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## The Door Is *Still* Closed

Why 16- and 17-year-old homeless  
children are missing out on  
support they are entitled to





Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the children and young people who gave their voice for this report, it would not have been possible without them. We are also very grateful to Coram Voice advocates and solicitors in the Coram Children’s Legal Centre who provided their insight and data which enabled us to write this report.

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About us

This report is published by the Coram Institute for Children, the dedicated research and development organisation for children at the heart of the Coram Group. It is generated as part of the Fostering Futures programme supported by the Hadley Trust and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Coram Voice as the Voice of the Child in Care.

Coram & the Coram Institute

Coram is the first and longest continuing children’s charity, established as The Foundling Hospital –the birthplace of children’s social care – in 1739. Coram’s vision for children is a society where every child has the best possible chance in life, regardless of their background or circumstances and the Coram Institute for Children is instrumental in realising this vision by turning insight into impact.



Coram Children’s Legal Centre

Established in 1981 as the UK’s response to the International Year of the Child, Coram Children’s Legal Centre is the leading integrated centre for legal advice, information and representation across education, family, immigration, community care and public law working with clients to uphold their rights at an individual case level and through strategic litigation. It has supported many homeless 16- and 17-year-olds with legal advice and has brought multiple cases against local authorities for the failure to fulfil their duties in law for children made homeless.

Coram Voice

Founded in 1975 as the Voice of the Child in Care and the first children’s advocacy organisation, Coram Voice champions the rights of children by getting young voices heard in decisions that matter to them and working to improve the lives of children in care, care leavers and others who depend upon the help of the state through advocacy, co-production and research into practice.

Over the last decade, Coram Voice has pioneered advocacy services for homeless children and young people owed a duty of care by children’s services. This includes supporting homeless children to overcome the barriers to being taken into care, and helping young people previously let down by the care system get the leaving care support they would otherwise miss out on.

We reach homeless children and young people through our outreach at homeless centres and our free phone advocacy helpline to provide trusted, independent advocates who work to end homelessness, and safeguard and support children and young people to re-engage with the social care system and to access the financial, housing and educational benefits to which they are entitled.

Voices in Action

Our **housing rights ambassadors**, young people aged 16-25 with lived experience of homelessness, empower and support other young people by providing peer education training, and campaigning for change by shining a light on problems and developing ideas as part of our Coram’s Voices in Action programme to make things better nationally and locally. They have co-produced the recommendations in this report.

supported by Oak Foundation

Foreword

Every day, young people in crisis are supported by local authority children’s services departments, who are fulfilling their statutory duty to provide a vital safety net for the children in need of their help.

Without these provisions in law and in practice, many more children would be in crisis and face risk of harm.

However, anyone who has worked on the front line or faced the reality of growing need knows how challenging it is to ensure that happens effectively every time and for every child.

All of us depend upon independent insight and information to ensure that we know what needs to be changed and can take action to change it.

This report is a timely reminder as we mark 50 years since the establishment of the Voice of the Child in Care, now Coram Voice, that children’s advocacy has helped to drive positive change and remains critical as a protection of the rights we have as a society put in place for children.

It clarifies and confirms that 16- and 17-year-olds who face homelessness are as entitled to that advocacy support as any other child. They, must be seen, heard and counted so that we turn this insight into practice and ensure that a decade from now, we can say we opened the door for the next generation.

Jenny Coles  
Vice Chair of Coram, Chair of Coram Voice

“THE TRUE CHARACTER  
OF SOCIETY IS REVEALED  
IN HOW IT TREATS  
ITS CHILDREN”

Nelson Mandela

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# What rights and entitlements do children aged 16 and 17 have when they become homeless?

Legislation governing the legal entitlements of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is complex, as is navigating the roles and responsibilities of housing and children’s services. Getting it right for homeless children is important, because which legislation 16- and 17-year-olds are housed under has long term implications, affecting the support they will be entitled to both before and after they turn 18, potentially until they are 25.

Assessment

16- and 17-year-olds presenting to their local authority as homeless should receive a ‘child in need’ assessment under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. This applies no matter whether they present as homeless to housing or children’s services. The vast majority of children assessed as being unable to live with their family will be children in need.

Duties

There are two key pieces of legislation that set out duties towards homeless 16- and 17-year-olds: the Children Act 1989 and the **Housing Act 1996**.

Local authority children’s services have a duty under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 to accommodate children under the age of 18 who are unable to live with their families. A child accommodated under section 20 becomes a ‘looked after child’ and the local authority takes on the role of a corporate parent.

Case law and statutory guidance are clear that this should be the default position. There will be very few circumstances where it is appropriate to provide accommodation to children under either section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (which would result in no leaving care support offered to children after they turn 18) or under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, which sets out local authority duties to prevent and relieve homelessness. The Housing Act 1996 establishes that 16- and 17-year-olds are in priority need for support from housing services if they are homeless.

The **2009 Southwark Judgement**<sup>1</sup> clarifies that children’s services have the primary duty to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, and this has been confirmed in statutory guidance issued in 2010, updated in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

“where a 16- or 17-year-old is owed duties under section 20 of the 1989 [Children] Act, this takes precedence over the duties in the 1996 [Housing] Act in providing for children in need who require accommodation” [para. 1.2]

The guidance is clear that the only exceptions should be where they are found not to be a child in need, or they make an informed decision that they do not want to be provided with accommodation by children services under section 20.

Local authorities have a range of duties to look after children.<sup>3</sup> This does not only include somewhere safe to live, but also support with education and training, health needs and preparation for adulthood. Looked after children will have a social worker who leads on care planning Looked after children are entitled to independent advocacy which supports them to communicate their wishes and feelings about the care they receive to their local authority (Children’s Commissioner, 2023).

Importantly children who have been taken into care will, depending on the amount of time they were looked after for, receive entitlements to support as a care leaver until the age of 25, including a dedicated Personal Adviser, financial support with education and training, and access to an independent advocate.<sup>4</sup> Care leavers also have additional entitlements to support under Homelessness guidance (MGCLG, 2018).

In response to concerns about the quality of accommodation older looked after children were placed in, legislation was updated so that from 2023 looked after children aged 16 and 17 can only be placed in supported accommodation that is regulated and inspected by Ofsted.<sup>5</sup>

1 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200809/ldjudgmt/jd090520/appg-1.htm>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/provision-of-accommodation-for-16-and-17-year-olds-who-may-be-homeless-and-or-require-accommodation>

3 For more information on local authority duties, please see: <https://childlawadvice.org.uk/information-pages/local-authority-duties-to-looked-after-children/>

4 The detail of which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-transition-to-adulthood-for-care-leavers>

5 The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 27C Prohibition on placing a child who is 16 or 17 years old in other arrangements. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/2010/959>

# Executive Summary

This report focuses on the rights, needs and experiences of 16- and 17-year-old children who present themselves to their local authority as homeless and are all too often unable to access the care and support that they are entitled to.

The report follows the publication ten years ago of *The Door is Closed* (Coram, 2014) which highlighted that some children were being allowed to become or remain homeless and being left exposed to potential risk because local authorities were too often falling short in their legal duties, turning children away without performing a proper assessment, or without providing the support that children need. Safeguarding concerns were being missed, while children’s wishes and feelings were being ignored and their experiences disbelieved. They were left unable to access advocacy, and denied a reasonable route to challenge the decisions taken about them.

Disappointingly, this report finds that a decade on, the door is *still* closed to the support and security that vulnerable 16- and 17-year-old children presenting as homeless need.

Statutory guidance and case law are clear that homeless 16- and 17-year-olds should receive a child in need assessment under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and subsequently if found in need, owed a duty to be housed under section 20 of the same Act. The latter entitles them to the care and protection afforded to children in care until 18-years-old and then to support as a care leaver until the age of 25.

Despite the Southwark Judgement (2017) court ruling that denial of assessments by local authorities is unlawful (Essex 2019), a host of subsequent reports from multiple charities and the Children’s Commissioner (2023) show that many homeless 16- and 17-year-olds continue to be left unassessed, and unsupported.

Our report brings first-hand testimony of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds along with data and expert insight from our advocacy and legal services as well as our youth housing rights ambassadors to look at what if anything has changed in the causes and consequences for young people since our report a decade ago.

6 This £5 million has been calculated based on the 6,469 16- and 17-year-olds who presented as homeless in 2022/23 from the Children’s Commissioners report (2023) and the £729 identified by the Children’s Commissioner Children’s Commissioner (2023b) as the average amount local authorities spent in 2022-23 per advocacy referral which equates to £4,715,901 alongside inflation rises and long term increases in the number of homeless 16- and 17- year olds.

# “BE THE CHANGE THAT YOU WISH TO SEE IN THE WORLD.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Our findings identify seven key barriers to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds receiving the entitlements and support they deserve. We show that national data on homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is poor and that early support to families could help prevent many from becoming homeless as a result of family breakdown in the first place.

For those that do become homeless, a large number are not assessed or are not housed under the right legislation. Many are not given accurate information about their rights leading to uninformed decisions that can have a huge impact on their lives. Importantly, vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds are not being given access to an advocate, and where appropriate, legal aid.

Some are housed in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation and for others, the effect of delay and local authority boundaries is that of gatekeeping and ‘waiting out the clock’ until they turn 18.

There are of course many homeless 16- and 17-year-olds who do get the appropriate support they need, when they need it; but for all too many there has been little meaningful change over the last decade and some vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds are continuing to be let down and it doesn’t have to be this way.

Our recommendations lay out clear steps for Government, including the Department for Education, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Ministry of Justice, along with local authorities, to remove the seven barriers that too many encounter to ensure homeless 16- and 17-year-old children get the support they are entitled to.

Critical to this is ensuring homeless 16- and 17-year-old children are assessed and provided with the correct information to make informed decisions about the right legislation they should be housed and supported under through access to an advocate who supports them.

Our primary recommendation is for investment by government of an additional £5 million<sup>6</sup> per annum to be provided to local authorities to ensure that all 16- and 17-year-olds who present to them as homeless have access to an independent advocate to provide accurate information and ensure all children get the support they are entitled to.

Now is the time for change so that a decade from now, this same report does not need to be written.



