next place... that doesn't sound like it's meeting a child's needs, to go into an emergency bed in effectively a hostel. It's barely suitable... It's a roof over their head, it's not somewhere to live in.'

Social care inspector

Foster care placements

Those working in children's services told us that, if a return to family was not possible, foster care was the second preferred option for this age group, but that finding a foster placement was 'virtually impossible'. The social care inspectors we spoke to verified this and said it was 'very rare' to find foster placements for children in the 16-to-17 age group. This is also supported by previous research, which found that care settings (including both foster care and children's home placements) accounted for only 6% of placements for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. [\[footnote 20\]](#)

Supported accommodation

Most children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless to the local authority will be placed in some form of supported accommodation. This was apparent from our conversations with children's services, housing authorities, advocates and inspectors, and mirrors other research findings. When children are placed in regulated supported accommodation, there are support standards that the accommodation provider must meet. These aim to make sure that children receive individual and tailored support that meets their needs. [\[footnote 21\]](#) When children are placed in unregulated supported accommodation, these assurances are not in place. This is more likely to be the case for children who are accommodated under section 17. Ofsted only began to regulate supported accommodation in April 2023. Because this research has taken place very soon after the new regulations were introduced, we have not made a distinction between supported accommodation that

is regulated and other provision of this nature that does not require regulation.

We heard that supported accommodation varied in terms of how well it met children's needs. Some offered help with maintaining their tenancy and additional needs such as mental health and general life skills (like budgeting, finances, cooking and cleaning). In one case, the supported accommodation was being used to help children transition to independent living. Their length of stay would depend on the level of support they needed to be ready for this – it varied between 6 months and 2 years.

For some children, it was unclear exactly what support was being offered as part of the supported accommodation provision. One advocate told us that the 'support' on offer was just a manned desk at the front of the accommodation, and that the staff were not trained to support the children's needs. Another told us their concerns about the appropriateness and safety of some of the supported accommodation.

Given that regulation of this type of accommodation is relatively new, it is too early to draw conclusions about its impact on supported accommodation at a wider level. However, some local authority representatives told us that they feel more secure about placing children in supported accommodation now that these need to be registered with Ofsted, rather than in semi-independent living options. Others voiced concerns about the impact of regulation on the availability of placements for 16- and 17-year-olds.

Children's preparedness for living alone

We asked local authority children's services and housing authorities if they carried out any form of assessment to determine a child's readiness to live alone. It was rare, and when it did happen, it was mostly on an informal basis. It was also rare for there to be a follow-up system in place to check in on the child and make sure that they were coping in their new arrangement. Ensuring that children are comfortable and happy in their placements is important for any accommodation type. But it is essential for children living in independent or semi-independent accommodation, as this can be less stable and more prone to breakdown.^{[\[footnote 22\]](#)} It can also be more daunting for children, who may have left their families under difficult circumstances and are facing the transition into adulthood alone.

How are children involved in decisions about where they live?

The young people who responded to St Basils' survey said that there needs to be more investment in accommodation for homeless children, so that there is more accommodation available that meets their needs.

Some of the focus group participants stated that they were already homeless on the day they contacted their local authority and so didn't have a proper opportunity to consider different accommodation options. Others said they were given a choice between supported and temporary B&B accommodation and opted for supported accommodation, as they were unsure what it would be like living in B&B accommodation.

Some of the young people in the focus group said they were given a choice of different places they could move to. However, others said they weren't given a choice at all, and that their social worker had told them what type of accommodation they would be placed in. One young person said:

'For me, personally, I was told by my social worker this is where you are going. And it is so important for us as young people to have a choice about where we end up.'

Young person, St Basils focus group participant

Other respondents in the focus group said that they would have appreciated having access to more information about their accommodation options. For example, one young person said that a website explaining the differences between temporary and supported accommodation would have been useful.

Barriers and enablers

The social care system in England has well-documented challenges, many of which we have examined in more detail in other research reports. The number of children in care continues to rise, and local authorities are struggling to keep up with their duty

to provide sufficient accommodation for them. This is partly due to the lack of suitable placements available in the right places.

