

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS AND LEISURE COMMITTEE MEETING

16 NOVEMBER 2016

QUESTION NO. 1 in accordance with Standing Order No.10

Councillor McGonigle to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Homelessness of children and teenagers

According to the Children's Society last year in the south east 1,890 children aged 16 or 17 presented as homeless. These teenagers are often at serious risk of harm and can be escaping homes where they face problems such as abuse, violence or severe overcrowding. Could the lead Cllr let us know how Reading supports its homeless young people, what follow up support they can expect and if the Council has adopted an explicit policy that no child under 18 can be made intentionally homeless

Can the Lead Councillor update me on the situation?

REPLY by the Chair of the Housing, Neighbourhoods & Leisure Committee (Councillor James):

I invite Councillor Davies, the Lead Councillor for Housing to make the response on my behalf.

REPLY by the Lead Councillor for Housing (Councillor Davies):

It is a high priority for the Council's that we prevent homelessness and support people who become homeless to help them get into secure long-term accommodation. This priority applies just as much to people under 18. We recognise that any incident of homelessness for young people can be extremely detrimental to a young person's wellbeing and ongoing development and it is particularly important that all young people are afforded support and the opportunity to ensure that future life prospects are not damaged.

Despite different Council departments having different statutory responsibilities we operate with a joined up approach - working together across services to meet the needs of vulnerable young people. In Reading this responsibility is laid out within internal joint working procedures across Housing and Children's Services that ensure a coordinated response to 16 and 17 year old young people who present as homeless and in need of accommodation and accommodation support services.

Our primary objective is to promote and safeguard the well-being of the young person and to prevent homelessness or, if a return home is not possible, the objective is to find the most suitable accommodation for the young person and to support them to sustain this. The protocol also seeks to ensure that young people are able to make informed decisions by giving them information about their entitlements and offering them an independent advocate.

Where a homeless (or at risk of homelessness) 16 or 17 year old seeks help from the local authority, the two service areas carry out a joint assessment to try to resolve the needs of the young person and to prevent any homelessness from occurring.

Where a young person is assessed as homeless and is unable to return home, Children's Social Care will be the lead agency and the primary legislation will be the Children Act 1989 (Section 20). If a young person is accommodated under section 20 they become a 'looked after child', and with this they are afforded further protection and rights with a range of support and services, including a named social worker and a care plan. Young people who are 'looked after' will also then qualify for leaving care support and services up to the age of 21 or in some cases, up to the age of 25. This support includes financial assistance in accessing higher education and entitlement to higher levels of Housing benefit.

It is essential that the young person is fully consulted about and understands the implications of being accommodated by Children's Social Care and becoming looked after. Professionals conducting the assessment must provide realistic and full information about the support that the young person can expect as a looked after child and, subsequently as a care leaver. Children's Social Care and Homelessness Services should also ensure that the young person is informed of their entitlements and receives accurate information about what assistance may be available to them, including from housing services under Part 7 of the 1996 Act, if they choose not become looked after, and how any entitlement for assistance will be determined. In particular, the possible risk of becoming homeless intentionally in the future, and the implications of this for further assistance with accommodation, should be made clear to the young person.

Those cases where children's services determine there is no section 20 responsibility (where the young person is refusing to become 'looked after'), the housing department will investigate their situation under the Housing Act Part VII, offering interim accommodation while this is carried out if the young person has nowhere to stay.

In order to ensure that all homeless young people in Reading (regardless of whether they refuse to become looked after or not) are offered the same immediate resolution to their homeless situation all accommodation options are sought through the Children's Services commissioning teams. This process has been designed to ensure that all homeless young people are able to benefit from the support that children's services are able to access, even if they are not afforded the full benefit of becoming looked after. Young people may be offered a foster placement, supported living or specialist supported hostel accommodation commissioned by the Local Authority. The Local Authority has committed not to place young people on their own in Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

For clarity, where any person applies for assistance under the Housing Act Part VII it is a legal duty of every housing authority to carry out full and thorough investigations into the circumstances under which a household becomes homeless; this applies equally to young people. The outcome of this investigation may be a decision that the household is found to have made themselves homeless intentionally, the Council has not adopted an explicit policy that young person cannot be found to be intentionally homeless. Having said this it is worth noting that due to joint working by children's services and housing - delivering effective interventions, prevention options and the clear offer of section 20 support - the Council has not made an intentionally homeless decision for a 16/17 year old since 2013.