# Methodology

This report is based on a mixed methods research study which included interviews and surveys with children and young people supported by our advocacy service alongside interviews with advocates and legal staff, supplemented with analysis of case management and safeguarding alert data and in-depth case file analysis.

**Our key research questions were:**

- 1. What do we know about children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless to their local authority?
- 2. What are the experiences of children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless to their local authority and what support do they receive?
- 3. How can the experiences of these homeless children aged 16 and 17 be improved through policy and practice changes?

## Data collection

A combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches was used to analyse information across multiple sources using both primary and secondary data.

**Desk-based research**

A rapid literature review was conducted to provide an update on relevant literature and reports published since the 2014 *The Door is Closed* report and context to the current climate.

**Advocacy case management and safeguarding data**

Our Coram Voice advocacy service provided data from their case management system on the 140 homeless children aged 16 and 17 they supported where their issue was closed to the service between April 2022 and December 2023. The data included demographic characteristics (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and presenting local authority) of the children, as well as service information such as referral source, nature of the issue, duration of support and outcome.

The Coram Voice advocacy service also records safeguarding alerts, collecting information around the nature of the safeguarding concern and demographics of the child. Safeguarding alerts between April 2022 and December 2023 for 196 children with housing issues were coded and analysed to understand the prevalence of issues as reported by children who were referred as well as differences across subgroups highlighted.

**Advocacy case file analysis**

Our Coram Voice advocacy service also provided a sample of 47 children’s case files from the case management system to look in-depth at the issues children were facing. Some of these were used to create illustrative vignettes and case studies which can be found throughout the report. A similar method was used in 2014 *The Door is Closed* report which analysed 40 case files, enabling an appropriate comparison across a decade.

**Qualitative interviews**

The advocacy service also provided a sample of children affected by the issue to be interviewed, five young people who had been affected by homelessness when they were 16 and 17 were selected by Coram Voice staff to be interviewed by researchers in the Coram Impact and Evaluation team. In addition, three interviews were conducted with Coram Voice advocates and three interviews were also conducted with legal staff from Coram Children’s Legal Centre (CCLC) which provides legal advice and representation in community care law. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and based on informed consent.

Interviews typically lasted 45 minutes and took place either over Microsoft Teams or on the phone and were audio recorded and then transcribed. Interviews were participant led and semi-structured. A topic guide was developed to support the conversation and shared with participants in advance of the interview.

Children who took part in an interview were offered participation recognition in the form of a £15 voucher.

**Survey of children involved with advocacy**

Coram Voice advocates administered an online survey developed by the research team with 10 of the children they were working with about their experiences of homelessness. Participation in the survey was voluntary and based on informed consent.

**Questions asked in the survey were:**

- What would have made a difference to prevent you from becoming homeless?
- What would you have liked to have happened when you became homeless that didn’t?
- What services for children affected by homelessness could be improved?

**Data analysis and reporting**

Thematic analysis using the key research questions was undertaken for the qualitative data collected which included interviews with young people, Coram Voice advocates and Coram legal staff as well as the survey with young people and the in-depth analysis of 47 case files.

Reflexive thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke’s 6-stage process of reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate thematic findings (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This involved assessing commonalities and differences in the data, to support identification of common and unexpected themes.

The real names of children and young people in the report found in interview quotes and case file vignettes and case studies have been replaced by pseudonyms to keep the identities of young people anonymous.

**Engaging our housing rights ambassadors**

Coram is committed to the participation of young people in its work and the Voices in Action programme works with 10 young people with lived experience of homelessness, providing opportunities to be trained as peer educators and develop campaigns to improve policy and practice in relation to housing and youth homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

The recommendations in this report were co-produced with our housing rights ambassadors. The young people participated in workshops where they identified the difficulties facing young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and identified the key things that need to change for 16- and 17-year-olds. This included in particular the challenges children of this age face in accessing information, advice and support and the issues for local authorities in seeking to respond to their needs. Some of these are highlighted in the report as direct quotes from the ambassadors given in the workshops.

## Terminology

Many of the children and also professionals we spoke to tended to use the term ‘social services’ when talking about the local authority department responsible for the welfare of children and care leavers. They rarely used terms such as ‘Children’s Services’ or ‘Children’s Social Care’, terms which are more widely used in policy.

Throughout this report we talk about children and sometimes refer to young people. We use the term ‘child’ or ‘children’ when referring to the time when they present themselves, aged under 18, as homeless or at risk of homelessness. We use the term ‘young people’ for those who are now adults, but who were homeless or at risk of homelessness when they were a child under 18 years old. For the purpose of this report, homeless children are children who have no fixed address and who have no-one exercising parental responsibility towards them.



7 For more information about our housing rights ambassadors, including how to sign up to be one, please see: <https://www.coram.20/12/24org.uk/housing-rights-ambassadors/>



# Seven barriers for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and our recommendations for removing them

1 “Unknown quantity” – not being counted means no one held to account.

## What is the issue?

National data on homeless children is patchy and incomplete. The Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) publishes data on youth homelessness but not all data is disaggregated by age group and data available only focuses on those households owed duties under homelessness legislation.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst local authority children’s services have to report data on the number of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds to Ofsted as part of Annex A<sup>9</sup> (the information required when they are inspected), this data is not collected nationally by the Department for Education.

Without quality data we cannot understand how well children’s needs are met. It is therefore difficult to see trends and hold services to account in fulfilling their obligations in law. This is unchanged over the last decade indicating that the needs of 16- and 17-year-olds facing homelessness remain a low priority for government.

## What have others found?

Data is limited when it comes to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. The latest official government statistics for 2024 state that there are 58,870 homeless young people aged 16-24 in England (MHCLG, 2024).<sup>10</sup> However, the number roughly doubles to around 119,300 (2022-2023 data up from 104,400 in 2020-2021) when accounting for children and young people who presented to their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness in England (Centrepint, 2023b).

Looking specifically at homeless 16- and 17-year-olds, research undertaken by the Children’s Commissioner for England (2023) found that in 2022-23 a total of 6,469 children aged 16 and 17 sought help from their local authority or were referred by another person or agency

for help, because they were homeless or were threatened with homelessness. Of the 16- and 17-year-olds children that were not Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) and those whose data could be used (equaling 4,879 children): over half were female (54%), the majority were white (73%), and almost 1 in 10 (9%) had a recorded disability.

This data is crucial to understanding who is presenting as homeless to the local authority and what their characteristics and needs are.

## What did we find?

We analysed data from our Coram Voice’s Advocacy Service’s case management system of 140 16- and 17-year-olds who were supported and subsequently their issue was closed to the advocacy service between April 2022 and December 2023.

We found a much higher representation of females - over three quarters (69%) of children referred to our advocacy service were female. There was also a much higher representation of children from Black and Black British as well as Mixed or Mixed British backgrounds, even when compared to the proportions in England and more ethnically diverse London (where many of the children supported by our advocacy service were from).

We also found a much larger number of children who reported themselves as having a disability: over half (55%) compared to just over 1 in 10 (11%) for children in the general population aged 15-19 (ONS, 2021). Of those that had a disability, over three quarters had a mental health condition (78%), just under a quarter had a learning disability (23%) and 9% had a physical impairment, with 6% reporting having more than one disability. A much higher proportion of those reporting themselves as disabled were female – almost three-quarters (72%).

8 The latest government statistics can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics>  
9 More information on Annex A can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services#Annex-A>  
10 This number represents the number of 16-24 years who were assessed by their local authority and found to be owed a prevention or relief duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. An evidence review by the Office for National Statistics highlights that these figures are likely to be underestimates due to the problem of ‘hidden homelessness’ as it does not include those who, for example are sofa-surfing which is where those with insecure housing are temporarily accommodation by their social network, an arrangement that often involves going from home to home. There are also those who do not present to their local authority or do present but are ultimately found to not be owed a duty.

## What is the solution?

Understanding the needs and characteristics of children who face homelessness is fundamental to supporting them. However, the Children’s Commissioner’s data collection was a one off and our data is only for those whom we supported through homelessness advocacy. Data is not being collected nationally on 16- and 17-year-olds who become homeless. As a result, trends cannot be tracked on a consistent or reliable basis.

As one of our Housing Rights Ambassadors said when asked what the solution should be:

“There should be an organisation that checks on what councils are doing.”

Improving existing data could not only help support children who become homeless or are at risk of homelessness but also ensure local and central government is held to account. Better data on homeless children could help support learning and understand progress. Rates of children who are homeless and whether children’s services take them into care is an important indicator as to whether children and young people are safe in and outside their home which is a core outcome of the Department for Education’s Children’s social care national framework.<sup>11</sup>

Local authorities should already have systems to collect this information as they share child-level data to Ofsted when inspected on children aged 16 and 17 that present as homeless (via Annex A). This data could be collected

nationally by the Department for Education through their existing children in need and looked after children statistics and incorporated into national reporting and Children’s Social Care Data Dashboard (Department for Education, 2024).

Ofsted also has an important role in holding services to account and have increasingly been flagging whether support for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is adequate.

- **Recommendations**  
The ***Department for Education*** and ***Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government*** should **collect and publish local authority level data on the number of homeless 16- and 17- year olds** who (1) present as homeless, (2) are assessed by Children’s Services and (3) become looked after as part of their national statistics and Children’s Social care data dashboard. This would emphasise that assessing and accommodating children in this age group is an important part of keeping children safe.
- ***Ofsted*** should **continue to request data on 16- and 17-year-olds when inspecting children’s services** and report on the quality of support for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds as part of local authority children’s services inspections. This should include reviewing the proportion of children who do not become looked after but are instead assessed to be owed a duty under Homelessness prevention and relief duties.

11 The framework can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-national-framework>





# 2 “More than just housing” – earlier and better support for children at risk of homelessness or homeless.

## What is the issue and what have others found?

The reasons behind a child becoming homeless are often a mix of complex and related issues unique to children and their circumstances. However, family breakdown is a common cause of youth homelessness (Centrepoin, 2023). It was the most common reason found by the Children’s Commissioner (2023) for why 16- and 17-year-olds presented as homeless to their local authority. Family breakdown was also seen in many cases highlighted in the 2014 *Door is Closed* report.