Lack of placements and resources

All of the participants in our research described the challenges caused by a lack of available placements, including emergency accommodation, for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Despite an increasing need for emergency accommodation, there are simply not enough of these types of placements available. This may lead to multiple risks for children who are placed in inappropriate accommodation. A lack of available placements for looked-after children might also influence local authorities when they are deciding whether to accommodate children under section 20.

Local authorities told us they were unable to staff certain services, such as 24-hour support for supported accommodation. They also said that, due to understaffing, social workers had extremely full caseloads. This meant that they had insufficient time to establish proper relationships with the homeless children they were working with. They were also struggling in terms of resources.

Children's circumstances acting as a barrier

Local authorities and housing authorities also told us about specific reasons why some children were more difficult to place or less likely to engage fully with the assessment process:

- Pregnant children aged 16 or 17 were the group most commonly mentioned by local authorities. They were difficult to place either because accommodation providers would not accept pregnant children, or because they would not accept them bringing their baby back after it was born. One local authority told us that they had done significant work with accommodation providers to overcome this. But they acknowledged that they had to 'fight' to get appropriate accommodation for pregnant 16- and 17-year-olds.
- Children with additional needs, particularly mental health needs, were difficult to place because of a lack of available accommodation and staff to care for children with complex needs. This mirrored what we heard in our previous research on sufficiency and children with complex needs in children's homes. [\[footnote 23\]](#)
- Older children were less likely to be offered care under section 20 as they

approached their 18th birthday, according to the inspectors and advocates we spoke to. This mirrors other research findings.

- Children who have been involved with the criminal justice system were more difficult to place in suitable accommodation, as some providers would not accept a child with a criminal history.

Our research also identified some factors that reportedly affected local authorities' ability to engage with children during the assessment process. The children most commonly mentioned were those who had previously been involved with the social care system. Those with earlier negative experiences were much less willing to engage with social workers, and were reportedly more likely to reject section 20 as the route to accommodation. Some children's services representatives also told us they felt that some children wanted to avoid the 'stigma' of being a looked-after child.

Capturing children's voices

Many of the professionals we spoke to highlighted the importance of listening to children and of using their opinions and feedback to tailor services to their needs and make improvements where necessary. We heard about different ways in which local authorities were doing this.

Getting feedback:

- working collaboratively with children throughout the assessment process, including being led by the child throughout the assessment
- designing recording templates that included areas to collect and record children's views, interests and feedback
- using independent or anonymous means, such as a central feedback platform that children could access at any time through QR codes
- going through independent advocates, recognising the benefits to children of being able to discuss their experiences with an impartial third party

Co-developing tools and processes:

- speaking to children and young people about their experiences of homelessness as part of an annual review and then using this feedback to improve their joint protocol
- including feedback from children and young people as a central part of their quality assurance framework, which was overseen by a dedicated quality

assurance manager

- consulting directly with children and young people about a range of issues, including the accommodation they chose to commission, the homelessness process itself, and the design of information leaflets provided to children when they present as homeless

Effective advocacy

Though we have highlighted earlier in the report that there are gaps in some local authorities' advocacy offers, we did hear some examples of effective advocacy practices.

Some local authorities offered children multiple choices of who they wanted to advocate for them, including informal advocacy from any person that the child trusted. A couple told us that they offered in-house advocacy as a way of 'capturing' the children who had chosen not to engage with the external services on offer.

Some of the local authorities we spoke to said that they would always try to involve advocates at the point when a child rejected section 20 care. This was to help the child understand the full implications of their decision, making sure to highlight the post-18 support that they were giving up by rejecting section 20.

Some of the inspectors we spoke to told us that they had seen examples of effective advocacy in the education sector – that is, schools and FE providers acting as advocates and 'not being afraid to challenge when the local authority has got it really wrong'.

Oversight and evaluating practice

Local authority children's services and housing authorities told us about the processes they had in place to provide effective oversight of the homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in their area.

Some of the authorities we spoke to told us of the benefits of children's services and housing having joint access to case management systems. This was helpful for keeping notes of interactions with children. It also helped professionals to 'stay on the same page' when it came to supporting each child. It meant that they could easily

see which other professionals and organisations had been involved with the child and this improved joint working.

