

Joint Protocol Children's Services & Housing

Homelessness 16-17 year old Young People in Herefordshire

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1. Introduction

1.1 Adopting a partnership approach, Herefordshire Council considers that young people are better off living at home, or within their family network, if it is safe for them to do so. Homelessness at a young age should be avoided wherever possible and our starting point is, therefore, always prevention and early intervention.

1.2 This joint protocol concerns young people aged 16 and 17 where homelessness or housing appears to be an ongoing issue, identifying what respective services and agencies will do to prevent homelessness, assess need and support young people. Prevention work should be undertaken prior to, and alongside, statutory duties. It will continue whether the young person remains at home or in the family network or if they have left the family or parental home, whether or not on a temporary basis. Over time it may still be possible to resolve conflict and or reunite young people with their families, where it is safe to do so.

1.3 The protocol recognises solution focussed and restorative approaches so that when a young person may become homeless, or threatened with homelessness, this will be dealt with on an individual basis and in a way that supports relationships at a local level.

1.4 By adopting a collaborative approach, it will result in a better, more consistent way of working that delivers improved outcomes for young people, including resolving difficulties at home and the prevention of homelessness in the first place.

1.5 This Protocol will be adopted as a Working Document and applies to all young people living in Herefordshire.

2. Key Principles

2.1 The following principles support this protocol:

- i) It is the responsibility of all agencies to help protect our young people from becoming homeless and protect them from harm.
- ii) The parents of, or those with parental responsibility for, 16 and 17 year olds are responsible for their children's welfare. A key commitment is to keep families together in their homes wherever possible because this is best for the young person in most instances.
- iii) There is excellent preventative work taking place at a local level which sits outside of the Protocol. This work supports the principle outlined above; namely that, for most young people, staying in their family home is usually the best outcome for them.
- iv) The experience of homelessness is damaging to young people and to their life chances: the statutory joint guidance (April 2018) states that "it is in the best interests of most Young People aged 16 or 17 to live in the family home, or, where this is not safe or appropriate, with responsible adults in their wider family and friend's network".
- v) Young people should be given every opportunity to have a realistic understanding of the options available to them, and to make informed choices about their future. Where considered appropriate

and required, independent advocacy may be sought which could include organisations such as Citizens' Advice or Shelter. Children's Services advocacy will aim to provide an advocate within 24/48 hours.

vi) Sometimes and despite everyone's best efforts, the pathway agreed with the young person breaks down. There is an absolute commitment to ensure that in such cases the pathway is rebuilt, the young person can go back to the appropriate stage, re-engage and be reassessed by Children's Service and Housing as appropriate.

3. Statutory Context

3.1 Housing Act 1996 (Part 7 Amended) and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017

3.1.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 amended Part 7 of Housing Act 1996 and introduced new categories of priority need groups including:

All 16 and 17-year-old homeless applicants have a priority need for accommodation except those who are:

- i) a relevant child or,
- ii) a child in need who is owed a duty under s20 of the Children Act 1989

3.1.2 The Homelessness Act also brought about the requirement for all housing authorities to formulate a homelessness strategy which would encourage partnership working in the prevention of homelessness.

3.1.3 The framework for every local authority when assessing applications for homeless assistance is contained within the Housing Act 1996, which was amended by the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2017. Essentially, every local authority has a duty to investigate claims of homelessness, when they are satisfied that an applicant is eligible (this revolves around immigration status) and is homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. This triggers a statutory duty to carry out an assessment of the individual's needs and circumstances (that have led to them become homeless) and also put together a plan – known as a Personal Housing Plan – to help both the individual and the Authority work together on actions that prevent or relieve the threat of homelessness. These are the Prevention and Relief Duties of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

3.1.4 A Public Sector Duty was also brought in on 1st October 2018 for specified public bodies to refer individuals who they have assessed "may" be at risk of homelessness within 56 days to a Housing Solutions Team. This duty includes a duty on Children's Services specifically and referrals can be made using the standardised email address that all Local Authorities across England have adopted for public sector duty referrals – dutytorefer@herefordshire.gov.uk or dutysocialworkermash@herefordshire.gov.uk

3.1.5 Assessments will focus upon prevention work as the key to successful interventions; decisions on the homelessness application are set aside until the end of the process and offers of accommodation that are deemed suitable can bring the duties to an end. An applicant will generally only receive a decision on their case once prevention and relief work has been exhausted and will focus on whether an individual household is:

- Eligible for assistance
- Homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days

- Has an assessed priority need
- Has become homeless intentionally
- Has a local connection

3.1.6 The promotion of both operational and strategic joint working between Housing and Children's Services is a crucial element to achieve effective provision of support and a range of suitable accommodation options for young people.