Children and their families need support to cope with complex issues before it causes homelessness, as well as ongoing support where children do become homeless, to cope with wellbeing and mental health, and not just housing support.

## What did we find?

Our research with those who had become homeless at 16 and 17 also found evidence that **family breakdown** was a major factor in homelessness, just as it was a decade ago.

We found family breakdown was often a result of **abuse at home**. Analysis of case files from our Coram Voice Advocacy Service illustrated specific types of abuse which contributed to family breakdown. These included **physical and emotional abuse**, along with **alcohol** and **substance misuse**.

Using the Coram Voice Advocacy Service safeguarding alert data for 196 children they supported with housing issues between April 2022 and December 2023, we found that almost all safeguarding alerts reported physical abuse (96%). In addition, 43% reported emotional abuse and 39% neglect, with 3% reporting sexual abuse. Our analysis found that females were overrepresented in safeguarding alerts (two-thirds, 66%, were female), as were those from non-white backgrounds, particularly those from Black British and Mixed British backgrounds.

Pseudoanonymised examples from the 47 case files we analysed give an illustration of the types of issues children were facing when they were referred to Coram:

Declan could not stay at home because of his mother’s alcohol issue and physical abuse. As a result he missed school half of the year. He tried to self-harm and his mother called an ambulance and the police. Declan then tried to stay with his father for a few days but couldn’t because of his father’s health condition (case file analysis).

Saoirse’s mother threatened her with a knife and has issues with drug usage but wanted her to continue to stay with her due to benefit payments. Saoirse phoned the police but they said they couldn’t get involved. Social Services closed her case because she was too anxious to speak to them so she wasn’t given a social worker. She was then forced to sofa-surf (case file analysis).

Coram practitioners who work with homeless children also highlighted that family breakdown was the predominant cause in children becoming homeless. **Difficult relationships with stepparents** were highlighted as a significant cause. This included cases where stepparents found parenting particularly challenging.

**Lack of access to support services** compounded issues within the home, leading to arguments in the family home, ultimately causing a family breakdown.

“There’s a large percentage of the cases that we take on are where parents have separated and a new partner’s moved in and that’s leading to the family breakdown like a breakdown relationship between a so-called stepparents. But generally, a lot of these children have difficulties that I don’t think parents are able, sometimes want, to manage.” (Coram Legal Staff interview).

An advocate we interviewed highlighted **cultural and religious differences** between family members as a factor in breakdown. In such families, often parents and grandparents had values reflective of their upbringing outside of the UK, which were quite different to the values of the young people brought up in the UK. He spoke of coming out as gay at 12-years-old to an unsupportive and religious household. His father became abusive and as a result he ran away from home. Aged 17 he was admitted to an inpatient unit due to mental health difficulties before receiving support from Coram Voice advocacy service and subsequently supported with accommodation.

**Financial difficulties** were also highlighted by practitioners as a cause of homelessness with some families not being able to maintain the care of the child. For example, one child explained how they went to a police station and told them that he had been rough sleeping after his uncle who was looking after him had asked him to move out due to the financial pressures of looking after him.

Our interviews and case file analysis highlighted that the poor **mental health** of parents and carers as well as children contributed to family breakdown. Self-harm and suicidal thoughts were also notably mentioned.

Using the Coram Voice Advocacy Service safeguarding alert data for 196 children, we found that almost half of children (47%) where a safeguarding alert was recorded reported a mental health issue with 6% reporting suicidal ideation or attempt and 3% self-harming.

Illustrative examples from our case file analysis showed many instances of self-harm and suicidal attempts, for example:

Bhavisana had mental health issues because of abuse and had self-harmed and thought about killing themselves as, they believed it would be better than going home (case file analysis).

Narissa had an eating disorder and attempted suicide in the past and was still suicidal, feeling that staying with their mum will only make them more suicidal (case file analysis).

Chantelle was self-harming and had a suicide attempt as a result of their relationship with their father. The hospital discharged them without any help and did not tell Social Services because they said they hadn’t asked (case file analysis).

This was also found in a number of our interviews with children. For example, Yael told us:

“[Becoming homeless] was because I accidentally got myself put in hospital and because my parents are very anti-mental health but I was at an age [17] where obviously I was able to go to the doctors and have it privately taken care of. They [her parents] were kind of medically neglecting that part of me and my parents were like, abusive in a physical, emotional or mental way” (Yael, interview).

Coram practitioners highlighted the increase in prevalence of mental health difficulties **combined with severe lack of access to mental health services**:

“I think mental health is a significant rising factor for children... 15 years ago, it was generally family breakdown circumstances due to they just didn’t get on ... or they may have had a learning difficulty or they’d kick off or something. I would say now a lot of these children have mental health difficulties. And I think you can’t get the mental health services you need. They’re just not available unless these children are suicidal, actually attempting their life.” (Coram Legal Staff interview).

Throughout our cases we found that many children had repeatedly approached children’s services without being listened to or any support being provided. This suggests that local authorities were missing opportunities to identify ongoing problems and to properly support these 16- and 17-year-olds which could have prevented them from becoming homelessness.

Some of the children explained to our advocates how this sense of not being heard made them feel. This was particularly the case for children who were also dealing with mental health issues. They detailed how they did not feel understood. For example:

Marco said he wasn’t being taken seriously and had serious mental health issues with a number of different social workers come and go. He felt like he’d ‘been taken for a fool’ (case file analysis).

This was a common theme in the 2014 Door is Closed report which found many cases where children were advised to go back home, without any follow up family work to address the issues that led to the family breakdown. This is clearly an issue which continues to affect many 16- and 17-year-olds who present to their local authority as homeless..

## What are the solutions?

### Support for families earlier to prevent children becoming homeless

Evidence suggests a large number of 16- and 17-year old children are homeless because of family breakdown. Our research has found a number of reasons for family breakdown including physical and emotional abuse, along with alcohol and substance abuse, family reformation and financial hardship.

There was a consensus from professionals we spoke to that **early intervention and holistic support for families** facing challenging situations may help prevent children becoming homeless. This was echoed in the survey responses of young people who received advocacy support when asked ‘what would have made a difference to prevent you from becoming homeless?’ For example:

“Social workers should have taken more action when they saw signs of domestic issues in the home. Before the age of 18 they could have done a lot more but didn’t. When I turned 18 things got far more turbulent and by the age of 19 I became homeless”  
(Imran, survey response).

“I had problems with drugs and police and stuff. Social Services could have been more supportive when I was younger, I was moved around from pillar to post”  
(Cillian, survey response).

It was repeatedly suggested that local authorities should intervene earlier in families who are struggling and at risk of a relationship breakdown. This would need to focus on the underlying reasons for the child’s family breakdown such alcohol and substance abuse, mental health issues in family members or the challenges of parenting a teenager as a stepparent for example.

Many practitioners referred to the current approach being “too little, too late”. For example:

“Families actually being supported at an earlier stage to be able to deal with the issues that they’re facing, which might actually support children to be supported in their family homes and those breakdowns not to happen”  
(Coram Legal Staff interview).

Similarly when asked what the solution should be, one of our Housing Rights Ambassadors said:

“There should be more support to stop family breakdown. Schools and social services should help more when there are potential issues, before they escalate”  
(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

Professionals noted a number of ways of supporting families faced with family breakdown. Some suggested **mediation** in a broad sense as a way to support families in these complex situations of family breakdown, or to prevent breakdown.

“My opinion is to have more mediation, more family support and try and prevent these things from happening. At the end of the day it’s not right for a 16-year-old to be homeless and in a hostel or you know, away from their family”  
(Coram Voice Advocate interview).

Professionals also highlighted family group decision making, and specifically **Family Group Conferencing**<sup>12</sup> as an example which could prevent family breakdown and an intervention which was under-utilised in many of the cases they had worked on:

“The problem is they are becoming involved way too late. They are becoming involved when kids need to be going into care...Then they need to become an involved earlier. So then that comes down to like, is it family group conferences? I don’t have a single client that’s been in in the last five plus years and said we had a family group conference”  
(Coram Legal Staff interview).

### Recommendations

- **Local authorities** should provide **training and support for frontline workers**, including early help and Children in Need social workers, to be able to identify concerns of family breakdown.
- **Local authorities** and **central government** should increase investment in **early help** and prevention including evidence-based parenting, drug and alcohol misuse, and family conflict programmes to prevent homelessness in 16- and 17-year-olds.
- **Local authorities** and central government should provide **funding and support for mediation** and other ways to deal with family breakdown so as not to cause a child to become homeless.
- The **Department for Education** should ensure that children at risk of homelessness are covered by their commitment to **mandate local authorities to offer family group decision making**, which should include Family Group Conferencing.

12 A family group conference is a family-led decision making process in which the family and friends network come together to make a plan for a child. The process is supported by an independent coordinator who helps the family prepare for the family group conference. For more information see: <https://frg.org.uk/family-group-conferences/what-is-a-family-group-conference/>

## Mental health and wellbeing support

**Timely and accessible mental health services** was also highlighted as critical. As one young person interviewed said:

“More support from the mental health teams, really, that’s the big one”  
(Dina, interview).

Our Housing Rights Ambassadors echoed the importance of mental health support when talking about homelessness prevention:

“There needs to be more mental health help, like counselling. It needs to be ok to ask for help, because having someone to confide in, who’s there just for you, can help stop the problems that can lead to homelessness”  
(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

Some of the children involved in our research suggested **early identification and support for mental health issues** by professionals, and particularly by their GPs, could have prevented them from becoming homeless.

“I feel like the mental health team and my doctor’s surgery, they was all aware of the relationship that me and my mom [had]. And they put me on medications. But that’s all they really done. They should have put something else in place so that if it did come to that, that circumstance where I would become homeless at least they’d have, like, sort of like a backup plan”  
(Dina, interview).

Coram legal staff highlighted the importance of making it easier for children to access mental health support through better **join up of mental health services with housing and social services as well as the third sector**:

“It would be great if charities had access to mental health workers because of the prevalence within this demographic. This would be under the remit of being on an emergency basis, they would help liaise with different professionals”  
(Coram Legal Staff).

