

Good practice: briefing

# Supporting homeless children

Guidance for children and family services

## Introduction

Children<sup>1</sup> living in bad housing or who are homeless can be seriously affected by their housing situation. It can impact upon their health, physical safety, enjoyment, personal achievement, schooling and life chances. Children living in temporary accommodation can find it difficult to complete homework assignments or may have to move schools depending on where they are housed, which can cause disruption to their schooling. Homeless children have lower levels of academic achievement that cannot be explained by differences in their levels of ability. Children living in bad housing, for example homes that are damp or overcrowded, can experience health problems such as respiratory issues or slow physical growth.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing identifies how bad housing and homelessness affect children and outlines the ways in which professionals working with children and their families can engage more effectively with those experiencing homelessness or bad housing. Within the Government's current children's agenda there is a particular emphasis on improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged children. Although many children's services work effectively with other agencies and specialists such as health and education practitioners, it appears that links with housing providers and the homeless sector are not so well developed.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this briefing, the term 'children' refers to children and dependent young people up to the age of 18.

<sup>2</sup> Shelter, *Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children's lives*, 2006.

## Homelessness and temporary accommodation

The term homelessness is often misunderstood; many people believe that the definition is restricted to those who sleep on the streets. In fact, the definition is far broader.

There are several ways in which a person can be legally defined as homeless:<sup>3</sup>

- they have no accommodation, in the UK or abroad, in which they have a right to live and that is available to them<sup>4</sup>
- they have a right to continue to occupy their accommodation but cannot secure entry to it<sup>5</sup>
- their home is a moveable structure such as a houseboat or caravan and they have nowhere to park it and reside in it<sup>6</sup>
- there is nowhere in which the whole household can live together<sup>7</sup>
- they have accommodation but it is not reasonable for them to continue to occupy it, for example because of its poor condition<sup>8</sup>
- they, or a family member, will be at risk of domestic or other violence if they remain in their accommodation.<sup>9</sup>

The local authority has a legal duty to give advice to people who are homeless.<sup>10</sup> In addition, if the local authority believes that someone who has submitted a homelessness application is homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need, then it must provide temporary accommodation for the applicant until a decision is made as to whether the authority owes them a main housing duty.<sup>11</sup> An applicant may be

ineligible for assistance if they have lived or come from abroad.<sup>12</sup> People considered to be in priority need include pregnant women, or someone living with a pregnant woman, and someone living with dependent children (including children who are under 19-years-old and in full-time education).

Homeless applicants can be housed in different types of temporary accommodation, including bed and breakfast hotels, hostels, registered social landlord and local authority accommodation, or private rented properties arranged through the local authority. There is no choice offered to the applicant and the quality of such accommodation varies greatly. However, the law requires that all accommodation offered be 'suitable'.<sup>13</sup>

To be suitable, the accommodation must meet the individual needs of the applicant (and household). This is a personal test related to each individual, but the length of time an applicant is expected to stay in the accommodation can be a factor in assessing suitability. Bed and breakfast hotels and hostels have shared kitchen and bathroom facilities and often there is no suitable access to cooking facilities. Bed and breakfast accommodation is often unsuitable for vulnerable people and is rarely suitable for households with children. Pregnant women and families with children can only be housed in bed and breakfast accommodation when no other accommodation is available<sup>14</sup>, but they can only stay there for a maximum of six weeks before the local authority must find them somewhere more suitable to live.<sup>15</sup>

## Issues faced by children in bad housing

In 2003, the Government published the green paper *Every Child Matters*<sup>16</sup>, which identified the five most important outcomes for children and young people. These outcomes serve as universal ambitions for

3 ss.175–177 Housing Act 1996.

4 s.175(1) Housing Act 1996.

5 s.175(2)(a) Housing Act 1996.

6 s.175(2)(b) Housing Act 1996.

7 s.176 Housing Act 1996.

8 s.175(3) Housing Act 1996.

