

The Door is *Still* Closed

By The Coram Institute for Children



In 2014, the study ‘The Door is Closed’, examined the advocacy case work of Coram Voice. They found that children were being allowed to become or remain homeless because local authorities were failing to give them the support they are legally entitled to.

Published in 2024, ‘The Door is *Still* Closed’, found that little progress has been made in the past decade. Examination of legal rulings, case work and published reports shows that all too many homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are still being left unassessed, unsafe and denied the support and security that vulnerable children 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 care housed under section 20 of the same Act. This 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.



The report found seven barriers to children receiving the support they are entitled to:

- 1 Wrong legislation:** A large number of 16- and 17-year-olds who become homeless are not assessed or are housed under the wrong legislation (the Housing Act 1996) with no practical or financial support from children’s social care services until the age of 25.
- 2 Gatekeeping:** Local authorities are continuing to gatekeep and ‘wait out the clock’ until children turn 18, at which point the local authority has less responsibility for them if not deemed a care leaver.
- 3 Unsafe accommodation:** Vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds are being housed in unsuitable and unsafe accommodation including adult hostels, unregulated or under-supervised provision. Children reported feeling scared, with one child going to a hospital to find somewhere safe to sleep. There was also clear evidence of adultification and a lack of recognition of the vulnerability of 16- and 17-year-olds.
- 4 Inaccurate information:** Many homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are not being given accurate information and are forced to make uninformed decisions that will have a huge impact on their lives. Children said they felt manipulated and misled.
- 5 Inadequate advocacy:** Children are navigating the complexities of the

different support options without consistent advice and advocacy (and in some cases legal advice) leaving children to make decisions which they later regretted. Advocate support was found to play a significant role in positive outcomes for homeless children.

- 6 Incomplete data:** National data on homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is incomplete, making it difficult to understand how well children’s needs are being met and hold services to account in fulfilling their obligations in law.
- 7 No early help:** Vital early support to families that could help prevent many children from becoming homeless in the first place is missing. Many 16- and 17-year-olds who contributed to the report faced harrowing family situations of physical and emotional abuse, alcohol and substance misuse, financial difficulties and mental health issues resulting in family breakdown and homelessness.

In response to the findings, Coram makes a number of recommendations to ensure homeless 16- and 17-year-olds can access the care and support that they are entitled to. Fundamental to this is that homeless 16- and 17-year-olds have access to an independent advocate in line with the 1989 Children Act. Coram has calculated that it would **cost just £5m per annum to ensure that no 16- or 17-year-old child facing homelessness stands alone without an advocate.**

The main recommendations are:

- The right legislation:** Local authorities should ensure that the default is to accommodate homeless children under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 in all but exceptional cases.
- No gatekeeping:** Local authority children’s services should have the resources to complete assessments within set timescales and offer support where and when children present as homeless.
- Safe accommodation:** Local authorities should ensure they have sufficient safe and suitable accommodation and support for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds as well as listen to the voice of the child.
- Access to accurate information:** The 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.

- Access to advocacy:** Local authority advocacy contracts should include a proactive (opt-out) offer of advocacy for homeless 16/17-year-olds.
- Improve data:** The government should collect and publish local authority level data on the number of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- Early support:** Increased investment in early help and prevention including evidence-based parenting, drug and alcohol misuse, and family conflict programmes to prevent family breakdown and homelessness in 16- and 17-year-olds.

*Southwark Judgement (2017) court ruling that denial of assessments by local authorities is unlawful (Essex 2019): www.childlawadvice.org.uk/information-pages/homelessness/

Read the full report here: <https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/the-door-is-still-closed/>

One young person interviewed for the report said:

“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 comprehension skills, like understanding how people are talking to me, understanding the writing in front of me, 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.”

Dr Carol Homden, CEO of Coram, said:

“Vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds who become homeless are almost always fleeing abuse and family breakdown. They not only need a roof over their head but the care and support that is their right under the Children Act 1989. It is disappointing to see that a decade on from Coram Voice’s study, we are still not acting. Coram calls for investment of £5m to resource local authorities to ensure every child in this situation has an independent advocate to address the barriers and ensure they get access to the support to which they are entitled. Now is the time to change so that a decade from now this same report does not need to be written again.”