3.2 Definition of homelessness.

3.2.1 Sections 175-177 of the Housing Act 1996 cover the definition of homelessness and the meaning of accommodation:

A person is homeless if he or she has no accommodation which he or she can legally occupy by virtue of:

- i) an interest in (eg as an owner, lessee or tenant) or by virtue of a court order;
- ii) an express or implied licence to occupy (eg as a lodger or when living with a relative), or
- iii) any enactment or rule of law giving him or her the right to remain in occupation or restricting the right of another person to recover possession.

3.2.2 This protocol focuses on 16 and 17-year olds who are being asked to leave their accommodation for any reason. This may include breakdown at home, eviction from supported housing or because they are no longer able to stay with other family members or friends.

3.2.3 Homelessness is defined in law as being where an individual lacks accommodation. An individual is defined as being homeless, or threatened with homelessness within 56 days, if there is no accommodation that they can access and have a legal right to occupy, or if they cannot secure entry to accommodation that they have a legal right to occupy. Consideration should also be given to whether it is reasonable to expect an individual to occupy such accommodation, which would take due consideration of the cost of it, its condition and any possible risks that may be posed to the individual if they were to remain in occupation.

3.2.4 Once an individual is considered homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days, either a Relief (once they are homeless) or a Prevention (at risk of homelessness) Duty are triggered and themselves run for a period not exceeding 56 days, during which the Housing Solutions role is to do everything possible to either prevent them becoming homeless or relieve it if has already happened.

3.2.5 Housing and Children's Services will undertake a joint same day assessment to determine whether the young person may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. At the end of a Joint assessment, Children's Service and Housing should have reached a decision on whether the young person is a "child in need" and requires accommodation as a result of one of the scenarios set out in s20(a) to (c) or s20(3). A child may be assessed as being in need of accommodation whilst not needing to become looked after.

3.2.6 If the young person, having been properly informed (through discussion with Children's Services and Housing Solutions workers, the provision of appropriate written information and access to advocacy) of the outcome of the assessment does not wish to become looked after, Housing Solutions have a duty to provide interim accommodation for a period of 56 days until a decision on their application for homelessness assistance is made.

3.3 Section 191 of the Housing Act - Intentionally homeless

(1) A person becomes homeless intentionally if he deliberately does or fails to do anything in consequence of which he ceases to occupy accommodation which is available for his occupation and which it would have been reasonable for him to continue to occupy.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) an act or omission in good faith on the part of a person who was unaware of any relevant fact shall not be treated as deliberate.

(3) A person shall be treated as becoming homeless intentionally if-

(a) he enters into an arrangement under which he is required to cease to occupy accommodation which it would have been reasonable for him to continue to occupy, and

(b) the purpose of the arrangement is to enable him to become entitled to assistance under this Part, and there is no other good reason why he is homeless.

3.3.1 It would be unusual for any housing authority to consider that a 16 or 17 year old had made themselves intentionally homeless from their parent's home. However, there will be times that an intentional decision has to be considered:

i) Breaching a licence/tenancy agreement (doesn't pay rent; anti-social behaviour).

ii) Voluntarily leaves accommodation with the full understanding of the consequences of his or her actions.

iii) Behaves in an unreasonable or anti-social way that they reasonably know would lead to them being asked to leave their accommodation (warned about behaviour in the family home but continues regardless)

3.3.2 It is the young person who must deliberately have done, or failed to do, something which resulted in their homelessness or threatened homelessness.

3.3.3 If a 16/17-year-old is considered to be homeless intentionally, Housing Solutions is only under a duty to provide interim accommodation for a 'reasonable' period of time (this will vary from individual to individual depending on their circumstances but be no more than 28 days). Housing Solutions will work closely with Children's Services to take account of all information in the making of such decision and ensure that they are informed immediately if they reach such a decision whereupon it will be for Children's Service to again revisit the offer of support under s20.