9 s.175(1)(a)–(b) Housing Act 1996.

10 s.179 Housing Act 1996.

11 s.188(1) Housing Act 1996.

12 s.185(2) Housing Act 1996.

13 s.206(1) Housing Act 1996.

14 Art 4(1)(a) The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation)(England) Order 2003, SI 2003/3326.

15 Art 4(1)(b) The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation)(England) Order 2003, SI 2003/3326.

16 HM Treasury, *Every Child Matters*, 2003.

every child and young person, irrespective of their circumstances or background. Improving the outcomes of all children and young people underpins all the development and work of children's services. Shelter's report *Chance of a lifetime* illustrates the devastating results that bad housing can have on these five outcomes (the findings below come from this report).<sup>17</sup>

### **Be healthy**

Accommodation that is damp, cold, overcrowded or in a poor state of repair has negative implications for health. Children in bad housing conditions are more likely to:

- have mental health problems such as anxiety and depression
- contract meningitis
- have respiratory problems such as coughing and wheezing
- experience long-term ill health and disability
- experience slow physical growth
- have delayed cognitive development.

### **Stay safe**

Poor physical housing conditions can make it difficult to keep children safe.

- Almost half of all childhood accidents are associated with physical conditions in the home.
- Families living in properties that are in poor physical condition are more likely to experience a domestic fire.

### **Enjoy and achieve**

Living in bad housing or temporary accommodation greatly reduces children's enjoyment and achievement in life.

- Homeless children have lower levels of academic achievement that cannot be explained by differences in their levels of ability.

### **Make a positive contribution**

Living in bad housing or temporary accommodation can be detrimental to children's schooling, self-confidence and the ability to deal with life changes and challenges.

- Homeless children are more likely to have behavioural problems such as aggression, hyperactivity and impulsivity.
- One study suggests almost half of young offenders have experienced homelessness.

### **Achieve economic wellbeing**

Housing circumstances can impact strongly on children's life chances.

- The high costs of temporary accommodation can make it difficult to make working financially worthwhile, trapping homeless families in unemployment, which is strongly associated with poverty and reduced life chances for children.
- Living in bad housing as a child carries a risk of low educational achievement. This in turn results in an increased likelihood of experiencing unemployment or working in insecure or low-paid jobs as an adult.
- Bad housing in childhood is linked to long-term health problems, which can affect employment opportunities later in life.

### **Issues faced by homeless parents**

Debt issues leading to the threat of homelessness can be a huge problem for some families. Many are preoccupied with practical problems such as trying to meet rent or arrears payments, and so do not realise that they are at real risk of homelessness. Other families may be dealing with more complex issues such as drug and alcohol abuse or mental health issues, and so the threat of homelessness is largely ignored.

The breakdown of relationships is a major cause of homelessness. For some this can be the result of fleeing, or attempting to flee, domestic violence. To leave a violent relationship or situation, many

<sup>17</sup> Shelter, *Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children's lives*, 2006.

people have to leave their homes and have nowhere permanent to go, therefore becoming homeless. They may move to a refuge or hostel or stay with friends, but these are only temporary placements. People who have experienced domestic violence have been through great trauma and often suffer from depression and anxiety as well as poor physical health. Their self-esteem and confidence will be low and they may find it difficult to build trusting relationships with others, including professionals. In these situations, children are also victims, either directly from violence and abuse or from witnessing the violence and its effects on other members of their family. The whole family will need specialist support.

Homeless families in a period of transition, for example staying in temporary accommodation, find it difficult to access support services, and even harder to maintain contact with these services. Feelings of shame or embarrassment regarding their personal situation may make it difficult for them to engage with services.

Homeless families moving from temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation face a critical time of change. Families continue to need support as they establish themselves into a new community and if children need to settle into a new school.

