

Consultation response

Tackling Child Poverty in Scotland: A Discussion Paper

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Shelter

Scotland

Tackling Child Poverty in Scotland: A Discussion Paper

Introduction

Shelter welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Scottish Government's discussion paper on tackling child poverty in Scotland. We support the suggested key aims of the strategy to a) to maximise the resources of households with children and b) to improve the well-being and life chances of children as well as the general approach taken in the paper. While the paper clearly outlines many of the key policy areas where the Scottish Government can make a difference in tackling child poverty it would be helpful to have a greater sense of the specific actions that the Scottish Government and its partners agree to take forward as part of the strategy.

We are pleased to note that the discussion paper makes an explicit link between child poverty and the role of communities and the physical environment. Extensive research has shown the profound impact bad housing has on children's life chances and the risks it poses to children's well-being.¹ In 2009/10 there were approximately 20,000 children living in households accepted as homelessness, with over 6,000 children living in temporary accommodation at any one time.² There are thousands more living in overcrowded, sub-standard housing.³ Children who are living in sub-standard housing or who are homeless are also likely to be from disadvantaged communities and low-income households.

If child poverty is to be eradicated by 2020 then housing must play an integral role in the Scottish Government's strategy.

Child poverty strategy consultation – questions

As Shelter Scotland's particular interest is in the links between child poverty, housing and homelessness our response focuses on these aspects when answering the questions posed by the discussion paper. We therefore focus on questions 1, 2, 3 and 7. We also

¹ Shelter (2006) *Against the Odds: An investigation comparing the lives of children on either side of Britain's housing divide*. Available at: <http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2006/11/28/AgainsttheOddsfullreport.pdf>

² Data from Scottish Government (2010) *Operation of the Homeless Persons legislation in Scotland: National and Local Authority Analyses 2009-10*.

³ Shelter Scotland (2010) *The facts: bad housing and homelessness for children and young people in Scotland*. Available at: http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/facts_report_2010

support the submission made by the campaign to End Child Poverty in Scotland (ECP) in response to the discussion paper.

1. What are your views on the Scottish Government's current approach to tackling child poverty, outlined in this paper? In particular: does it capture the key areas where action is required to ensure the greatest impact on reducing child poverty, and are there any important steps to be taken by the Scottish Government that are not covered in this paper?

The following highlights Shelter's views on the Scottish Government's current approach to tackling child poverty, as described in the discussion paper, picking out areas of support and concern for Shelter Scotland.

- We agree that good quality, well targeted information and advice for families should be a priority. Access to timely and appropriate advice for families is even more crucial with the current changes in the benefits system.
- We welcome the acknowledgement that the cost of housing can put significant pressure on family budgets and the need for policies to improve good quality, accessible and affordable housing as a result. There is a dire shortage of housing in Scotland with nearly 200,000 households on council housing lists as at 31 March 2010. The high cost of housing for families is illustrated in the fact that the number of children living in poverty in Scotland rises from 210,000 to 260,000 once housing costs are taken in account (ie when family income is looked at after the rent or mortgage has been paid).⁴ The supply of affordable homes is failing to match the need for housing which is subsequently exacerbating child poverty. Further the Scottish Government has recently cut the housing budget by more than 30 per cent meaning the pressure on housing supply is unlikely to let up. Therefore, while we firmly agree that investing in affordable homes should be a priority area for the child poverty strategy we question whether the Scottish Government can claim that its current approach to housing supply is helping to tackle child poverty.

In addition the pressure of housing costs on household budgets is likely to worsen due to cuts in housing benefit meaning families will have to pay a greater share of their rent from their own pockets forcing them into poverty or further into poverty. The benefit changes most likely to affect child poverty levels include moving from the median rent rate to the 30th percentile (Oct 2011), restricting housing benefit to 90 per cent of the full award for those out of work for more than 12 months (April 2013), reducing housing benefit to working age claimants in under-occupied houses (April

⁴ Family Resources Survey, Households Below Average Income Dataset 2008/09

2013) and a cap on benefits for out of work households to be introduced as part of the Universal Credit proposals (April 2013).

As a result many families will be forced to find cheaper accommodation as a result of the cuts, potentially forcing them to move out of their local area away from their support networks, schools and places of employment. The cuts are also likely to lead to an increased risk of homelessness. These are all factors that we know can have serious implications for children's well-being.