“You can’t get in with a mental health worker unless your child is literally attempting suicide. You know, if they’re self-harming, it’s not enough... Well, if she’s not attempted suicide, no, we [the local authority] can’t do anything. You can apply to go on our waiting list but likely be about a year. I feel like that kind of earlier help would be to families would be more beneficial  
(Coram Legal Staff interview).

### Recommendations

**Local authorities** children’s social care and housing teams should **assess the mental health needs** of all children they come into contact with who are at risk of homelessness or present as homeless and refer to mental health support if appropriate.





# 3 “The wrong door” – Children are not being housed or not being housed under the right legislation

## What is the issue?

Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are children in need of care and protection. The concerning reality is that most children who present to their local authority as homeless and should be taken into care under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, are housed under different legislation and are left without the safeguards, care and support they are entitled to because they have asked for help through ‘the wrong door’.

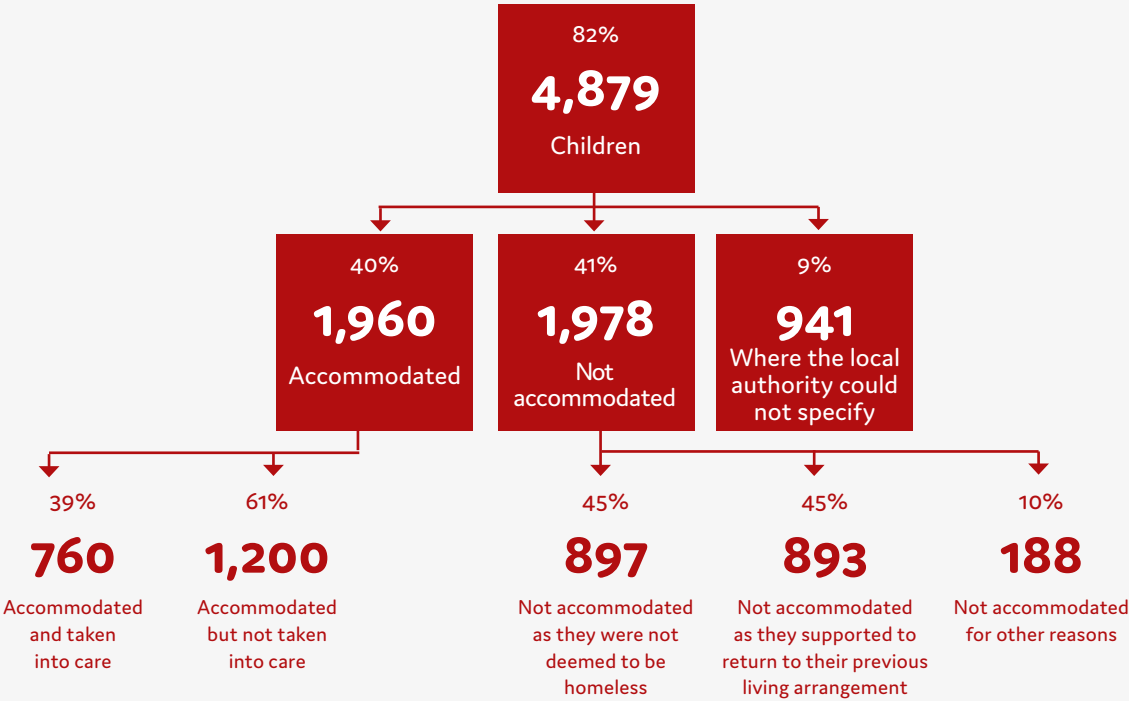
## What have others found?

As shown in the figure below, the Children’s Commissioner (2023) found that only 2 in 5 (40%) of those presenting as homeless to a local authority who were not UCSA were accommodated. Of those accommodated, only 39% were accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act, while 61% were accommodated under section 17 or other housing legislation.<sup>13</sup>

They also found substantial variation around the country, including some local authorities where children were only accommodated under section 17 or housing legislation rather than under section 20.

13 The Children’s Commissioner’s report notes: “For the group that is referred to as ‘Accommodated: section 17 or other legislation’ it was not possible to distinguish between local authorities where the child was housed under housing legislation, and was also getting section 17 support, and those where the child was housed under section 17. As guidance is clear that section 20 should be used in preference to these alternatives, they have been grouped together.”

Figure 1 Breakdown of homeless children



Of the 16- and 17-year-olds children that were not Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC) and those whose data could be used (equaling 4,879 children): just under a third (31%) self-referred; with just under a quarter (24%) being referred by social services and 6% referred via the local authority’s own homeless team or local housing association; and 5% via a school or college.

Worryingly, they showed that children who presented following an initial contact with local authority homeless teams or housing associations were most likely to not be accommodated and, of those who were accommodated, were most likely to be housed through section 17 and other housing legislation.

As shown in the figure below, less than 1 in 10 (8%) of these children were accommodated under section 20. Referrals via social services and via schools or colleges led to the highest percentages of children being given care under section 20 (19% and 16% respectively).

The Children’s Commissioner report (2023) noted that “It is deeply concerning that these children who should be becoming looked after children, and getting the legal

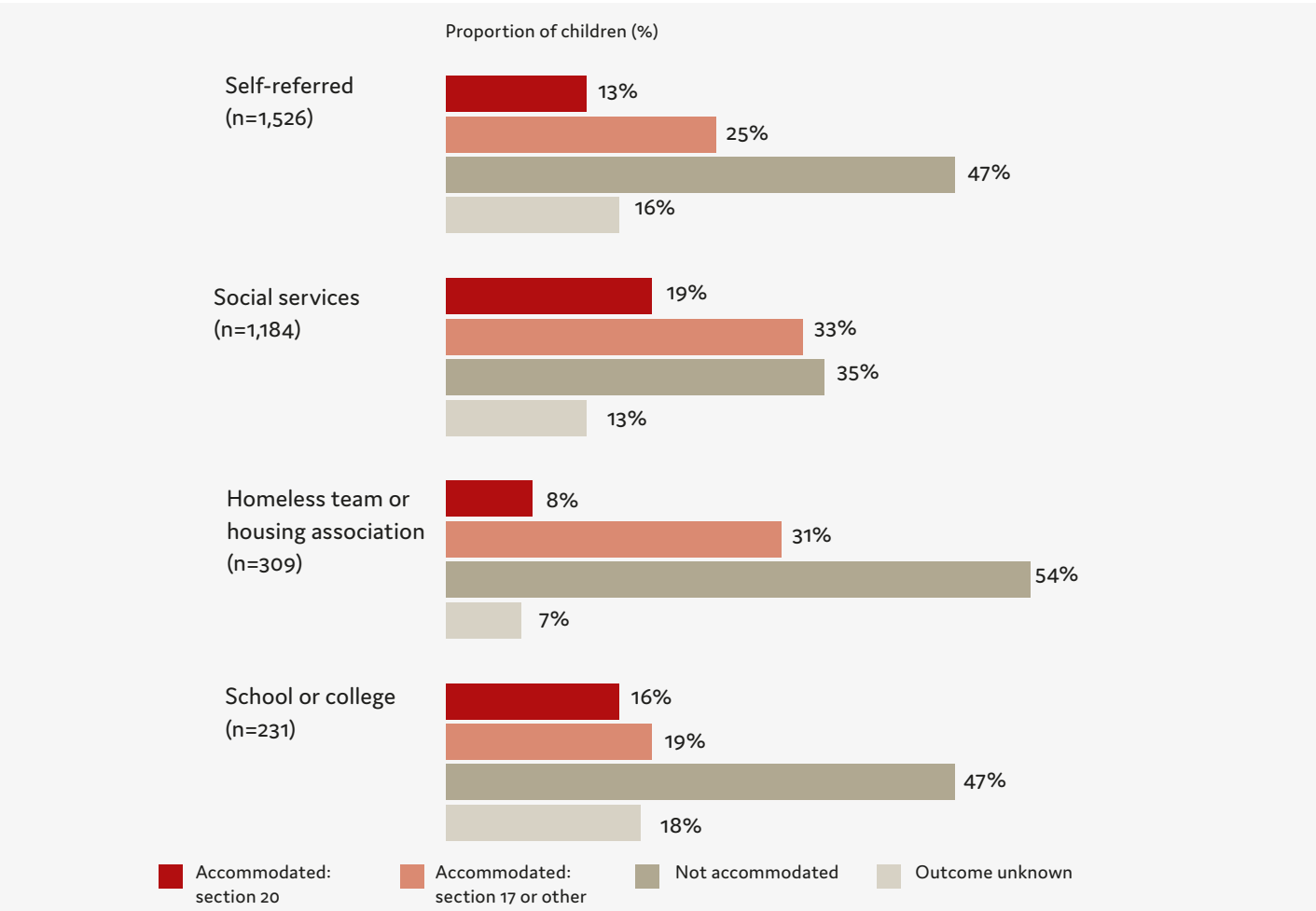
protections that entails, are instead being accommodated under other legislation.”

Recent government statistics show over 2,000 homeless 16 and 17 year olds were accommodated in 2023/24 without making them looked after children<sup>14</sup> These are children who have been assessed as being owed a prevention or relief duty under Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, so does not include others who are missing out on looked after status due to being accommodated under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

Not becoming a looked after child has extensive long-term implications on the support they will receive, for years after.

Most significantly, once they turn 18, they will not have the status of a care leaver and will not have priority need if they become homeless. They will also miss out on the entitlement to have their long-term needs assessed.<sup>15</sup> This could help with their education, career planning, employment, accommodation and financial needs. Too many young people find themselves in this situation at age 18, essentially on their own.

14 Statutory homelessness in England: financial year 2023-24 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Published 3 October 2024  
15 This would be as part of a Pathway Plan Needs Assessment that sets out the advice, assistance and support social services will provide them to transition to independence.





