



LOCAL AUTHORITY GATEKEEPING: BRIEFING

Centrepoint's 2022/23 Youth Homelessness Databank has found that more than a third of the young people who approached their local authority in England in 2022/23 were not assessed for eligibility. Moreover, since the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act, there has been a decrease in the proportion of young people receiving assessments, going from 79 per cent in 2018/19 to 65 per cent in 2022/2023.

While some of these discrepancies may be attributable to young people not meeting the threshold for an assessment and subsequent support, data collected by Centrepoint suggests that many local authorities are engaging in practices that block access to homelessness support – often called gatekeeping. In this briefing, gatekeeping is defined as the denial of a homelessness assessment and/or support by local authorities to people who have a right to them. This phenomenon can occur in a number of ways and at a number of points. Moreover, it can happen to a wide range of people – irrespective of their perceived vulnerability.

The following briefing provides an analysis of gatekeeping data collected by the Centrepoint helpline between July 2023 and September 2024.¹ This analysis explores rates of gatekeeping over time, rates by demographics and rates by gatekeeping type.

Findings

Data obtained from the Centrepoint Helpline shows that 564 young people have experienced forms of local authority gatekeeping in England between July 2023 and September 11th 2024. Of the 317 local authorities in England, the Helpline has recorded at least 1 gatekeeping case in 125 (39%).

The data shows that there was an average of 4.4 gatekeeping cases per council. In real terms, however, there was relatively large variance between the number of recorded gatekeeping cases per council, with one Council linked to 90 cases and a number of others recorded as engaging in between 10 and 21 cases.²

Of the young people recorded as having experienced gatekeeping, 255 were female (45%), 174 were male (31%) and 10 identified as non-binary or transgender (2%) – 125 respondents did not disclose this information. Worryingly, there were 82 recorded instances of gatekeeping where the applicant had children or were pregnant at the time of contacting the helpline (14.6%). Helpline staff report seeing an increasing number of gatekeeping cases involving young people who are pregnant/have children in the last year:

One Council told a pregnant 20 year old who was rough sleeping that she will only be considered priority need once she reaches 20 weeks pregnant and can provide her MAT B1 form. This goes against the Homeless Code of Guidance: 8.5 Normal confirmation of pregnancy, e.g. a letter from a medical professional, such as a midwife, should be adequate evidence of pregnancy.

Case Study 1: Pregnant young person

A pregnant young person had been to her local council office and had been offered a homelessness assessment the next month. This was despite her having slept rough prior to her presentation and having proof of pregnancy – which should move her up in the queue to receive an assessment. The council stated that they were not in a position to offer her an assessment before January.

¹ The Centrepoint Helpline provides housing and homelessness advice in England to young people aged 16-25 or their family and friends over email, webchat and phone.

² These figures are illustrative rather than demonstrative of actual gatekeeping rates in these local authority areas.

The Centrepoint Helpline did a three-way call between the young person and the local authority to try and find an interim housing solution for the young person. In response, the local authority said that they have a policy of not providing interim housing options and that they would, instead, provide a list of local homelessness shelters. However these shelter options were designated for the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol and were, therefore, unsuitable.

Case study 2: Pregnant young person

In total, the Centrepoint Helpline has received 5,124 calls from young people since July 2024. This means that recorded cases of gatekeeping have accounted for 11% of total calls. Moreover, since data started to be recorded, the Helpline has reported an average of 1.3 case of gatekeeping per day – equivalent to over 1 young person calling Centrepoint every day asking for help because their local authority has refused to provide them with homelessness support.

Where we were able to record gatekeeping category data, we have identified rates of local authority gatekeeping by type. The type most reported has been ‘wrongly considered to not be priority need’, with 202 cases since July 2023 (35%):

Types of local authority gatekeeping	Frequency
<i>Wrongly considered to not be priority need</i>	202
<i>Unable to contact the local authority (i.e. phone switched off, number not available on website etc.)</i>	100
<i>Wrongly considered to have no local connection</i>	58
<i>Wrongly considered to be intentionally homeless</i>	53
<i>Council not able to confirm homelessness prior to assessment (i.e. when council asks for telephone number of family member to confirm homelessness)</i>	25
<i>Wrongly considered to be ineligible for housing support</i>	19
<i>Young person has no ID or evidence documents (i.e. proof of income)</i>	18
<i>Council stating that they can only assess and support people in priority need</i>	14
<i>LA signposting to non-statutory services lieu of providing assessment (e.g. charities)</i>	10
<i>Council refusing to prevent homelessness</i>	2
<i>Other</i>	63
<i>Total</i>	564

Figure 1: Frequency and percentages of local authority gatekeeping by type, July – December 2023.