- The paper rightly acknowledges the impact a child's home learning environment has on a child's life chances and the importance of a good home learning environment, with specific mention of parent's role with this. It fails to mention however the housing factors that can affect a child's home learning environment such as overcrowding meaning a child lacks the space to concentrate or do homework or a parent's ability to support their child with their learning due to stresses related to homelessness. Furthermore homelessness can lead to other issues which will affect a child's learning such as difficulties travelling to school, poor attendance, no internet access out of school and bullying alongside behavioural issues related to the emotional health and well-being of children and young people facing homelessness.

To mitigate the impact of homelessness on children's learning it is crucial to improve the links between the housing and education sectors so children receive the support they require to achieve and participate at school. Shelter Scotland is launching on-line resources to advise the educational sector on ways it can make sure it supports children whose learning is affected by housing problems. These resources are a culmination of lessons learned by Shelter Scotland as a result of providing educational support to children affected by homelessness for the past three years and wider research undertaken by Children in Scotland on behalf of Shelter Scotland.

- While Shelter Scotland commends the Scottish Government's work to meet the 2012 commitment we question its relevance to improving the housing situation for children and families facing homelessness. The 2012 commitment did not increase the rights of homeless families, as they were already considered a priority need group for housing. Instead the 2012 commitment gives other groups such as single person households the same rights as others. It is therefore not clear how the 2012 commitment in itself will help tackle child poverty.

We suggest there have been more recent developments within the homelessness sector that have more relevance to tackling the housing related aspects of child poverty. These include:

1. The publication of Scottish Government guidance on meeting the best interests of children facing homelessness in June 2010 - mentioned briefly in the discussion paper.
2. The introduction of a new duty, brought in with the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, to assess the support homeless households require to deal with homelessness and to settle into a permanent home, and to secure the relevant services to meet any needs identified.
3. The publication of guidance for standards of temporary accommodation, produced by Chartered Institute of Housing and Shelter Scotland in November 2010.⁵
4. The introduction of pre-action requirements, through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, whereby a social landlord must fulfil a set of actions before it can start eviction proceedings on a household for rent arrears.

The strategy should focus on the implementation of these current pieces of work already occurring within the sector to help end child poverty.

- The focus on underpinning all work related to improving children's lives with the principles of GIRFEC is one that we support. However if GIRFEC is to be used as an approach to tackle child poverty, including those living in cramped, unsuitable or temporary accommodation, there needs to be greater integration of the working practices of the housing sector with the more traditional children's services, such as education, health and social work. It is essential that housing professionals are linked into the reforms taking place as a result of GIRFEC and receive training on when they need to share information with professionals within other services and what factors they need to consider in relation to children's well-being when they come into contact with families with children. At the same time professionals within the children's sector, particularly those assigned roles as named persons and lead professionals, must receive training on the impact housing problems can have on children's well-being, what types of support a child may need as a result of an unstable housing situation and when to involve housing professionals as part of child's plan to promote their well-being.

Together these actions have the potential to improve the well-being and life chances of children living in bad housing – both a cause and consequence of child poverty.

⁵ Available at:

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/301686/CIH_Temp_Accommodation.pdf

- An area of concern that is not discussed to any extent is the negative impact of welfare reforms on child poverty and what action the Scottish Government plans to take to mitigate the negative effects of any changes at the UK level.

In terms of looking at the cuts to housing benefit – 25 per cent of households claiming housing benefit are families with children – the one change likely to have the largest impact for families with children is the drop in LHA from the median rent to the 30th percentile. A Scottish Government analysis has found around 10,300 children under 18 are in households losing more than £10 a week. This means 28,000 households with children claiming LHA will in fact lose less than £10 a week. The report notes however that this figure does not take into consideration the serious disruption that may be caused to these families with children as a result of being forced to move into cheaper accommodation, forced changes to schools or longer journey time to school. These changes also need to be considered in conjunction with other cuts in the welfare system including the Universal Credit proposals to cap income from benefits at £26,000 per annum for out of work households.

2. We should like to hear your views on what the priority areas for action in the Scottish strategy should be:

a) What measures will make the biggest difference to reducing levels of child poverty?

One of the key areas affecting levels of child poverty in Scotland is the benefits system, especially in light of the recent UK Government cuts to benefits and tax credits. From Shelter Scotland's perspective a priority area should be to consider and act on the impact of changes to housing benefit to reducing levels of child poverty. A recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that current policies will lead to an increase in levels of child poverty.