## CASE STUDY: Coram Children’s Legal Centre v London Borough of Barnet

Amir, originally from Iran, had entered the UK five years earlier on a family reunion visa however in early 2024 he fled his family home due to being subjected to alleged violence. A referral was sent by Amir’s school to London Borough (LB) of Barnet and a Child in Need Assessment completed. During this period Amir sofa surfed with a friend and his family. Amir was found not to be a child in need of any services under section 17 Children Act 1989. The assessment recorded that the “father was spoken to and advised that he did push, grab and slap [Amir]”. It was recognised that intervention was required, but concluded that “there is no reason for [Amir] to not be at home”. Amir was willing to undertake mediation and proceeded with the first session which, in Amir’s eyes, made things worse. Amir was unwilling to return home until he felt safe to do so, and there had been an improvement in the relationship with his father.

Amir was then asked to leave the temporary residence where he was staying. He re-contacted his social worker,

but was told that they could not assist and had closed his case, without him receiving any notification.

Coram were instructed in September 2024 by Amir and sent pre-action correspondence to LB Barnet, seeking the provision of section 20 accommodation. A further Child in Need Assessment was completed. Unlike the first assessment, this found Amir to be a child in need but concluded that he did not require accommodation. The premise for the decision was that the father was still willing and able to exercise his parental responsibility and had shared his plan for doing so with LB Barnet; this was to return Amir to Iran.

Judicial Review proceedings were initiated in November 2025 and permission was granted, with an order for interim relief, requiring LB Barnet to accommodate Amir pending a full hearing in February 2025.



## What did we find?

The issue of not being correctly housed under the right legislation was frequently found throughout our research. Many of the 16- and 17 had no explanation about why this happened, or about the consequences.

Zayn was initially accommodated under section 20, only for it to be changed to being accommodated under section with concerns that he was receiving important information without an interpreter and not fully understanding what’s being said to him. The advocate had to pursue section 20, which was it was finally granted, but after Zayn’s 18th birthday (Case file analysis).

In one of our case files, the local authority was noted as commenting that every child cannot have a section 20 due to the financial cost of this for the local authority. The child was eventually granted section 20 after substantial delays but continued to have issues with their benefit payments. In both these cases, an advocate was crucial to ensuring the child’s rights were upheld.

As one advocate explained:

“It is crucial that children’s services are lawful in their practices and share information with young people about their rights and entitlements in line with the Children’s Act rather than offering an interpretation of the law that seeks to limit young people’s rights post-18. The decision has since been overturned however the social worker would still hold meetings with the young person to encourage him to opt for section 17 as this would be the “independent option” better suited to his needs. LA must practice lawfully” (Coram Voice Advocate, interview).

The case of Amir, below, illustrates the issue from local authorities not deeming children to require accommodation.

## What are the solutions?

House children, and house them under the right legislation  
Support for children under legislation other than section 20 should be the exception rather than the rule.

Our findings and that of the Children’s Commissioner (2023) indicate that while joint assessments should always take place, the initial point of contact does have an impact on the outcome of whether a child is accommodated under section 20, or under section 17 or other legislation. Those initially presenting to housing services were much less likely to end up in care than those initially seeking support from the local authorities’ children’s services.

### Recommendations

Local authorities should ensure that the default is to accommodate homeless children under section 20 in all but exceptional cases.

Local authorities should ensure that local joint working protocols between Children’s Services and Housing and any other relevant policies and procedures should align with this principle and ensure all homeless children are assessed under the Children Act 1989 and accommodated under section 20 in all but exceptional cases.



# 4 “In the dark” – Children are not given the correct information about their rights

## What is the issue?

Children’s services hold the primary duty to homeless children aged 16 and 17, including informing them of their rights and entitlements. Joint Statutory Guidance states that children should be informed of the difference in support between the legal status under section 17 or section 20 of the Children Act (1989), including the support available on them turning 18.

This was often not the case for many children who were part of the 2014 *Door is Closed* report.

Disappointingly, 10 years on, we found that frontline workers continue to fall short in providing the correct information to children, and that this was often a consequence of them not having the required knowledge of relevant legislation and guidance. This risks giving children incorrect advice and local authorities working unlawfully.

As a result, children too often lack information that explains their legal rights and entitlements and subsequently felt mislead, ignored, and ultimately unsupported.

## What did we find?

Our case file analysis and interviews with children and professionals highlighted there was a widespread **failure to provide a full explanation of their legal rights, particularly concerning section 20 and section 17 of the Children Act 1989. In many of the case files we assessed, the option of being accommodated by children’s services or by housing services was being presented to children in a biased way, with the short- and long-term consequence of each option not adequately explained.**

Some children interviewed spoke to felt that they had been provided with inaccurate information by their local authority and were dissuaded from accepting the option of section 20. This is illustrated in Yael’s story.

## Yael’s Story

Yael opted for section 17 over section 20 when she was 17 years old, based on the information provided by her local authority. However, when she discussed this with a Coram Voice advocate she realised she had been provided with inaccurate information that her parents would need to agree to a section 20. When she challenged her local authority they told her that they had never given her this information. She explained during the interview:

“The way they [the local authority] explained the section 20 to me in that meeting, it made it seem like I couldn’t have the section 20 unless my parents agreed to let me go into care. But then when I have a phone call with [name redacted] from Coram Voice later on, like a month later from that meeting she said your parents don’t need to sign it.

You can volunteer yourself into care because you’d like to... so then I just had a breakdown, because then I had to call back the local authority and jump back on my decision to go for the section 17 or whatever, because that’s the one I thought was my only option.”

One advocate described how children are rarely aware of their rights to accommodation and support. This becomes more of an issue the closer the young person gets to 18 when they have been told inaccurate information or have no information at all and are told by the school or local authority that they will not have any entitlements because of their age.

For the children we spoke to **insufficient information** was provided by social workers, which led them to agreeing to be accommodated under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. We also found instances of the local authority trying to have the young person accept section 17 over section 20. It was only when an advocate became involved that the children understood section 20 could have been the better option for them.

Our research suggests that this is partly due to the **lack of knowledge** social workers have on the law around children’s rights and entitlement to accommodation and support. As one advocate explained, much of the support

and information 16- and 17-year-olds request from an advocate could have provided by social workers in children’s services. In many cases their requests are substantially delayed and they only gain a response to their section S20 request once an advocate becomes involved.

In the case below, the child was told that their request could not be changed, and that he must leave his current accommodation which would render him homeless.

Jovan was not assessed, and his social worker did not explain the difference between section 17 and section 20 and its consequences. He only realised this when he did not receive any benefits at Christmas that he’d made the wrong decision. He re-contacted his social worker but was told that he’d already made his formal decision, and it could not be changed. His social worker then informed him that he had to leave his current accommodation making him homeless.

(Case file analysis).

The case study below, Coram v Essex County Council, provides an illustration of how not providing children with the correct information about their entitlements can have a substantial impact.

## What have others found?

Our findings are supported by the Children’s Commissioner’s report (2023), which highlights that information on the options available to children was often manipulated to present section 20 as less attractive to children. They also found that some children reported that they were actively told that they could not receive support under section 20 when this was incorrect.

## What are the solutions?

### Make sure staff understand children’s rights and entitlements and work in a joined-up way

To make informed choices, 16- and 17-year-olds need to be given accurate and unbiased information. There are substantial concerns that in many cases these children are not being offered a choice about different types of placements that may suit their needs. The Joint Statutory Guidance clearly states that Children’s Social Care need to have a range of options that address the varying needs of this group of children.

There are a number of ways local authorities can support frontline practitioners to improve the information they provide to children.





As our Housing Rights Ambassadors said:

“It feels like the adult responsible for me is not doing their duty. I think, why do you not know what I am talking about?”

(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

It is important to make sure that the policies and procedures that they work to are in line with legislation. Joint working between children’s services and housing is important and statutory guidance stresses that all local authorities should have a joint working protocol (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2018). It is important that this is legally compliant and clear about children’s rights and entitlements.

In addition, training for frontline workers (especially social workers) on children’s rights and entitlements was highlighted as critical:

“Social workers training number one, I think training for social workers in the sense that some social workers ... aren’t even aware of the law”

(Coram Voice Advocate, interview).

Joint working was also highlighted as something which could support the fulfilment of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds’ rights and entitlements. For example:

It’s about working together, joint working, and ... joint meetings ... when there’s a homeless person, they have joint meetings with housing and the social worker together to look at housing with the young person. And so they all work together and I think that’s what’s important

(Coram Voice advocate, interview).

Recommendations

Local authorities should ensure they have a **legally compliant Joint Protocol** between children’s services and housing services and that **all relevant staff are trained in their local Joint Protocol** and the rights and entitlements of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.

Local authorities should **monitor the practice of providing homeless 16- and 17-year-olds with information** on their rights and entitlements through audit and supervision.

Give children the right information

Children in these difficult situations need to be better informed about their legal rights and entitlements. This includes explaining the short- and long-term consequence of being accommodated by children’s services or by housing services so that they can make fully informed decisions.

For example, Coram is currently supporting children to understand their rights is by educating and empowering them via workshops so that they are aware and confident in their rights. As one Coram advocate said:

“It comes down to raising awareness. Running these workshops that we’re running for the children and young people for them to know about their rights and entitlements and then the end goal of advocacy being upheld, which is that children themselves become advocates. They are self-advocates and they can advocate for themselves and secure the rights and treatments without any intervention or support from another body or another person”

(Coram Voice Advocate interview).



Coram are also developing a peer education programme where housing rights ambassadors will train other children and young people to better understand their rights.

When asked what the solutions to gaps in knowledge should be, our Housing Rights Ambassadors said:

“There needs to be one place you can go to for information about rights”

“Knowing my rights means I know what’s going on and what I’m entitled to”

(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop).

Recommendations

The **Department for Education and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government** should produce a **child friendly version of the statutory guidance** to explain what to expect when you become homeless and the rights and entitlements of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds.

**Local authorities** should ensure that **information they provide does not discourage children from becoming looked after**, should include information about complaints processes and about how to access to advocacy and is accessible to children in homeless persons units, homeless day centres as well as more broadly in schools and community settings.

The **Department for Education** and **local authorities** should **trial education and peer education programmes** to help children understand their rights and entitlements in settings that work with vulnerable children including charities, community groups and schools and colleges.

CASE STUDY:  
Coram Children’s Legal Centre v Essex County Council

The court challenge initiated by Coram Children’s Legal Centre related to the Essex Children’s Partnership (EYPP), a housing gateway introduced by Essex County Council’s Social Services Department. EYPP was a gateway for 16- and 17-year-old children and young adults 18 and above, who are at risk of homelessness, to access accommodation whilst accessing support in a supported living arrangement.

