

# Keys to the Future

## An independent evaluation of Shelter's Children's Services

Interim report on policy influence,  
legal and advice work (England)



# Shelter



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### **Acknowledgements**

The evaluation team would like to thank everyone who gave their time to participate in this evaluation and made invaluable contributions: external practitioners, policy makers, front-line workers, management and administrative staff at Shelter.

Cover photograph by Sophie Laslett. Other photographs by Matt Cook, Nick David, Andrea Testoni and Kate Stanworth.

To protect the identity of Shelter clients, names have been changed and models have been used in photographs.

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## Introduction

This report has been produced as part of an independent evaluation of the Keys to the Future (KTTF) programme commissioned by Shelter, specifically covering the influencing work of Regional Children's Co-ordinators, Shelter's Children's Service Advice Line and its Children's Legal Service in England. It presents the findings of qualitative research conducted over the past year with staff from each of these Keys to the Future services, plus external policy and practitioner stakeholders. It aims to provide an overview of the achievements of the services over the past year and, as such, contributes to an evaluation summary report that covers all of the Keys to the Future services.

The origins of Keys to the Future lie in the Million Children Campaign undertaken by Shelter between 2004 and 2006. This aimed to raise public awareness of the number of children living in families who were homeless, in temporary accommodation or unsuitable housing.

Over this period, two research reports commissioned by Shelter highlighted that: ‘Despite the impact of housing on children’s life chances... public policy has paid surprisingly little attention to the issue’.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Million Children Campaign, Shelter made a proactive decision to: ‘demonstrate, through a range of practical and support pilots, new ways of preventing child homelessness and supporting those children who are already homeless to achieve better outcomes’.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to local services in England and Scotland, as part of the development of Keys to the Future, Shelter successfully sought trust and corporate sponsorship to develop the initiative at a regional and national level. This was a strategic decision to:

- extend the reach of Shelter’s advice services for children and families through the development of a dedicated telephone advice line for Children’s Centre (and subsequently HomeStart) workers
- promote, regionally and nationally, good practice in both the prevention of homelessness and reducing its impact on children and families through the activities of Regional Children’s Co-ordinators
- establish a dedicated Children’s Legal Service and adopt a ‘test case strategy’ to bring about change in the legal and legislative frameworks around children, families and housing.

1 Harker, L. (2006) *Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children’s lives*. Shelter, London.  
See also: Rice, B. (2006) *Against the odds; An investigation comparing the lives of children on either side of Britain’s housing divide*. Shelter, London

2 Internal Shelter policy/strategy paper.



## Aims and interventions

Senior Shelter staff noted that although the Million Children Campaign raised awareness of the impact of poor housing on children's lives, it also highlighted a need to identify what could be done about these issues at a practical level.

One staff member gave the following example:

'A child is registered for education and the school gets an address. So that child has accommodation. The school does not know – is this temporary, is it suitable... so they then do not understand the cause of that child being disruptive in class or having difficulties learning.'

A Regional Children's Co-ordinator, undertaking audits of local authority arrangements for joint working between housing and social services to meet the needs of homeless children and families, commented: 'What we also found was that policy and practice in this field was not really 'joined up' despite Children's Trust arrangements. In short, housing has been the missing element in integrated children's services and partnership working.'

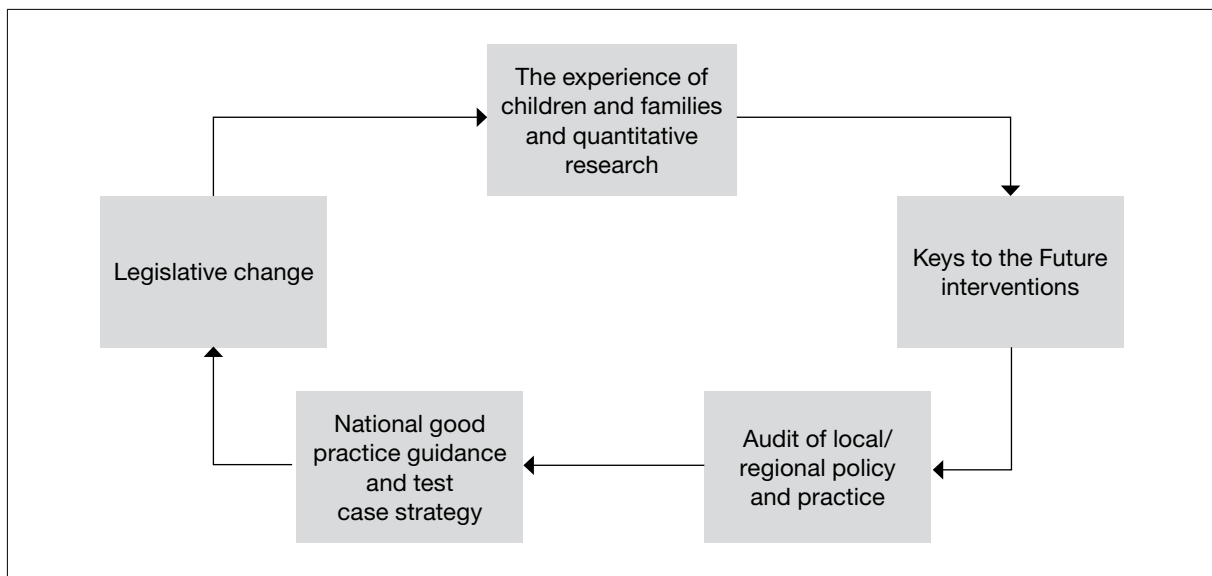
**Keys to the Future's influencing and advice work has four core aims:**