## What children's services can do

Children's services must respond to the specific needs of their locality. Children's centres, social workers, Home-Start co-ordinators and volunteers, teenage parent support workers, parenting advisers etc are all well placed to support children and parents experiencing homelessness or the threat of homelessness.

Consultation with children's professionals and parents has identified action that would enable services to engage more effectively with homeless families and those at risk of homelessness.

## Families at risk

Health visitors can provide a good source of referrals to children's services. Organisations must, therefore, ensure that health visitors are kept up to date with the services that they offer.

Children's workers should assess the needs of homeless families as soon as possible, so that they can provide practical support on issues such as accommodation, health and education. The family and children's service staff will then be able to look at the wider issues of the emotional and personal development of the children.

Arrangements should be made for the early assessment of vulnerable children using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF).<sup>18</sup> The CAF provides an assessment of a child's strengths and needs, taking into account the role of the parents, carers and any environmental factors such as housing that may impact on their development. Practitioners can then agree with the family and the child about what support is suitable. This support may be delivered directly by the children's organisation or referrals can be made to other appropriate services.

Workers need to be aware of the presence or requirement of a Lead Professional when dealing with children or young people who have additional support needs. The Lead Professional is a key element of integrated support, taking the lead in co-ordinating the provision of services for the child and acting as a single point of contact for the child and their family. Appointing a Lead Professional is central to the effective frontline delivery of services for children with a range of additional needs. Workers need to establish contact and work with an existing Lead Professional in each child's case. Alternatively, children's service workers could themselves be lead professionals, allowing them to provide a more integrated approach to providing support to children or young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

<sup>18</sup> For more information about CAF, go to the Every Child Matters website: <http://shltr.org.uk/6r>

## **Families in temporary accommodation**

Outreach services are essential in the case of families living in temporary accommodation because families experiencing a crisis will not automatically seek external support. Children's workers need to establish and maintain a good working relationship with the homeless persons department (or similar) of the local authority and temporary accommodation providers and their staff. In order to achieve this, organisations should objectively review their service, asking themselves whether it is harder for homeless families to access the service or for the service to access the families, and how the service can become more accessible.

Workers need to have a basic working knowledge of debt, housing and homelessness issues to enable them to identify problems early and intervene where necessary.

Services such as play sessions and information about all services should be provided to all temporary accommodation providers. Workers should also work with partner organisations such as health services to encourage them to provide services in temporary accommodation settings as well.

Hostels should be encouraged to refer families to children's services; however, they should be aware that some parents may wish to settle in first. Initially it can be too traumatic for families to understand and consider the services they are being offered because accommodation will be their primary concern. The hostel should provide families with details of services available to them, such as childcare. Care must be taken not to overwhelm the family with details of more intensive support services too soon.

Families living in temporary accommodation generally like to spend as much time as possible outside their accommodation. Children's organisations should encourage the use of their facilities and services in other venues. Nursery placements are useful because they provide respite for both parents and children.

Workers should ensure that they are aware of the needs of estranged fathers – those living in shared or unsuitable temporary accommodation may need another space in order to have contact with their children.

In areas where there are high numbers of families in temporary accommodation, a specialised worker role is effective, such as a Homeless Families Outreach Worker or another worker role that involves taking lead responsibility for homeless families.

## **Multi-agency working**

The Social Exclusion Unit states that:

'a client-centred approach is critical, with individually tailored help and support that can address different sets of multiple needs through a single phone call or one-stop-shop. Having personal advisers who help individuals understand what services and benefits are available and who can negotiate access to a range of options has been successful in developing a more client centred approach.'<sup>19</sup>

In order to improve the lives of homeless children, agencies need to work together to develop and maintain contact with families. Establishing effective links and maintaining positive relationships with other local organisations can achieve this multi-agency approach.

## **Families in permanent accommodation**

Children's services have the potential to prevent repeat homelessness by maintaining contact with families when they move into settled accommodation, and signposting or referring them for support. Some families may require support to sustain their tenancy and prevent them from becoming homeless again.

