



**Sustainable Accommodation - A strategy for the provision of
suitable and sustainable accommodation for young offenders and
young people at risk of offending**

Consultation Response - Revolving Doors Agency

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Introduction

Revolving Doors Agency works with people who are in crisis. Our clients have mental health problems and have come into contact with the criminal justice system – generally through arrest or imprisonment. The Agency offers practical support to this client group through its Link Worker Schemes. The schemes help clients engage with support services to resolve problems such as homelessness, poverty and drug addiction which contribute to their offending behaviour.

In March 2004 Revolving Doors Agency set up two Young Persons Link Worker schemes based in Haringey, north London and Gillingham, Kent. The aim of the schemes has been to work with young people aged 15 to 21 with mental health and multiple needs who come into contact with the criminal justice system and who fall through the net of mainstream services, to improve the ways in which the full range of their needs can be understood and met. The majority of the schemes referrals have come from youth offending teams and from young offender institutions.

A significant number of young people have had housing problems and the Link Workers have supporting them in finding appropriate accommodation. The information presented in this submission is based on the experience of the Link Worker schemes. It directly corresponds to the areas raised in the strategy and the additional questions.

The strategy's scope, overall direction and specific recommendations

Revolving Doors Agency supports the main themes highlighted in the strategy and the main recommendations. We recognize that the prevention of homelessness among young people who offend has been a neglected area and action is long over due. In particular, there is a need for closer co-operation and co-ordination between agencies and it is vital that representatives from local housing authorities are included on Yot management boards.

Revolving Doors Agency welcomes the plan to phase out the use of unsupported bed-and-breakfast accommodation for all 16 and 17-year-olds within the next five year. However, given the overall shortage of affordable social housing this plan needs to include a strategy to ensure that there is sufficient appropriate accommodation in place so there is no longer a need to resort to unsupported bed and breakfast accommodation.

Our link worker schemes have supported young people prior to release from custody in Rochester Young Offenders Institution and Holloway prison. They have found that housing advice services are patchy and ad hoc. It is critical that there are improvements in provision but providing housing advice alone is not sufficient. It must be combined with active support to advocate on behalf of young people to ensure they have suitable accommodation on release from custody. Revolving Doors Young People Link Worker

scheme in Kent has developed a specific approach to meeting the housing needs of young people in Rochester YOI which is highlighted below.

Meeting the accommodation needs of groups in greatest need

Revolving Doors Agency Young Persons Link Worker schemes have found that practice on the ground remains confused due to conflicting interpretations of Homelessness legislation. There is uncertainty over responsibility for housing individual young people between social services and local housing authorities. As a result the Link Workers have had young people on their caseloads that have been passed from agency to agency with their housing needs unmet. There is a need for clearer national guidelines to avoid any further confusion. In particular, there is a specific need for clarity over the right to appeal to inform practitioners who to appeal to, and what the appeal process involves.

When disputes arise between social services and local housing authorities Link Workers have found that young people can be left stranded. There is therefore an urgent need for guidance to ensure that in such circumstances a contingency plan is put in place for the young person which involves a joint partnership between social services and the housing authority so that temporary measures are put in place to meet the young person's housing needs while dispute is being addressed.

Overall there is a need for more effective multi-agency working that involves regular monthly meetings between the Yot and housing providers to ensure there is joined up working and information sharing. Information relating to the housing needs of young offenders, especially those young offenders who are leaving custody and returning to the local area of the Yot, must be passed on to housing providers so they can plan for providing appropriate housing places. This needs to be effectively co-ordinated by Yot accommodation officers playing a more strategic role.

Effective partnership working in delivering housing support to young people who offend

Revolving Doors Agency Young Persons Link Worker schemes have worked with young people who have mental health problems and multiple needs. They are often the most vulnerable and hardest to engage and will typically have led chaotic lifestyles, have substance misuse problems, have a history of losing contact with services, do not meet the criteria of any one agency and find it difficult to keep appointments (See Appendix I).