Some local authorities told us that they were transparent with the data they collected about homeless children. They would allow the children themselves to access assessment reports so that they could see what had been written about them. They said that this helped to build trust between themselves and the children they worked with, as well as being an ethical practice.

Many of the local authorities regularly reviewed their practice, in a number of ways, to make sure they were operating effectively and in the best interests of homeless children. One local authority said they had monthly meetings to 'review if anything is being missed over time', as well as to check that rights and entitlements have been properly explained to children. In another local authority, when a child was deemed not to be homeless, this automatically triggered a board meeting between the senior managers of housing and children's services to review the case to see whether any other help was needed. Another local authority said that they had regular multi-agency meetings involving operational managers who dealt with homeless children, as well as partners in leaving care and children in care teams, accommodation providers, health professionals, and children themselves. They shared feedback across services, focusing on what had worked well, and dealing with any concerns children had raised.

Inspectors gave some examples of 'good data' that they saw in stronger authorities, including:

- information on when children presented as homeless that showed clearly what decision was made and what type of accommodation they were placed in
- a detailed needs profile for each child and a record of all the interactions with the child, as well as the use of advocacy

Practical support

Local authorities were offering a range of practical support for children who presented as homeless in their area. All of our participants were able to give us some examples of additional wraparound support their authority had in place for homeless children. Types of support included:

- life skills like cooking, cleaning and budgeting

- education around sexual health and healthy relationships, and drug and alcohol abuse
- support with health needs: for example, one area had an in-house clinic that worked with children and, where appropriate, their families to provide psychotherapy and mediation
- assessments of physical and mental health needs, and provision of mental health support – although this was rare, likely due to the issues with capacity and resources in the mental health sector
- education support: for example, in one local authority, homeless children who had become disengaged from education were offered the opportunity to gain ASDAN qualifications^[footnote 24]
- support with decorating and furnishing a new home: these schemes allowed authorities to provide children with things like furniture, white goods, carpets and curtains in order to make their new homes feel more comfortable

Although this kind of support can be vital for children who find themselves homeless, the availability of support varied. It was less likely to be offered to children who were not accommodated under section 20.

The role of education

Homelessness is likely to be a barrier to accessing education.^[footnote 25] This means strong multi-agency work between local authorities and education providers is essential to make sure there is minimal disruption to homeless children's education. Given that homelessness is likely to make a child more vulnerable, schools and education providers need to understand how homelessness affects their pupils, both from a safeguarding and a pastoral perspective. We heard examples of local authorities working closely with schools and education providers. We also heard from our inspectors that homelessness can be a 'hidden issue', but that schools and education providers can play a role in bringing it to light to make sure affected pupils have the support they need.

Some of the local authorities we spoke to mentioned that their multi-agency work involved colleagues in the education sector. Some examples included:

- involving schools and education providers during the homelessness assessment process; this helped them to understand the child's educational needs, what support was already being offered, and what additional support might be needed

- maintaining links with early intervention and pastoral workers in education providers to both help with homelessness prevention work and provide in-school support after a child had become homeless
- having schools and education providers involved in multi-agency panel meetings about children's next steps

The important role of schools was highlighted by one of the young people who participated in the St Basils focus group, who said they'd received support from their school to access advice and guidance on homelessness:

'My experience wasn't great at all at home, so when my school said they were going to get me some help from St Basils I was relieved. Because St Basils aren't that well known in a little village, I would have never known how to get that support on my own.'

Focus group participant

The inspectors we spoke to generally had significant insight about homeless children, both from their own experiences as professionals in the sector, and from their inspection work. Many commented on the negative effect that homelessness could have on a child's education. One inspector reported that homelessness among 16- and 17-year-olds is more common than is realised:

'I think it's a massively hidden issue. What we come across much more is those 16- and 17-year-olds who are in unstable home conditions [...] Those that are actually homeless at 16 or 17, it impacts them so greatly and often there's a history to that that doesn't start at 16 or 17, it starts earlier, this instability.'

FE and skills inspector

Similarly, other inspectors mentioned the prevalence of children 'sofa-surfing'. These children may not actually present as homeless, or be known to authorities as homeless, but are still living in precarious and potentially dangerous situations.