However, Coram Children’s Legal Centre’s case work, in the case of child D, and those of other homeless children, revealed that Essex County Council was using the EYPP gateway to avoid assuming duties of care to 16 and 17 year old homeless children, diverting them away from significant protections at a crucial time in their transition to adulthood and without informing the children of their rights and entitlements under the Children Act 1989.

When D presented as homeless to Essex County Council, she was not informed of her entitlements to accommodation and on-going social care support. Having come from a difficult family background, D did not want to be placed in family-based foster care and wished to be supported to develop independent living skills in a supported arrangement. However, Essex County Council told her that she did not have entitlements to social care input if she refused to be placed in foster care. She was

asked to sign away her rights to social care input. For nearly two years before this settlement was reached, D experienced rent and service charge arrears as a result and was unable to access educational opportunities.

Essex’s approach directly contradicted the legislative safeguards and evidence was filed in the judicial review by Coram Children’s Legal Centre to show that the unlawful practice adopted by Essex County Council has had a significant negative effect on homeless children like D.

Essex has admitted that what they told D about her entitlements was wrong as under the Children Act 1989, local authorities are obliged to act as corporate parents and support the children to transition to adulthood by providing accommodation, financial and emotional support as well as access to educational, vocational and employment opportunities.

Essex County Council apologised for its failures and said that decisions on the type of accommodation to be provided were now being made without any involvement of the EYPP. It also embarked on training of its social workers involved in assessing 16 and 17 year old children to ensure they are aware of the range of accommodation and support that can be provided.



# 5 “No one to stand by their side”– Children are not being given access to an advocate, and, where appropriate, legal support.

### What is the issue?

Too many children, faced with complex situations and often in crisis, are not receiving support to make decisions which will have long lasting and profound implications for them. Navigating the complexities of the different support options without consistent advice and advocacy is leaving children to make decisions which they later regret and is often overwhelming and damaging for children.

Statutory guidance is clear:

‘Young people should have access to independent advocacy and support to assist them in weighing up the advantages and disadvantages and coming to a balanced decision and understanding and navigating the housing system. Independent advocacy and support services can play a key role in supporting 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless or threatened with homelessness’

(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2018).

Without access to experienced advocates or legal advisors to explain what this decision could mean for their futures, it is unreasonable to expect children to be able to make a fully informed decision.

### What did we find?

A significant factor in the eventual positive outcome for homeless children appeared to be the role advocates played in **empowering children with the knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements and holding local authorities to account on their statutory duties.**

Examples included understanding the law in the face of eviction:

“If I had the support of an advocate and a lawyer I would have understood the landlord was dodgy and he was threatening to throw me out. If I had more understanding and knowledge of the law and housing then I wouldn’t have been made homeless”

(Amina, survey response).

I definitely think services like advocacy ... they’re so good ... She’d send me all these articles about like, you know, if I go for Section 20. Like the way that it could benefit me and the ways that it would be just such a good thing for me to go to for myself and just things like, you know, even some reports about, like how some local authorities just they translate as much, putting the children into care, like as late as possible, so that they’re not that accountable for as many children. And that was really, like insightful ... And she just did so much to just try and make sure that I knew that I was signing up for a good thing. And I am entitled to sign up for this and I should really go through it, because it would benefit me in the long run and the short term.

(Yael, interview).

As well as helping to interpret information and advocate for them:

“When I had my meeting where it was my homelessness officer, my social workers and me, I just wish I had ... an independent advocate there because I was stressed. I was not in the best mentally healthy place and I have... problems with comprehensive skills, just like understanding how people are talking to me, understanding the writing in front of me and it all confuses me. So ... I just wish that someone was there to just talk, talk on my side more and ... explain things to me better so that I could have made the better decisions sooner. Because, you know, I was getting so close to that threshold where if I went into care, maybe like a couple weeks later, I wouldn’t have the benefits that I do now, ... I wouldn’t be getting my Christmas allowance or like my winter clothes allowance and things like that”

(Yael, interview).

In an interview, Amina explained how it took two or three years for her to be accommodated after first approaching the local authority when she was 17. However, once she approached Coram Voice she was placed into temporary accommodation within a matter of weeks.



“They are amazing people. Actually, they’ve saved me. [Coram Voice advocate] she was amazing. She helped me through the whole thing. She worked with me for ... two to three years. She only stopped working with this year because I finally got my secure accommodation because of her ... Before the council was not trying to help me at all. They were just like pushing me to the side, saying you’re not a priority. That’s all I keep hearing from them. And then she just explained. And then they gave me a place, temporary accommodation, one bedroom. When I worked with [Coram Voice advocate] straight away everything started everything quick

(Amina, interview).

The advocates were also valued as adults that children could express their frustrations who would genuinely listen to them and act on their behalf. Even when they no longer needed the support, children understood they could return for future support if needed in the future.

Unfortunately, we do not know how many children who present as homeless are offered an advocate. However, we do know that only a small proportion of children aged 16 and 17 in our research had been referred to Coram Voice’s advocacy service by children’s services. Of the case files we analysed of cases that had closed between April 2022 and December 2023: over two thirds (69%) self-referred to our advocacy service. Of those that were referred by others, the main referrers were ‘other professionals’ (32%), ‘social Services’ (29%) and ‘relatives’ (21%).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Those that didn’t self-refer and those referred by others are not equal due to non-response, and also mismatch in responses (i.e. a few cases where respondent has mentioned self-referral, he has also responded to the question on who referred by).

### The difference advocacy can make

We found many cases where children, despite their complex situations, were supported by an advocate in accessing accommodation and other support they are entitled to.

This included support to live in supported accommodation with young people their own age or closer to their support network, combating their social isolation instead of insecure and inappropriate hotels or sleeping rough. Additionally, advocates supported young people in navigate the social security and education systems. Critically, many of the young people described feeling happy and safe as a result of their advocate.

In Yael’s case (as highlighted above), as a result of her support, she had managed to complete her A-Levels during this time despite the local authority only providing support to her once she was hospitalised for her mental health due to family abuse. This also included her fighting to change her Section 17 to a Section 20 after she was advised by Coram Voice that she had not been provided with accurate information on her rights and entitlements by the local authority. This highlights the importance of advocacy in achieving the most suitable outcome for a young person.

“I feel like things are very OK right now. I’ve like I’ve finished my exams and things and like, that’s something that I like. If you told me last year, I wouldn’t even like imagined”

(Yael, interview).

These examples of positive outcomes following support from an advocate, however, do not negate the difficult experiences these children have had to get to the point where they needed support.

## What have others found?

Our findings relating to the importance of advocacy for children are supported by the Children’s Commissioner (2023) research who found that children who had accepted an advocate were the most likely to be accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.

Over a third of children who had accepted an advocate were accommodated under section 20 (38%), compared to only 12% for children who were not offered an advocate.



## What are the solutions?

### Access to advocacy

When asked how things could be improved, the children we interviewed suggested that all children in situations like theirs should be offered an advocate, as is already the case in a few local authorities.

This was echoed by our Housing Rights Ambassadors who said:

“The council should make sure there is a designated worker to help deal with housing issues and explain how things work. It would mean young people will be able to stay informed and know what’s going on.”

“An advocate can explain your rights and go through what you need to know. They don’t have obligations to the council. They just have to listen to the child.”

(Housing Rights Ambassadors workshop)

Interviews with practitioners also suggested the provision of advocates by local authorities for children could help prevent homelessness and ensure better outcomes for children.

“I think that every single child who approaches the local authority should have an advocate. If it was an agreement across the board universally, with every authority, you have to refer those children [to an advocate], I think that would really help. And I think that it would also help the authorities, because if they do have children, go back to them and say I was coerced to make this decision and if they had someone there to ensure that decision was supported and they understood that... they would have less issues down there down the line because they could say actually they did know what’s happening”

(Coram Voice Advocate interview).

### Recommendations

- The **Department for Education** should **publish the Revised National Standards and Guidance for Advocacy and Statutory Guidance on Effective Advocacy** for local authorities and include the duty to provide independent advocacy for homeless 16/17-year-olds.
- Local authority advocacy contracts should include a **proactive (opt-out) offer of advocacy for homeless 16/17-year-olds**. The offer should be made when the child first gets in contact for support as a homeless child, as well as during the Child in Need assessment.
- **Local authorities** should **record data on how many homeless children are offered and use advocacy services** and consider how additional support services like mentoring and befriending programmes as well as Independent Visitors can help this group of children.

### Access to legal support

Through charitable trust funding from the Oak Foundation, Coram Children’s Legal Centre is able to provide legal advice to homeless children and young people. These types of services need to be more widely available.

Although housing legal aid rates were raised in December 2024, legal aid for children and young people interacting with the care system remains at 1996 levels. This means there is a critical shortage of legal advice and representation compromising access to justice.

An advocate we spoke to suggested also introducing universal children’s solicitors and children’s legal aid service.

“There should be some kind of ... children’s streamlined service to legal aid and also I think there should be some kind of universal children’s solicitors that has like type every type of law but they universally work with children. They know how to speak to children. They know how to support them with the forms properly because they might be going through the forms as if it’s just an adult client and the children are like what is going on” (Coram Voice Advocate interview).

Our Housing Rights Ambassadors said:

“It’s too hard to get legal advice. Cost, long waiting lists.”

“‘legal literacy’ is an issue. There are lots of words to understand. How can you expect a 16-year-old to understand?”

(Housing Rights Ambassadors workshop)

### Recommendations

- The **Ministry of Justice** should **increase civil legal aid rates** for all areas of social welfare law to account for the amount they have lost in the decades of inflation since they were set in 1996 and ensure it is index-linked to future-proof their stability.
- **Government** and **local authorities** should support **community legal advice surgeries and national specialist advice** so that homeless children have meaningful access to legal advice and representation.

# 6 “Locking the door” - Local authorities are gatekeeping, ‘waiting out the clock’ and abdicating responsibility by passing the buck across boundaries.