3.3.4 If a professional identifies that a young person may have difficulties relating to their tenancy which may lead to eviction, then they can contact the Housing Solutions Team to undertake joint preventative work.

3.4 Section 10 of the Children Act 2004 'Early Help'

3.4.1 Providing Early Help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later. Early Help means providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child's life, from the foundation years through to the teenage years.

3.4.2 Effective Early Help relies upon local agencies working together to:

- Identify children and families who would benefit from early help;
- Undertake an assessment of the need for early help; and
- Provide targeted Early Help services to address the assessed needs of a child and their family which focuses on activity to significantly improve the outcomes for the child. Local authorities, under section 10 of the Children Act 2004, have a responsibility to promote inter-agency cooperation to improve the welfare of children.

3.4.3 Children and families may need support from a wide range of local agencies. Where a child and family would benefit from coordinated support from more than one agency (e.g. education, health, housing, police) there should be an Early Help Assessment (EHA) completed by a lead professional. The assessment should identify what help the child and family require to prevent needs escalating to a point where intervention would be needed via a statutory assessment under the Children Act 1989.

3.4.4 The assessment should be undertaken by a lead professional who should provide support to the child and family, act as an advocate on their behalf and coordinate the delivery of support services.

3.5 Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 'Child in Need'

3.5.1 A child in need is defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is:

- a) unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for him of services by a local authority under this Part;
- b) his health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision for him of such services; or
- c) he is disabled,

3.6 Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 'Child Protection'

3.6.1 Reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

3.7 Section 20 of the Children's Act 1989 'Provision of accommodation for children'

- (1) Every local authority shall provide accommodation for any child in need within their area who appears to them to require accommodation as a result of:
 - a) there being no person who has parental responsibility for him;
 - b) his being lost or having been abandoned; or
 - c) the person who has been caring for him being prevented (whether or not permanently, and for whatever reason) from providing him with suitable accommodation or care.
- (2) Every local authority shall provide accommodation for any child in need within their area who has reached the age of sixteen and whose welfare the authority consider is likely to be seriously prejudiced if they do not provide him with accommodation.

(3) A local authority may provide accommodation for any child within their area (even though a person who has parental responsibility for him is able to provide him with accommodation) if they consider that to do so would safeguard or promote the child's welfare.

(4) Before providing accommodation under this section, a local authority shall, so far as is reasonably practicable and consistent with the child's welfare -

- a) ascertain the child's wishes and feelings regarding the provision of accommodation; and
- b) give due consideration (having regard to his age and understanding) to such wishes and feelings of the child as they have been able to ascertain.

(5) A local authority may not provide accommodation under this section for any child if any person who -

- a) has parental responsibility for him; and
- b) is willing and able to -
 - i) provide accommodation for him; or
 - ii) arrange for accommodation to be provided for him,
 - iii) objects

3.7.1 If a young person is accommodated under section 20 they become a 'looked after child' and they are afforded further protection and rights with a range of support and services, including a named social worker and a care plan. The allocation of a social worker and a plan are still requirements where a child remains child in need. The plan must address accommodation and support with named contacts, timescales for action and review dates. Young people who are 'looked after' beyond the age of 16 will also be entitled to support as they leave care. The type of support and legal entitlements depends on how long they have been looked after. However, if they have been looked after for 13 weeks or more at any point after their 14th birthday, are still looked after on or after their 16th birthday, they may qualify for leaving care support up to the age of 25, however this is discretionary.

3.7.2 It must be noted that, whilst a local authority can offer services and support to a young person under section 17 of the Act, if a section 20 duty is owing, they cannot substitute the section 20 duty with section 17 powers.

3.7.3 The seven tests are:

- Are they a child?
- Are they a child "in need"

In the case of a 16/17 year old and even if a parent objects, if the young person wishes to be a Child Looked After, they can be if they are deemed competent to make that decision.

- Are they within the local authority's area?
- Does he/she appear to the local authority to require accommodation?
- Is that need the result of section 20(1)(a)-(c), or 20(3) or 20(4) – see section 20 above?
- What are the child's wishes and feelings regarding the provision of accommodation for him/her?
- What consideration (having regard to his/her age and understanding) is duly to be given to those wishes and feelings?