It is evident that priority need was most frequently used by local authorities as a reason to not provide young people with homelessness support. Analysis of these instances show that local authorities are often ignoring and/or misinterpreting guidance delineating the definition of priority need as it relates to homelessness. This

means that young people at risk of and/or experiencing homelessness who should have received support because of mitigating factors such as experiences of domestic abuse, were wrongly blocked from receiving an assessment and, subsequently, accessing support. For instance, one young person was deemed to be intentionally homeless, despite them having experienced domestic abuse which caused them to flee their home. Another young person was told by a different Council that ongoing physical abuse from a parent was 'normal' and, subsequently, judged that they were not a priority without making further enquiries.

Moreover, some councils also use priority need as a threshold against which presenting young people are judged. The Centrepoint Helpline has, for example, recorded cases where local authorities have told young people "You aren't pregnant so we can't help you". This has meant that young people have been denied assessments and/or support, despite guidance clearly stating that due consideration should be given to all for whom there is reason to believe that they may be homeless.

Beyond priority need, 'unable to contact the local authority' was frequently reported as a reason for young people not receiving a homelessness assessment and subsequent support:

One young person found that their local authority operated a voicemail only out of hour's homelessness service. As such, the young person was required to leave a message giving their contact details and a summary of their situation so that the local authority could respond. Upon calling the service, however, the young person found that the local authority phone line was not working, meaning that they were not able to ask for an assessment and receive support.

This young person had a number of experiences that contributed towards their homelessness, resulting in them sleeping rough. As such, the young person should have been classed as being in a priority need category and been provided with an assessment and support.

Case study 3: Young person not able to contact local authority

This type of experience was not uncommon. Young people contacting the Helpline have frequently reported that their local authorities had, intentionally or unintentionally, erected barriers to accessing and engaging with homelessness support. A number of young people stated that they had been told that they had to present to their local authority as in need of homelessness support via particular methods, such as in person at a specific location or through an online form. This meant that young people, who might be unable to travel to their town hall or civic centre or who might not have regular internet access, were often less likely to reach out for support.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Centrepoint Helpline gatekeeping rate experienced has increased in the last couple of years – unfortunately, data was not recorded pre-July 2023. This has had a significant impact on the Helpline, with more time spent advocating for and on behalf of young people who have experienced gatekeeping. The following testimony highlights this impact:

As a team, we are seeing more and more gatekeeping by local councils who are actively avoiding their duty to accommodate even the most clear-cut cases. This, in turn, puts a strain on our service as we end up spending a lot of time trying to reach out to councils to gently challenge the situation and their gatekeeping. With such a high demand for homelessness services, we can often spend up to an hour on hold waiting to speak to councils, which means there is less available time to be helping other young people. We are seeing a lot of council's housing teams failing to hold up their responsibilities, and it often feels like they are trying to catch the young people out. The young people we support are very rarely met with empathy and consideration, and we often get feedback from them saying that they wish council workers had the same understanding and kind approach that the Centrepoint Helpline does.



Member of the Centrepoint Helpline team

Conclusion

- Helpline staff report that the high rate of gatekeeping has meant that they are now having to spend more of their time advocating for and on behalf of young people to local authorities, encouraging them to provide homelessness assessments and temporary accommodation when needed. This is not always successful and means that staff often have less time to support other young people.
- Local authorities are obliged to begin enquiries as soon as they have reason to believe an applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. This is clearly not happening in a significant number of instances, meaning that many young people – likely far more than recorded via the Centrepoint helpline – are not receiving assessments and, if eligible, support.
- Local authorities are obliged to try and prevent or relieve homelessness for all applicants who are eligible for assistance and are homeless or threatened with homelessness, irrespective of whether or not they may have a priority need for accommodation. However, many councils are denying support to young people who should have priority need status, such as those who are pregnant/with children and/or with experiences of domestic abuse.
- Local authorities are also engaging in unethical practices by insisting that young people contact them in particular ways. This goes against the Homelessness Code of Guidance, where local authorities are told that: *Applications can be made to any department of the local authority and expressed in any particular form..... As long as the communication seeks accommodation or assistance in obtaining accommodation and includes details that give the housing authority reason to believe that they might be homeless or threatened with homelessness, this will constitute an application.*