## What is the issue?

We found evidence that homeless children are being denied their rights and entitlements due to local authority delays amounting to a blocking of access to homelessness support – an illegal practice called ‘**gatekeeping**’. Many 16- and 17-year-olds spoke to us about the slow response to their case, and the length of time it took for them to get the right help, particularly if they were close to their 18th birthday. Such delay, sometimes referred to as ‘**waiting out the clock**’, means the local authority can avoid supporting a child under section 20 and therefore not be responsible for supporting them once they turn 18 as a care leaver. Both gatekeeping and waiting out the clock were issues highlighted by many children in the 2014 *Door is Closed* report.

One of the causes of a delay in communication and action from local authorities in a number of instances was due to children **falling through the gap in responsibility between local authorities** with some abdicating responsibility of the young person to another local authority. Disagreements between local authorities caused delays, meanwhile children were left without support or suitable accommodation.

This was the case for a number of children in the 2014 *The Door is Closed* report where local authority children’s services often tried to pass responsibility to another local authority where the child had previously lived.

A decade after the publication of the 2014 report, the reality is that the door is still closed.



## What did we find?

The children we spoke to often felt like they were not a priority and often experienced substantial delays, feeling ‘fobbed off’ or ignored, or that the local authority was doing what they thought was the ‘cheapest option’.

I went to the council and they said I wasn’t a priority. However I had so many needs, was self-harming, had physical and mental ill health issues, and they still didn’t help. Council services could be improved to offer support to young people in my situation like found me somewhere safe and appropriate to live instead of just leaving me to it. They could have helped me with financial support as well.

(Amina, survey response).

Coram practitioners spoke about their experience of unlawful gatekeeping.

The main issues we see involved with children falling homeless is gatekeeping. What that stems from is hard to tell, but in our experience it will vary, from local authorities not doing their job properly, as in avoiding taking responsibility for the person, so a failure to properly assess them, for example. Or, a failure to actually provide them with services that they might be entitled to and advise them.

(Coram legal staff interview).

The children just feel that they’re being denied their rights... Because the social care sector, I think, want to keep it on the low. Children are not given the full picture about section 20 and section 17. There’s a clear agenda there. Keeping it restricted, keeping a big gate or not letting children who are entitled in”

(Coram Voice Advocate interview).

In addition to this, there is consistent evidence of ‘waiting out the clock’. As one of our Housing Rights Ambassadors said:

When you turn 18 the council responsibilities lessen. The council do it a lot. They wait until young people are older to avoid housing them.

(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

This was demonstrated in the case study below, Coram v Essex County Council 2024.



## CASE STUDY: Coram Children’s Legal Centre v Essex County Council 2024

Katie instructed Coram Children’s Legal Centre two months in advance of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. She had been in the care of Essex County Council on a full care order for a number of years and was highly vulnerable, with significant mental health difficulties. She has suffered significant and prolonged trauma. Katie was without appropriate transition planning from the Local Authority and had a poor relationship with her personal advisor. Her life was chaotic and she was moving from placement to placement and from one crisis to another.

In advance of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday the Local Authority held a looked after children’s review meeting. Katie was dysregulated on this day due to an incident that had occurred and was unable to attend. As a result of Katienot attending, a decision was taken that her placement would be closed on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and despite her high vulnerabilities Katie would be required to present to the Local Housing Authority (LHA) on her birthday for housing a homeless young person.

On her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday Katie, unable to cope with the request and her circumstances, was admitted to hospital. Upon her discharge she was moved into emergency housing through the LHA. However, due to Katie’s inability to cope in such accommodation and her subsequent actions, the LHA ended their emergency duty to Katie.

Through pre-action correspondence Katie was re-accommodated by Essex County Council as a Former

Relevant Child. Initially she was constantly moving from hotel to hotel which was not conducive to her mental health. As such, her alcohol consumption and level of self-harm increased significantly. Katie reported numerous safeguarding matters, including but not limited to various assaults; county lines and suspicion of attempts for her to be trafficked.

Coram Children’s Legal Centre bridged a significant gap in service provision, supporting the client around her mental health and benefit appointments for example.

Judicial Review proceedings were initiated as a result of a failure to appropriately assist Katie. This included a failure to:

- Source appropriate accommodation;
- Complete a pathway plan;
- Appoint personal advisors that could assist when required; and
- Complete a Care Act assessment.

Relevant assessments were then completed and a suitable plan and housing were put in place, resulting in a settlement in the proceedings. At the end of November 2024 Katie moved into supported LHA accommodation. She now has a completed Care Act assessment, two allocated personal advisors and an up-to-date pathway plan, a support worker, and is receiving PIP.



This is a clear case where the lack of early planning and assistance has resulted in a significant drain on public funds and significant detriment to Katie.

We found a number of instances in case files where **children were being pushed from one local authority to another**. In one instance following safeguarding referrals two local authorities received, both denied that they were responsible for the child who remained street homeless and at risk until legal action took place.

This unwillingness of local authorities to take responsibility for the children they have a legal duty to support and accommodate We found a number of instances in case files where children were being pushed from one local authority to **another**. In one instance following safeguarding referrals two local authorities received, both denied that they were responsible for the child and they remained street homeless and at risk until legal action took place.

This unwillingness of local authorities to take responsibility for the children they have a legal duty to support and accommodate appears to be linked to the ever-increasing cost of providing support and accommodation. This is part of a wider issue of funding allocation from the government to support and accommodate homeless children.

### What have others found?

A study of gatekeeping in statutory homelessness services which included qualitative interviews with 12 authorities in the Northeast found evidence that illegitimate gatekeeping had worsened due in large part to the twofold challenge of diminishing resources, alongside an increase in service users (Alden, 2015).

The Children’s Commissioner’s report (2023) report also highlighted that children reported feeling that there was a deliberate attempt to prolong the assessment period and avoid supporting a child under section 20 and therefore not be responsible for supporting them once they turn 18 as a care leaver.

In addition, Centrepoin (2024) data from their helpline showed that between July 2023 and September 2024, 564 young people experienced forms of local authority gatekeeping in England with an average of 4.4 gatekeeping cases per council with substantial variation: one Council linked to 90 cases. Worryingly they found 82 cases (14.6%) of gatekeeping where the applicant had children themselves or were pregnant at the time of contacting the helpline.

Centrepoin’s research suggests that councils are turning away young people because they don’t have the resources to fulfil their legal duties, with councils facing a £300 million shortfall.

Analysis by the LGA (LGA, 2024) suggest that children’s social care in England face a shortfall of £6.2 billion over the next two financial years.

### What are the solutions?

Timeliness of assessment and support is essential, as every day a young person waits, they miss out on essential support. The statutory guidance is clear that:

‘Where homelessness is threatened or actual, this should result in a prompt response based on individual circumstances. The maximum timeframe for a statutory assessment to conclude, such that it is possible for the local authority to reach a decision on next steps, should be no longer than 45 working days from the point of referral.’

(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2018)

Those we spoke to suggested that much of the gatekeeping was due to limited resources and accommodation available within the local authority. As research by Centrepoin and the LGA suggest, there is a clear need for significant increases in funding.

The Joint Statutory Guidance is clear that there is a duty to assess and provide immediate support to homeless children, irrespective of their habitual residence. Although the responsibility may be later transferred between Local Authorities, the Joint Statutory Guidance is clear that priority should be given to the child’s welfare, ahead of resolving disputes between different Local Authorities. By not following the guidance, local authorities are delaying urgent action and leaving children at risk of homelessness.

- Recommendations
- **Local authority** children’s services should have the **resources to complete assessments** within set timescales and offer support where and when children present ahead of resolving any disputes on local authority responsibility.
  - **Ofsted** should review joint working protocols as part of their inspections of local authority children’s services to ensure that they align with statutory duties including timeliness of assessments.
  - **Local authorities** should provide **support for children irrespective of their residence** status and ahead of resolving any disputes on local authority responsibility.



# 7 “A shelter in name only” Children are being housed in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation, their needs not taken into account and their voice listened to

## What is the issue?

Legislation<sup>17</sup> requires that accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds must be suitable. Statutory guidance<sup>18</sup> states:

‘In considering suitability, both children’s and housing services should bear in mind that 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless and estranged from their family will be particularly vulnerable and in need of support... Whether accommodation is provided by children’s or housing services, arrangements should be in place so that young people have the support that they will need to make a positive transition towards independence. This might include, for example, the provision of supported accommodation or supported lodgings where young people can remain beyond the age of 18 and develop the skills they will need to manage the transition to adulthood.’

(Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Education, 2018)

Even though legislation and statutory guidance is clear, children often experience **living in unsafe accommodation, including adult hostels, unregulated or under-supervised, either whilst waiting for the local authority to accommodate them, or when they were accommodated.**

This was repeatedly found in the 2014 *Door is Closed* report. It highlighted that since the Children Act (1989) has higher regulatory requirements about suitability of accommodation for looked after children, a decision to accommodate children under section 17 can often result in 16- and 17-year-olds them being placed in substandard accommodation such as hostels for vulnerable adults for example, where their safety is at risk. Children often duly feel unsafe and leave the accommodation, becoming homeless again and placing themselves at further risk. Local authority housing departments are then likely to declare that they made themselves intentionally homeless, which reduces their chances of getting rehoused. As a result, it was found that referrals for accommodation under section 17 can not only place children at immediate risk but also jeopardise their chances of finding long term settled accommodation.

In addition, 16- and 17-year-olds need care and support that goes beyond just housing.

17 In accordance with chapter 3 of Part 4 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 in every case the local authority must establish that the accommodation is suitable. Regulation 27 of schedule 6 to the Care Planning Regulations set out the standards that the authority must be satisfied with in respect of the accommodation and young person.

18 Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Department for Education, 2018.

## What did we find?

We found many instances where children were placed into unsuitable and unsafe accommodation, particularly when accessing emergency accommodation. Drugs and alcohol were often present, with poor living conditions such as dirty bedding and no hot water. Children spoke of feeling scared in these situations:

“I was in two emergency hostels.... One which was really horrible, actually. It was quite dangerous as well. There was all people running up and down. And this couple was trying to break down my door and I called the police, but the police didn’t turn up. So that was quite scary.”