Link workers have provided the young people with the opportunity to engage with them on a voluntary basis. They have initially provided the young person with the space to build up a relationship based on trust and then supported them to access services (see Service Pathway document in Appendix II). In many cases this has involved linking them into appropriate accommodation and also providing housing management support.

The Link Workers main focus has been on ensuring that young offenders find appropriate housing that meets their multiple needs rather than being housed in unsupported private or social housing. To achieve this outcome they have had to work closely with numerous social housing providers. Successful relationships have been formed with some of these providers and in many cases the Link Workers have had to carefully negotiate a housing place for the young person. This has involved working with the young person and the housing provider to demonstrate that despite the young person's criminal record, he/she is committed to meeting the terms of the tenancy. Without the Link Worker Scheme many clients would have been unable to access suitable supported housing that meets their needs.

Link workers have also provided housing management support for young people in local authority general needs housing who are experiencing problems sustaining their tenancies. This has involved providing assistance with benefits applications and helping them understand their tenancy arrangements. In general, this has been interim support before directing clients to local authority floating support schemes.

Further examples of innovative practice

The Link Worker scheme in Kent has set up a mechanism for fast tracking information to Medway local authority's Homeless Persons Unit. The system is intended to assist young offenders in Rochester YOI who are due for release to the Medway local authority area without any accommodation in place. It was set up because the Link Workers were finding that delays in the system were resulting in young people being without accommodation whilst their applications were being processed by the council. A young person would be given a letter confirming they were homeless to take to Medway council's Homeless Persons Unit on release. However, this led to the young person being left homeless whilst the application was being processed.

To overcome the delays in the system the Link Workers have designed a basic 'application to register as homeless form' (see Appendix III) that is completed by the Link Worker with the client prior to release. The form is then sent to Medway council's Homeless Persons Unit in order to enable the unit to open a file on the young person and begin processing the basic information. The intention is to ensure that the homelessness application is begun prior to the young person's release from Rochester so that when he/she presents at the council some form of temporary accommodation will be in place, assuming the application has been successful and the young person has been assessed as unintentionally homeless.

Further issues

There are a number of other relevant issues that Revolving Doors Agency would like to draw to the attention of the YJB.

Shortage of appropriate move-on accommodation – Revolving Doors Agency has found that young people can be left in either supported or unsupported temporary accommodation for many months due to a lack of appropriate move on accommodation which meets their long term housing needs. In these circumstances there is a danger that the young person's situation can deteriorate and the initial progress they have made is undermined. It is therefore important that the YJB's strategy addresses the problem of a shortage in suitable long term housing for young offenders and young people at risk of offending

Lack of communication – Link workers have found that when social services place a young person in private accommodation where support services are not provided by social services communication between agencies often breaks down. Social services will rely on the agencies that are providing support to keep them informed of the young person's progress. However, this does not always happen and social services will lose track of the young person. In some cases the young person is lost in the system and social services are not aware of their predicament. Link Workers have had to inform social services of cases where a young person has ended up in custody without their knowledge.

Tenancy conditions – Link Workers have also found that conditions of tenancies are unduly restrictive and the approach taken by housing providers to tackling transgressions is inflexible and excessively punitive. Housing providers need to be more realistic about young offenders and take a more enlightened approach that is less rigid and coercive.

APPENDIX I

Making a Referral to the Young Persons' Link Worker Scheme

Who is eligible for the Link Worker Scheme?

- **Young people aged 15 - 21 who have come to the attention of the police, Youth Offending Services and Young Offenders Institutions because of concerns about their particular vulnerability;**
- **Young people who are deemed to be at risk of offending; and**
- **Young people who are experiencing one or more of the following:**
 - Show signs of being depressed, withdrawn/ confused/ or very anxious;
 - Have had difficulty engaging with other agencies in the past;
 - Lead chaotic lifestyles and find it hard to cope;
 - Have a history of self-harm or current suicidal ideas;
 - Have a number of additional problems e.g. using drugs and alcohol;
 - Have no established contacts with local services;
 - Have a history of losing contact with services;
 - Do not meet the criteria of any one agency;
 - Find it difficult to keep to appointment times;
 - Their offending behaviour is linked to their vulnerability and
 - may be prevented or reduced by the involvement of the Link Workers.