3.7.4 The homelessness legislation takes precedence in the event that a young person aged 16 or 17 years old does not give informed consent for Children's Services to accommodate under s20 but they can, alternatively, be supported by Children's Services under s17.

4. Early Intervention

4.1 At the point any professional becomes aware that there may be an issue relating to a risk of family breakdown and potential homelessness of a 16/17-year-old, there will be consideration of a MASH referral being made.

4.2 Additionally, in line with the duty to refer obligations set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, notification should be made to Housing Solutions.

4.3 This will necessitate a thorough multi-agency assessment which will determine what the steps are. This will include:

- Undertaking a home visit and offering mediation to the young person and their parent/person with parental responsibility.
- Considering evidence of homelessness, (reminding all that if there are no safeguarding issues and a parent will provide accommodation they are NOT homeless).
- Contacting family members and connected persons so they can remain.
- Managing expectations and informing young people, parents, carers and professionals of the realities of leaving the family home at a young age and what the likely housing options will be.
- Explaining consequences for any warnings, breaches of accommodation, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts or Notice to Quit/Eviction.

4.4 The work completed should include relationship work between the young person and their parent(s) or carers and clear identification of what the issues are that may lead to homelessness and require focus and intervention.

5. Joint Assessment

5.1 Legislation, government guidance and case law are clear what should happen when a young person is homeless or threatened with homelessness. This is a joint protocol and as such reminds us as professionals that cohesive working will promote the health and wellbeing of young people. The young person's wishes and feelings must always be taken into consideration.

5.2 Procedure

5.2.1 The following procedure aims to provide a framework for both Children's Services and Housing Solutions to follow when dealing with young people aged 16/17 who may be either homeless, or at risk of being made homeless (this includes young people facing eviction from supported housing):

5.3 Risk of Homelessness Highlighted

5.3.1 Initial enquiries are made by the service first contacted about the risk or actuality of homelessness. Where the first contact regarding homelessness is made to Housing Solutions, and no other services are involved, Housing Solutions will carry out first enquiries whilst referring to the MASH, gaining and sharing information between professionals to agree next steps.

5.3.2 When the first contact regarding homelessness is with Children's Service it will be via MASH unless the young person is already open to the service. In this event, the allocated team should be responsible to undertake these enquiries.

The enquiries include speaking with parents and those holding parental responsibility (PR), and anyone else deemed relevant in order to determine a genuine risk or actuality of homelessness. It is important to identify what has happened that has led to the breakdown in relationships and remind the family that the young person is still a child and they have parental responsibility for them. Parents and extended families should be advised that it is not acceptable to make their child homeless.

If the young person is said by everyone with parental responsibility that they cannot return home, work should be completed to identify an alternative suitable address they can reside at. It is expected that the young person should remain within the family unit unless there is a risk of doing so.

Housing Solutions and Children's Services will share information and consult with each other.

Whilst it is often the case that a young person does not wish to return home, unless it is identified that there are risks inherent in returning, it will be considered reasonable to do so, either with or without additional family support to maintain the relationships at home. In any event information will always be shared between the two Services.

5.3.3 The MASH or the allocated team will check their records and seek consent to share information as required. In some cases, consent can be dispensed with where the matter is related to safeguarding others.

5.3.4 If no accommodation options are available for any young person with family and friends, Children's Services will take the lead responsibility for identifying emergency accommodation for the young person. If accommodated for more than 24 hours in Local Authority Accommodation, the Young Person becomes a Looked After Child. Head of Service will need to approve the young person becoming a Looked After Child (LAC) and processes triggered. A Young Person will remain LAC unless someone with PR agrees for the young person to return home or an assessment concludes they are not a "child in need".

The joint assessment will be required same day/within 24 hours to decide the next steps for appropriately accommodating the young person. This will involve a Housing Caseworker from Housing Solutions and a Social Worker from Children's Service.

Timescale for the Child and Family Assessment to be completed within 45 days or earlier. The assessment should be child-centred and holistic in approach, addressing the young person's wider needs, as well as that for accommodation. The joint assessment under this protocol, is not limited to one meeting with Children's Services and Housing, it is an on-going process and Housing and Children's Services should continue to liaise with one another throughout the process.