Services need to recognise that they may lose touch with families when they move into settled accommodation. It is important to be aware of this in advance and encourage families to continue to use the service and to refer families moving out of the area to relevant services in their new area.

<sup>19</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, *Breaking the cycle; taking stock of progress and priorities for the future*, 2004, page 11.

## Good practice examples

### Children's centres

#### ***Link to advice services – Green Gates Children's Centre (Redcar, North Yorkshire)***

Centre services are promoted via the Community Development Team, which is proactive in the community: co-delivering play sessions, giving out information, and building relationships. Green Gates have agreed with the housing department that 'Sure Start – what's on' information and registration forms should be given out to all families when taking up a new tenancy.

There are a significant number of families seeking asylum in the area and so a specific refugee support worker has been seconded from the North of England Refugee Service to work closely with the children's centre. Green Gates liaises with housing providers in the borough to identify the best area for a refugee family to move to, including looking at community profiles, support services and other issues that will affect the conduct of their tenancy.

#### ***Specialist worker – the Susan Lawrence Children's Centre, (Newham, London)***

When the original Sure Start programme was being set up five years ago, a needs analysis of Newham found high numbers of families living in temporary accommodation. A full-time temporary accommodation worker (TAW) role was created to work with the Susan Lawrence Children's Centre team.

Referrals for this service are received from the Homeless Persons Unit, which produces a fortnightly list of families in temporary accommodation. On average there are eight or nine families on each list. The TAW then sends an introductory letter to the family and arranges an initial visit to them. At the first visit, the TAW assesses the needs of the family and outlines the support that the centre offers. There are also self-referrals to the service from families already using centre services who encounter housing difficulties.

### Home-Start co-ordinators and volunteers

#### ***Home-Start (Redhill, West Sussex)***

Home-Start Reigate's Co-ordinator called Shelter's Children's Service Advice Line (CSAL) to get advice on housing options for a teenage mother who had been asked to leave her grandmother's house. The young mother had already approached the local authority's housing options team and had been advised to find accommodation in the private rented sector. On Shelter's advice, the client was informed that, as a homeless person with a dependent child, she was in fact in priority need for housing assistance from the local authority.

The case was referred by the CSAL to Shelter's advice service in Crawley and, with the support of an adviser, the young mother and her baby were able to make a successful homelessness application to the local authority and were placed into temporary accommodation the very next day. The mother and baby are thriving and are very happy to have somewhere settled and secure to live.

The Home-Start Co-ordinator said, 'I can't speak more highly of Shelter, they really did a wonderful job for my client. I received excellent advice and support from both the advice line and from the local office. I am so glad I had the Shelter contact number as it enabled me to gain instant information to be able to advise my family correctly.'

### Family Intervention Projects

#### ***Shelter Family Intervention Project (Rochdale Borough Families Project, Greater Manchester)***

A single mother with four children was referred to the Family Intervention Project in Rochdale. The mother had convictions for dealing drugs at the property, and there were numerous acts of antisocial behaviour including rowdy parties and criminal damage being perpetrated by the family and their visitors to neighbours' property and possessions. The eldest two children were terrorising neighbours and other children on the estate and the eldest child was at risk of receiving a custodial sentence because of the severity of her/his offending behaviour.



Following a detailed assessment, the family was assessed as requiring 'level 2' intervention. This made the family eligible to be rehoused in a new area where they would have no history of antisocial behaviour. All the children were allocated a Children and Young Person's Worker, who worked with them on issues including fire safety, water safety, anger management, diversity awareness, self-esteem, bullying and confidence building. The children were rewarded with positive activities after they completed each group successfully. The mother engaged well with a parenting course and successfully completed it. The two older children completed work on substance misuse and agreed to a referral to specialist workers.