(Dina, interview).

We found evidence of children being required to move repeatedly to different forms of accommodation due to lack of permanence in their accommodation. Two of the children we interviewed had been refused support from their local authorities aged 16 and 17. As a result they had nowhere safe to live. One (Yael) ended up going to hospital as somewhere safe to sleep.

“I think I went to hospital two or three times while I was sofa surfing, mainly because I had nowhere to sleep. So then I had another mental relapse. And then I had to go back to hospital because I wasn’t OK and it was safest for me to be in, like, the mental health ward”

(Yael, interview).

Another young person interviewed approached a charity who provided her with money for accommodation, but this resulted in her being in an unsafe and threatening environment:

“It was a nice accommodation, but the landlord was not nice. He was dodgy. And then he was very aggressive as well towards me, like he was threatening to kick me out, throwing me out the window like it was scary. Then after [he] just threw my stuff outside ... He took £750 of my deposit. He never gave it back to me”

(Amina, interview).

Amina went on to have a baby and the local authority subsequently housed her. Sadly, this was also unsuitable. Despite complaints to the local authority about this, Amina remained in this accommodation until a Coram advocate supported her into more suitable accommodation.

In workshops with our Housing Rights Ambassadors, one said:

I was housed into supported accommodation. Without a bed, or a washing machine. I wasn’t given the ability to get things I needed. I was often ignored. It made me feel neglected and distrust the people who were supposed to help me. It had a very bad impact on my mental health (Housing Rights Ambassador workshop).

Our practitioners shared their experiences of working with children given unsuitable accommodation. They cited reasons such as pregnancy, medical issues, safety or certain localities not being suitable. They referred to local authorities placing children into accommodation as a “tick box” exercise rather than actually providing suitable accommodation and support.

“I’ve had children who are pregnant and have to go up flights and flights.... No lift, no services. Or children who are in accommodation and gone into their room for the first day and found needles lying around. Potentially there might be people using drugs and people walking into their rooms.... Children who may have been victims of sex exploitation or abuse and then, being really fearful of being in a particular area and local authorities not understanding that, the fact that it’s 10-15 minutes away from where they might have been abused”

(Coram Legal Staff interview).

“[Young people] may have been victims of trafficking and exploitation which doesn’t make people feel safe within hostels, they may fear their traffickers has access to the hostel – the onus goes onto the child to disclose all their info about what experiences they have to avoid them being placed in unsuitable accommodation”

(Coram Legal Staff interview).

Consistently throughout our research we found evidence from 16- and 17-year-olds as well as advocates and legal staff that **children’s voices were not being heard**. Not only in terms of safe and suitable accommodation, but in supporting their needs from education through to mental health.

One advocate described children’s voices not being heard as ‘the biggest challenge in the social care sector’, explaining the importance of active listening, being empathic and non-judgemental.

“I’ll deal with the young people who are care leavers who are basically not having their wishes and feelings listened to or the rights and entitlements in the law upheld. It is literally the biggest challenge in the social care sector that children services are not listening to their needs... You know, being non-judgmental, be listening, you know, active listening is very important. And just being empathetic because they don’t seem to be...There’s a lot of young people that are very grieved and quite rightly so...They’ve got a lot of grievance from the social workers that they’re working with that they’re not being listened to, that they’re not empathetic, they’re not compassionate, they’re not caring, you know, all of those sort of words are used”.

(Coram Voice Advocate, interview).

The Children Act 1989 sets out that local authority children’s services have a duty to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children regarding the provision of services to be delivered under section 17. Under section 20, it also requires that the local authority must ascertain the child’s wishes and feelings regarding the provision of accommodation. Corporate parenting principles and Care planning guidance underlines the importance of listening and acting on looked after children and young people’s views in line UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our research has found that local authorities often **failed to listen to children** when telling them of the issues they faced. One advocate described children’s voices not being heard as “the biggest challenge in the social care sector”, explaining the importance of active listening, being empathic and non-judgemental.

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(Coram Voice Advocate interview).



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Part of the issue appeared to be a lack of compassion and empathy, and recognition from social services of the vulnerability of 16- and 17-year-olds who are still legally children. There was clear **evidence of the adultification**<sup>19</sup> of many 16- and 17-year-olds and consequently this impacted on not having their needs recognised. As one child said when asked what would have helped:

Remembering that we are still children at the end of the day and should not be treated as adults before we are even 18

(Umaru, survey response)

Our Housing Rights Ambassadors echoed this:

“It can feel like people are not caring. They need compassion... to comprehend what someone else is going through.”

“There is an adultification of young people. Remember 16- and 17-year-olds are children!”

(Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

What have others found?

There have been concerns about the quality of accommodation available for children both inside and outside the care system.

Our findings are similar to the Children’s Commissioner’s (2023) report which found that children were placed in accommodation that was highly inappropriate and posed a danger to the child’s physical and mental health. A Freedom of Information request by the Times in 2023 found that 50 children in care had died in unregulated accommodation in the 10 years to 2021 (Beal, 2023).

With regards to adultification, it was also an issue highlighted by Homeless Link (2024) who found that the experience of homelessness in itself can be seen as a process of adultification.

What are the solutions?

Recent policy developments have been intended to increase oversight of the accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds in care. Legislation was amended to make it unlawful to place these children in unregulated supported accommodation and Ofsted has developed a framework for registration and inspections. These regulations do not however encompass children housed outside the care system, although some may live in the same settings.

- Recommendations
- **Local authorities** should ensure they have **sufficient safe and suitable accommodation for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds** with these needs included in their Sufficiency strategies.
  - **Local authorities** should place all children aged 16 and 17 in **quality accommodation regardless of their care status**.
  - **The upcoming cross-Government’s** strategy to end homelessness should ensure **increased investment** in prevention, support and affordable, appropriate accommodation for homeless children aged 16- and 17-year-olds. Children should receive care and support, not just a roof over their heads

The homeless children Coram works with have a range of needs. They need care and support that goes beyond just housing. There is no need to set up alternative systems to support this group. If they become looked after 16- and 17-year-olds are entitled to support from social workers and personal advisers once they leave care. Existing care and pathway planning processes should ensure that their needs are assessed and support put in place to help them develop the skills they need for adulthood. Many local authorities will also have additional provision for children in care and care leavers, such as mentoring and befriending programmes, as well as Independent Visitors.

Our Housing Rights Ambassadors stress the need for practical help:

“A buddy or keyworker could help to signpost to community activities.” (Housing Rights Ambassador workshop)

19 Adultification refers to the process by which a young person is presumed to be older than actual age with one of the implications being perceived to be less vulnerable than their similarly age peers. It is often applied to the experiences of black children whereby racial prejudice can exclude children from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds from the protections usually afforded to children and young people. In such cases, services may overlook their needs and disregard their legal rights and safeguarding responsibilities.

- Recommendations
- Local authorities should use **care and pathway planning to ensure homeless children’s needs** are met and they are supported to develop independent living skills and thrive.
  - Local authorities should also consider how **additional support services** like mentoring and befriending programmes as well as Independent Visitors can help this group of children. Children should still be considered children with their wishes and needs listened to and acted on

It is important to recognise that all those under 18 years old are still children in law. Not only does our research show that these children may experience parental abuse, but experiencing homelessness can itself put them at risk from harm. Those who present as homeless at 16 and 17 are not just in need of housing, they need the support that most parents provide to help their children thrive and learn to manage independently.

- Recommendations
- Local authorities should offer relevant staff **youth-led, trauma-informed training**, to increase understanding of children’s lived experience including focus on adultification and the risk of extra familial harm.
  - **Local authorities** should **promote a culture where listening to children’s wishes and feelings** are at the heart of social care decision making. They should make sure professionals have the **skills, confidence and time** in working with homeless children to listen to children’s wishes and feelings, record and act on what they say. Where this is not possible, this should be explained to the child.





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# In Conclusion: Time for Change

Ten years on from *The Door is Closed* (2014), this report highlights that very little meaningful change has taken place.

16- and 17-year-olds who are children in law are continuing to experience homelessness, after being denied looked after status and receiving no support or too little support from local authorities. Many presenting to their local authority as homeless are refused accommodation whilst being assessed, despite leaving unsafe situations at home.

Once children present themselves to local authorities to obtain support and accommodation, evidence from this report highlights a number of issues which hindered children’s ability to obtain support and ultimately safe and secure accommodation they are legally entitled to.

Key issues included children not being heard by the local authority, failure to provide information and support, delays and gatekeeping of local authorities in providing support and accommodation, abdication of responsibility across local authorities.

A standout issue is that children spoke of the lack of information they were given by the local authority in explaining their legal rights and entitlements. Critically, information on the options available to children was often manipulated to present section 20 as less attractive to children.

The significance of advocacy in helping support children and helping them access their rights and entitlements was highlighted by children themselves. They played a vital role in empowering children with the knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements and holding local authorities accountable. Access to advocacy is therefore the key to opening the locked door, even without any other changes, whilst local authorities and government address the need to provide safe and suitable accommodation children are entitled to.

Earlier and more comprehensive family support to reduce the number of 16- and 17-year-olds becoming homeless in the next decade is critical. Government must guarantee that children’s rights and entitlements to accommodation are met without delay, ensuring that the domestic abuse, family breakdown and trauma do not blight their lives.

**Now is the time for change so that we ensure that a decade from now, this same report does not need to be written.**



“FEELING SAFE AND  
FEELING HAPPY – THAT’S  
NOT TOO MUCH FOR ANY  
CHILD TO ASK FOR...”

## Time for change

Lucy (left) was 15 years old when she turned to Coram for support. Having left her family home, she felt she had nowhere to go. Kelly Everett, Senior Solicitor at CCLC, represented Lucy in challenging her local authority to provide secure accommodation and to safeguard her welfare and mental health.


“I had a lot of childhood trauma. I ended up in a very uncomfortable place with children’s social care and Coram helped me with all of my issues and to get the outcome that I needed. Kelly helped me...and gave me the confidence that I needed to stand my ground. She gave me reassurance that what I was asking for wasn’t unreasonable. Feeling safe and feeling happy – that’s not too much for any child to ask for...”







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