5.3.5 Where an existing assessment (e.g. recent child and family assessment) comprehensively addresses social and housing needs that may be used, unless the Young Person presents with a change in circumstance, then a new assessment should be completed. However, where a new joint holistic assessment is required, the following should be included:

- A brief social history of the individual and their family
- The reasons that homelessness has become a possibility
- What has been done to avoid homelessness and what was the outcome?
- What accommodation options have been considered and discounted? Why?
- The views of the young person, their parents, family and carers (as appropriate)
- Any specific areas of vulnerability: eg care status, health, contextual safeguarding
- What are the risks of accommodating the young person?
- What are the risks of not providing accommodation?
- What support can be made available to an accommodation provider?

5.3.6 Sustainable and appropriate housing solutions will be considered, that meet the needs of the young person who is, legally, still a child. There will continue to be a joint approach between Children's Services and Housing Solutions following the assessment with the Agencies working together to ensure the most suitable option is delivered to the young person on behalf of Herefordshire Council. Neither Service should end involvement without consulting the other and reaching agreement about next steps.

5.3.7 Either agency may identify the place for the young person; depending on their individual circumstances and whether the lead agency is the Children's Service or Housing Solutions. The best means of support for the child at this time, remains their parents and family. The social worker may, if required, accompany the young person to appointments and would take the lead in sorting out benefits and payments. If the young person is not s20 and leading duties fall under the Homelessness Legislation, not the Children's Act duties, then accommodation would be sourced via the Housing Solutions Team but working together to look at how best the young person may sustain whatever is sourced.

5.3.8 In some cases, Children's Service may agree to act as Guarantor (for a privately rented property) for a young person aged 16-17, This is an exceptional circumstance and will only be considered when all other appropriate options have been exhausted (eg provision of Rent in Advance or a deposit through Housing Solutions). Head of Service approval will be required.

The Young Person's Choices:

At the initial joint Children's Services and Housing assessment meeting, there should be a transparent discussion with the young person as to their options on managing their case moving forward, either under Part 7 Housing Act 1996, s17 Children Act 1989 or s20 Children Act 1989.

These options should be presented to them in an unbiased way, as each option has advantages and disadvantages for the young person. The option must be the right one for that specific young person based on their wants, needs and the specific circumstances of their current circumstances. The Young Homelessness leaflet should be provided to the young person to help them to understand the options and allow them to make an informed decision on what is best for them.

If a Young Person wishes to be considered for s17 or s20, Children's Services will lead on the assessment. Housing will continue to assist and advise. Children's Services will complete their child and family assessment and decide whether or not the young person has met threshold to be considered as "a child in need". If they do, the young person will be accommodated under either s20 or s17 depending on the young person's specific circumstances. Herefordshire Council cannot refuse to offer s20 support if the threshold for s.17 is met and the young person specifically wishes s20 support. The decision for a child to become looked after may be made in principle to allow for the provision of emergency accommodation but can subsequently be reviewed after 24 hours in order to reach the best decision for the child.

Decisions regarding s20 must be oversighted by Head of Service, a referral to Edge of Care Reunification Home (ECHO) and an advocate from Hear Me advocacy services is to be requested.

If the Young Person wishes to be supported under Part 7, Housing will take the lead and Children's Services will complete their assessment based on information gathered. Children's Services will give consideration to what support services are needed to meet their non-housing related needs.

Housing Solutions have a duty to provide interim accommodation for a period of 56 days until a decision on their application for homelessness assistance is made.

A flexible approach will be needed between the two services to ensure that sustainable and suitable accommodation is sourced for the young person and it is recognised that this can take time. Where a young person is initially accommodated by Children's Services but wishes to be supported under the Housing Act 1996, the immediate removal of Children's Services support would likely render them homeless. Support may therefore need to continue from Children's Services until appropriate accommodation is sourced by Housing colleagues as temporary accommodation is deemed inappropriate for young people.