The family support worker worked with the mother on maintaining the tenancy. This included managing visitors, getting rid of unwanted visitors, avoiding conflict with neighbours, maximising her benefits, and addressing health issues and drug usage, which involved referral to specialist services. The support worker worked closely with the housing department to identify an appropriate property in a suitable area, which would give the family the best chance for a new start. The worker also liaised with

the new housing officer to build up good working relationships so any problems could be acted on at the earliest point. The family have successfully moved to the new area and there have been no further complaints.

## Teenage Parent Support Workers

### **Impact Housing Association, Carlisle, Cumbria**

Impact Housing Association employs a teenage pregnancy floating support worker and a domestic violence floating support worker. Carlisle also has a multi-agency teenage parents group. The children's centre is actively involved with this group, providing playgroup sessions and health-related support. The centre also funds a domestic violence support group. Many of the users of these services experience housing problems or are homeless and living in temporary accommodation. Through its work with this client group, the children's centre is able to promote its services and provide play and support sessions to vulnerable parents who may not otherwise access services.

## Further information

### **Shelter Children's Service**

Good practice briefings offering guidance for education professionals and children and family services are available to download free from: [shelter.org.uk/childrensservice](http://shelter.org.uk/childrensservice)

### **Shelter Children's Service Advice Line 0845 421 4444**

Lines are open Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm.

The advice line offers staff working in the children and families services listed below direct access to Shelter's specialist advisers:

- voluntary sector children's service professionals, including those at Action for Children, Save the Children and the NSPCC
- professionals working in some extended schools, schools attached to children's centres and pupil referral units
- health professionals supporting families with children and 16- and 17-year-olds, whether living in a family, or independently (including the Family Nurse Partnership)
- School Home Support and Family Action services

- family intervention projects
- homelessness health visitors.

Staff who are not eligible to call the advice line can either contact their nearest Shelter office (details at [shelter.org.uk/getadvice](http://shelter.org.uk/getadvice)) or direct their clients to call Shelter's free housing advice helpline on **0808 800 4444** (open 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 5pm on weekends; some mobile phone networks may charge for the call).

Comments from callers to the Advice Line:

*'A very useful service that I have used twice now. [It] makes me feel confident that I can contact [it] at any time and get helpful advice. [The] copy of the information sent on email [is] also very useful.'*

*'This up-to-date, quantifiable service, available free at point of delivery is an absolute boon for community workers everywhere...'*

### **Women's Aid**

**0808 2000 247**

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

Women's Aid is the key national charity working to end domestic violence against women and children.

## Recommendations

There are measures that children and family services should adopt to assist families and children who are homeless or living in temporary accommodation:

- Increase their awareness of bad housing and homelessness and its effects, particularly in relation to the five Every Child Matters outcomes.
- Ensure staff are trained on basic housing rights, allowing them to provide initial housing assistance or make appropriate referrals to external organisations where necessary.
- Where services encounter substantial housing and homelessness issues, workers should attend and participate in local housing and homelessness forums.
- Develop links with the benefits agency, allowing workers to provide service users with more information regarding benefits to which they may be entitled.
- Develop and maintain an ongoing working relationship with temporary accommodation providers and the local authority housing department, ensuring they are provided with up-to-date information on services and referral processes.
- Provide outreach services and activities to families in temporary accommodation. Many families prefer to spend time away from their temporary accommodation, so local community centres and children's centre facilities should be utilised for sessions.
- Investigate the possibility of providing childcare for parents who need to dedicate time to their housing/financial issues or would benefit from respite time. This may be available in children's centres.
- Take on the role of, or liaise with the, Lead Professional for each child in temporary accommodation.
- Establish links with housing advice services, advocacy services and housing caseworkers in order to address housing problems. Organisations should also be able to provide, or make referrals to, advocacy services that provide support to families in housing need.
- Ensure each child is tracked and supported.
- Ensure links between the service and families are maintained when the family moves into more settled accommodation, so they will continue to receive the appropriate support. It is imperative that children's organisations refer families to other services when they move to settled housing outside the catchment area.

Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity

Until there's a home for everyone

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