We cannot provide a service to people who:

- Have no particular vulnerabilities (see above);
- Have a history of extreme violence;
- Are serving a sentence of 3 years or more; and
- If in prison, have an Earliest Date of Release of more than 6 months.

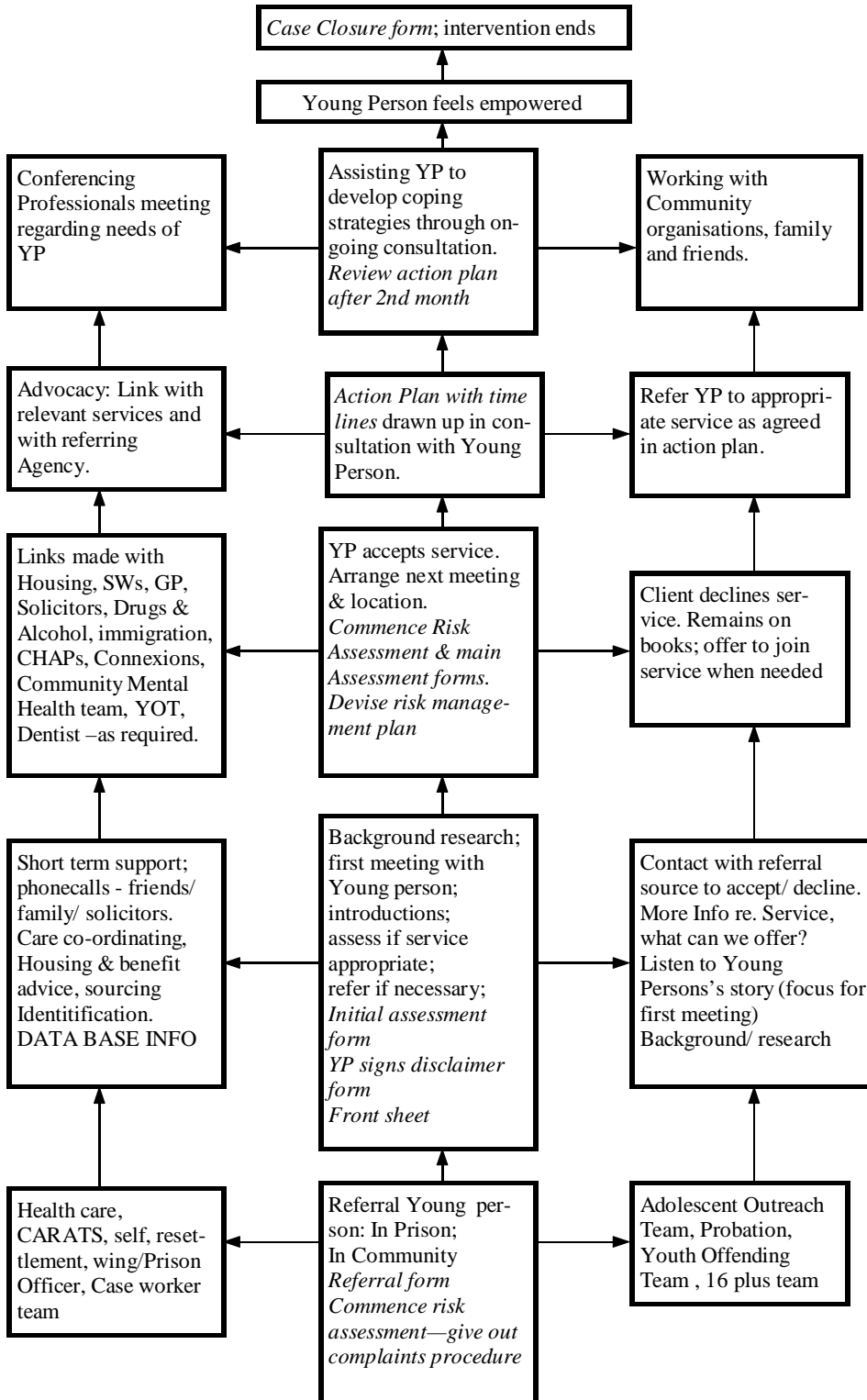
We will offer support including:

- Referral to another agency as required;
- Benefits advice;

- Liaising with housing providers;
- Regular contact over an extended period providing emotional and practical support;
- Involvement in creative activities; and
- Linking into education, training and employment opportunities.

Please complete the referral form and return to Link Workers

Service pathway for Young Person's Link Worker Scheme



APPENDIX III

APPLICATION TO REGISTER AS HOMELESS.

NAME:

DATE OF BIRTH:

NATIONAL INSURANCE NUMBER:

ADDRESS PRIOR TO PRISON:

TIME SPENT THERE:

TENURE (type of tenancy):

HOW DID YOU FIND THIS ACCOMODATION:

CONTACT DETAILS OF THE LANDLORD/FRIEND/RELATIVE AT THE ABOVE ADDRESS:

PREVIOUS ADDRESSES FOR THE LAST FIVE YEARS (if with family then please state)

1. ADDRESS:

TIME SPENT LIVING THERE:

TENURE (type of tenancy):

CONTACT DETAILS:

HOW YOU FOUND THE PROPERTY:

2. ADDRESS

TIME SPENT LIVING THERE:

TENURE(type of tenancy):

CONTACT DETAILS:

HOW YOU FOUND THE PROPERTY:

3. ADDRESS:

TIME SPENT LIVING THERE:

TENURE (type of tenancy):

CONTACT DETAILS:

HOW YOU FOUND THE PROPERTY:

PROBATION OFFICER/YOT OFFICER -

CONTACT DETAILS:

CURRENT OFFENCE:

SENTENCE:

LENGTH OF SENTENCE:

PREVIOUS OFFENCES:

OFFENCE-

PRISON-

FROM

TO

OFFENCE-

PRISON-

FROM

TO

DOCTOR'S DETAILS (if known)

MEDICAL DETAILS (are there any health issues. These can include mental health issues can include mental health issues, alcohol and drugs)
Please provide supporting evidence from relevant agencies (eg a doctor's letter)

MEDICATION:

KEY WORKERS, SOCIAL WORKERS OR PSYCHIATRISTS:

CONNECTIONS TO MEDWAY

FAMILY IN MEDWAY - YES/NO

NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP	TIME IN MEDWAY
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FAMILY IN OTHER AREAS - YES/NO

NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP	TIME IN AREA
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IF UNABLE TO RETURN TO AREA, PLEASE STATE REASON WHY AND PROVIDE SUPPORTING EVIDENCE ON A SEPARATE SHEET (this may include a letter from any supporting agencies involved with you):

WE, AT REVOLVING DOORS AGENCY HAVE ASSISTED YOU IN COMPLETING THIS APPLICATION ON BEHALF OF THE COUNCIL AND AS THIS IS A COUNCIL FORM THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED AND UNDERSTOOD:

If you do not give the Council the full facts, or if you tell lies; or if you do not tell the office any change in your circumstances before a decision is made, you may be breaking the law, as set out in Section 214 of the Housing Act 1996. if you do break the law in this way you may be prosecuted by the Council and if found guilty may be ordered to pay a fine of up to £5,000.

If you do not understand what this means, ask for it to be explained before signing this.

I have checked the details on this form about my/our situation; I have read the Warning and understand what it means. I also authorise the Council to make any necessary enquiries to verify my circumstances and further more authorise the provision of information to Medway Council by any relevant parties involved.

Signature of Applicant(s).....

Date.....