The extent to which Ofsted hears about these children depends on the extent to which their education provider is aware of their situation. Clearly, any child living precariously should be monitored from a safeguarding perspective, and we did hear examples from inspectors of providers doing good work in this area:

‘Effective safeguarding means these young people are being monitored because they’re vulnerable, they are at risk. The vast majority of these colleges, there will be a flag for these learners because they’re vulnerable. They will check in on them on a frequent basis to make sure they’ve got what they need, they can refer them onto other services, for example mental health support, or it could be they need help applying for additional funding routes, bursaries, and things to help them in other aspects of their lives.’

FE and skills inspector

Another FE and skills inspector commented that, in the schools where safeguarding practices were ‘excellent’, there was evidence of the provider ‘actively’ advocating for the young person, for example by making phone calls on their behalf.

Next steps

Our research has revealed that there are some areas that local authorities need to address to improve their provision and support for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Local authorities should:

- make sure children receive, and understand, age-appropriate information about the different accommodation options available to them, and are well supported to make the right decision for their circumstances
- review the strength of the advocacy offer for homeless children – this should include how the offer is promoted to children, whether it should be offered to all children who refuse section 20 and how the offer is monitored to ensure uptake and effectiveness
- consider the benefits of co-creating with children important documents like the joint protocol and information leaflets provided to children, and policies that affect children’s experiences of presenting as homeless

- consider involving children, advocates, other external partners such as clinical psychologists and speech and language therapists, and professionals from the education and third sectors, in work such as designing materials
- in cases where B&B accommodation is being used as emergency accommodation, take urgent action to change this
- assess children's happiness with their living situation on a continual basis to make sure their accommodation is right for them
- provide children with adequate follow-up support and aftercare – regardless of whether they are accommodated through section 17 or section 20

We asked all our participants what Ofsted could do to help improve practice in response to, and in support of, homeless children. Their responses, together with discussions with external and internal stakeholders, have identified some areas for us to consider further. We will:

- update our data request before an ILACS inspection to include a copy of the joint homelessness protocol when we next update the ILACS framework and guidance
- consider how we can get a better insight into whether children who present as homeless are accommodated under section 17 or section 20, including the possibility of further research in this area
- ask inspectors to routinely consider the take-up and impact of advocacy for children who present as homeless when they are looking at those children's experiences
- share learning resources and materials about homeless 16- and 17-year-olds across all of our remits
- consider how to share our insights from inspection and other activity in a way that makes it easier for local authorities and their partners to see examples of good practice

Methodology appendix

A note on terminology

This report concerns homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Though often referred to as 'young people', people aged 16 and 17 are still children. Referring to children as

‘young people’ may adultify them, causing them to be treated as if they were adults. Throughout this report, when referring to ‘homeless children’, we are talking specifically about homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, unless stated otherwise. We do use ‘young people’ or ‘children and young people’ when talking exclusively about our findings from the St Basils engagement, as participants were aged 17 to 24 and this is their preferred term.

We often refer to children being ‘accommodated’ under section 20 or section 17. In this report, when we say ‘accommodated’, we mean provided with a place to live and, in the case of those accommodated under section 20, provided with ongoing care and support.

Data collection

The main method of collecting data for this research was focus groups. We ran these between April and May 2023. We carried out the following focus groups with local authority children’s services, housing authorities, advocates and His Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI):

Participants	Number of focus groups	Number of participants
Representatives from local authority children’s services	2	12 total
Representatives from housing authorities	2	6 total
Advocates from independent advocacy services	2	7 total
Social care HMI	3	10 total
Schools HMI	2	9 total
FE and skills HMI	2	7 total

Because we wanted to hear about both good and less good experiences of working with homeless children, we used purposive sampling via a gatekeeper to select local

authorities with different ways of working and different characteristics (for example unitary and 2-tier authorities). We used a mix of purposive and convenience sampling to select participants for our inspector focus groups. To hear from advocates, we contacted well-known advocacy organisations and advertised on social media to gain our sample, which was spread geographically.