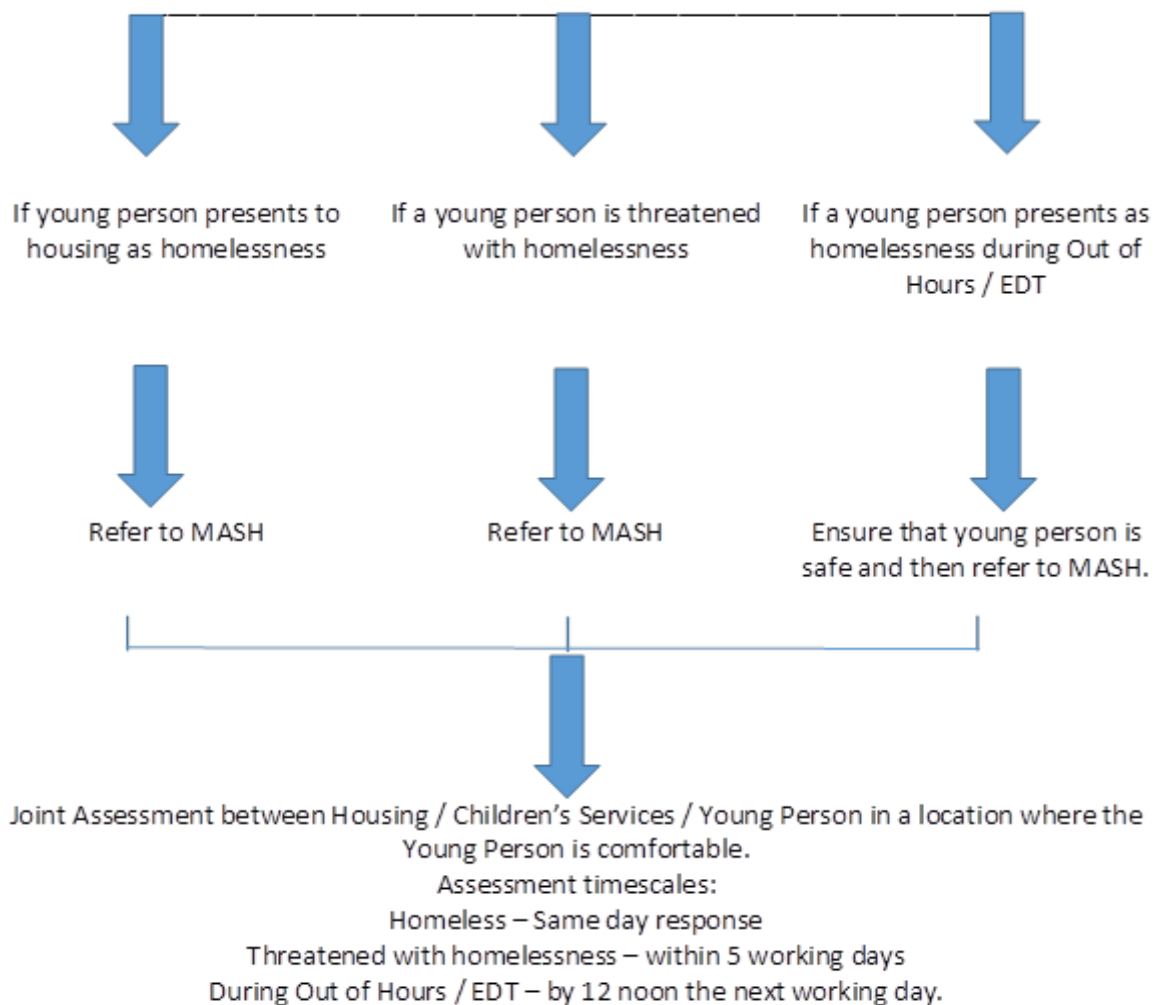
Conversely, Housing Solutions may make an adverse decision on a young person's homeless application and no duty may therefore be owed. This may be as a result of the young person losing their accommodation due to their own behaviour and being deemed to be intentionally homeless. In such circumstances, it would automatically trigger Children's Services to revisit the decision on their role and duties and provide the young person with support.

6. Flowchart

Principles

- Every 16/17 year old at risk of homelessness will be treated as a Child in Need (CiN).
- There will be no wrong door. A young person can approach any professional to report that they are at risk of homelessness.
- If a young person presents as homeless or is at risk of homelessness, an automatic check will take place to see if they are known to children's social care but the protocol will still be followed

Young person presents as homeless or at risk of homelessness



Please refer to the following practice guidance for Children's Services and Housing

7. Appendix



Duty to Refer.docx



Homelessness
feedback form.docx



Children's Guide.pub



Protocol quick
guide.docx