The Scottish Government recently published an analysis of the impact in Scotland of the housing benefit changes which was produced in conjunction with the Housing Benefit Reform Stakeholder Advisory Group. It is important that the Scottish Government undertakes further analysis of the changes to benefits, and addresses the implications, of these changes on families with children in Scotland, both in and out of work to ensure the cuts do not lead to an increase or stagnation in levels of child poverty in Scotland. The child poverty strategy then needs to prioritise how the Scottish Government will mitigate the negative impact of cuts to the welfare and benefits system that increase the risk of child poverty.

b) What measures will make the biggest difference to reducing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children?

The key priorities in terms of reducing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children are:

- To create more high quality affordable housing for families in neighbourhoods that promote their health and general well-being
- To improve the quality of housing children are living in, for example to tackle the energy inefficiency that drains family income, problems of damp and condensation which puts children at greater risk of experiencing asthma and other respiratory problems and overcrowding which among other things means children lack space to play and do their homework
- To tackle the educational inequalities experienced by children living in bad housing or who are homeless as too often a child's housing situation will affect a child's learning. These can be mitigated by improving the links between the housing and education sectors so children receive the support they require to achieve and learn at school.
- To ensure families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness receive appropriate advice and support to prevent problems escalating and to help them cope with the stresses related to homelessness. Types of support could include help with budgeting, accessing benefits, linking up with local health services or liaising with school to ensure children receive additional support for their learning.
- To ensure that Guidance on standards for temporary accommodation,⁶ recently produced by CIH and Shelter Scotland, is used by the Scottish Housing Regulator and local authorities to improve the physical, location, service and management standards of temporary accommodation in which children stay
- In relation to the implementation of the GIRFEC agenda the strategy needs to prioritise ensure lead professionals and named persons are fully aware of the impact an unstable housing situation can have on all aspects of children's lives and that good practice is shared about how the children's sector can work with the housing sector to reduce the impact of homelessness on children's lives. Housing professionals need to be included in GIRFEC training rolled out by local authorities and homelessness should be recorded as a significant event in a child's chronology
- To ensure the Scottish Government guidance on acting in the best interests of children facing homelessness is implemented, linking it into the GIRFEC agenda

⁶ Available at:

http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/301686/CIH_Temp_Accommodation.pdf

**3. What, in your view, are the main constraints to tackling child poverty in Scotland:
a) at the (Scottish) national level?**

The two key constraints Shelter Scotland has identified are:

- a) the recent cut by the Scottish Government of the housing and regeneration budget reducing it by over 30 per cent for 2010/11. This will have serious implications for housing supply and availability of decent quality, affordable housing for families.
- b) The impact of the combined benefits and tax credit cuts over the next few years on families with children. The Institute of Fiscal Studies analysis of recent announcements found that UK wide relative child poverty is expected to decrease slightly in 2010/11, remain stable from 2010/11 to 2012/13 and rise in 2013/14.⁷ This analysis does not take into account longer term welfare changes and the introduction of Universal Credit. The analysis says that such a rise would mean the UK Government would need to achieve a drop in child poverty of 10.5% in the seven years from 2013/14 to meet the 2020 target; a rate of reduction that has never been achieved before.

b) At local (Community Planning Partnership) level?

At the local level the main constraint is the lack of any statutory requirement, or robust mechanism, for making sure that reducing child poverty is a priority at the local level. Particularly at a time when local authorities and CPPs are experiencing severe cuts and it is inevitable that the priority will be given to statutory requirements.

7. We are interested in examples of effective local practice in tackling child poverty. If there are any examples you think it would be useful for us to be aware of, please provide a brief summary below.

Shelter Scotland provides housing support services to families with children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Dumfries, Glasgow and South Lanarkshire. These services offer tailored support to families to help them cope with homelessness and to settle into a permanent home and break the cycle of repeat homelessness. Support workers provide intensive practical and emotional support to the parents but also to the children. In addition there are four education liaison workers who focus on supporting

⁷ Brewer and Joyce (2010) *Child and Working-Age Poverty from 2010 to 2013*, IFS

children and their parents to make sure children can continue to learn and achieve at school while experiencing homelessness.

For more information about Shelter Scotland's housing support services please contact Mark Griffiths, National Services Manager, at Mark_Griffiths@shelter.org.uk

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