We also commissioned youth homelessness charity St Basils to conduct 2 research activities with homeless-experienced children and young people:

- a survey, which ran for 2 weeks from 20 October to 3 November 2024 and received 96 responses from children and young people
- a focus group with 10 children and young people, aged between 17 and 24, who had experienced homelessness at age 16 to 17 – these young people were from 5 local authorities in the West Midlands region

We chose to commission this part of our research from an external organisation because St Basils has expertise in engaging with children and young people who have experienced homelessness, and has good relationships with members of its youth panel. Because the children on St Basils' panel already knew the researchers and chose whether they wanted to volunteer for each individual project, we could be assured that the young participants' involvement was fully voluntary.

The qualitative nature of our research means that the findings may not be representative or generalisable. However, the intention of our work was to add nuance and further depth to existing large-scale, quantitative research on the topic. [\[footnote 26\]](#) We also wanted to hear different perspectives by speaking to a range of professionals and inspectors.

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1. [‘Homeless 16- and 17-year olds in need of care’](#), Children’s Commissioner, November 2023. This figure includes unaccompanied children seeking asylum and those who were subsequently assessed not to be homeless. ↩
 2. This is set out in statutory guidance: [‘Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation’](#), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018). ↩
 3. Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 are very similar, so sometimes children will be said to be accommodated through part 7 – they mean very similar things. ↩
 4. [Services for children leaving care](#), Coram Child Law Advice. ↩

5. In this context, if a child is assessed as not being a 'child in need', the local authority has decided that the child has no additional needs other than being homeless. [↵](#)
6. '[Homeless 16- and 17-year olds in need of care](#)', Children's Commissioner, November 2023. [↵](#)
7. '[The door is still closed](#)', Coram, December 2024.

[The door is closed](#)', Coram, December 2014. [↵](#)
8. '[Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)', Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018). [↵](#)
9. '[Beyond a Number: the scale of youth homelessness in the UK](#)', Centrepont, 2022. [↵](#)
10. '[Homeless 16- and 17-year olds in need of care](#)', Children's Commissioner, November 2023. [↵](#)
11. '[Introduction to supported accommodation](#)', Ofsted, April 2023. [↵](#)
12. '[Homeless 16- and 17-year olds in need of care](#)', Children's Commissioner, November 2023. [↵](#)
13. '[Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)', Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018). [↵](#)
14. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Youth HAST advisers are dedicated posts funded by the Department for Education to focus on homeless prevention for 16- to 17-year-olds, care leavers, people leaving custody and vulnerable young people aged 16 to 24. They help local authorities through targeted support visits, offering advice and challenge and sharing learning. [↵](#)
15. '[Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)', Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018). [↵](#)
16. '[Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)', Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018). [↵](#)
17. Different types of local authority in England are explained at '[Understand how your council works: Types of council](#)'. [↵](#)
18. '[Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation](#)', Ministry of Housing,

Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018): 5.1. [↵](#)

19. [‘Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds who may be homeless and/or require accommodation’](#), Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, April 2010 (updated April 2018): 2.1. [↵](#)
20. [‘Homeless 16- and 17-year olds in need of care’](#), Children’s Commissioner, November 2023, page 33. [↵](#)
21. [‘Providing supported accommodation for children and young people’](#), Department for Education, March 2023, page 32. [↵](#)
22. [‘Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in need of care’](#), Children’s Commissioner, November 2023, page 36. [↵](#)
23. [‘How local authorities plan for sufficiency: children in care and care leavers’](#), Ofsted, November 2022.

[‘Good decisions: children with complex needs in children’s homes’](#), Ofsted, January 2024. [↵](#)

24. ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) is an education charity and awarding organisation providing courses, accredited curriculum programmes and regulated qualifications to engage, elevate and empower learners with diverse needs. ASDAN works alongside mainstream and special schools, FE colleges, pupil referral units, local authorities and voluntary and community organisations. [↵](#)
25. [‘The impact of homelessness and bad housing on children’s education’](#), Shelter, November 2022. [↵](#)
26. [‘Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in need of care’](#), Children’s Commissioner, November 2023.

[‘Beyond a number: the scale of youth homelessness in the UK’](#), Centrepoin, 2022. [↵](#)

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