- to raise awareness among professionals in children's services of the impact of poor housing on children and families

- to promote effective inter-agency working to address the needs of homeless children and families through the dissemination of good practice
- to extend access to specialist housing advice to the children's services' workforce
- to bring about national policy and legislative change which benefits children and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

To achieve these aims, Keys to the Future has developed a clear process model (summarised in Diagram 1) of working from locally based pilot projects in Scotland and England to influence regional and national policy development in both nations.

**Diagram 1: Influencing policy and practice, from local to national levels**



In developing and implementing the above process model, the following Shelter interventions have been adopted in England:

### Children's Service Advice Line

This was launched in April 2007. The service was originally delivered through local Shelter advice services providing expert housing advice to Children's Centre staff. The Advice Line has subsequently been relocated to Shelter's central call centre in Sheffield, where there is now a pool of 19 advisers servicing the line.

### Regional Children's Co-ordination

Shelter has established a network of Regional Children's Co-ordinators, coterminous with Government Office regions. These posts originally covered London/South East and the South West, but with further fundraising the four posts now also cover the North East, North West with Advice Line promotional work in the East and Midlands shared between Co-ordinators in the North West, North East and South East/London. Co-ordinators play three roles: promoting the Children's Service Advice Line, raising awareness of the impact of homelessness on children's lives among children's services' professionals and developing/promoting good practice in addressing homelessness which can influence both regional and national policy development.

### Children's Legal Service Solicitor

This is a 1.4 full-time equivalent position that is 'job-shared' between two part-time solicitors located within Shelter's Legal Services department. The service is charged with undertaking casework, providing technical advice to the staff of Shelter's advice services and to external agencies, facilitating seminars and events on relevant legal issues as well as developing a test case strategy to influence legislative change and, therefore, policy and practice guidance.



## Programme reach

A key objective of Keys to the Future, regionally and nationally in England, has been to extend the initiative's reach and influence both at a practical level (eg into Children's Centres) and in policy and good practice development.

### **Children's Service Advice Line**

As with local Keys to the Future services, the targets set for both the Children's Service Advice Line and Shelter's Children's Legal Service are ambitious.

#### **The key achievements of the Children's Service Advice Line include:**

- repeat publicity about the service that has been distributed to all Children's Centres (and is thereby hitting the intended target audiences). This promotional activity has been supplemented by presentations given by Regional Children's Co-ordinators to Children's Centre management teams and other regional networks
- advice protocols and web-based information 'packs' that have been refined to support individual Children's Centre staff callers with tailored procedures and advice materials
- 479 Children's Centre staff (in addition to original targets) who have attended housing training sessions provided by Shelter and the outreach work that has been developed.

However, take up of the Children's Service Advice Line has been slower than anticipated in terms of casework support. The service has a target of delivering housing advice, through supporting Children's Centre staff, to a total of 6,950 families over three years. Between September 2007 and March 2008, 153 Children's Centre cases were opened. This figure has built, between April 2008 and March 2009, to 436 (total 580) with further growth, cited by staff for the five months to August 2009, to an overall total of 810 cases for the 23 months. This represents 18.2 per cent of the projected target to date. A number of reasons for this were given by both Shelter staff/management and external stakeholders – in particular that, as Children's Centres have rolled out over three phases, the focus has been on internal management issues and the delivery of core services, with a lack of capacity to extend the range of advice and related work with service users. One Children's Centre manager also noted that staff 'need to be made more aware of how to identify children in temporary accommodation or bad housing and given the confidence to believe they can do something about this'.

With increased capacity within the Regional Children's Co-ordination team to support marketing, the Children's Service Advice Line is now reaching beyond London/South East and the South West to all regions in England (see Appendix 1 for further details). Further, a postal survey of Children's Centre staff accessing the service (August 2008) showed high levels of satisfaction with the service; of 45 respondents (30 per cent of those contacted) 85 per cent (38) reported that the service was extremely/very useful. A similar percentage noted that while the advice given was complex, it was appropriate to the needs of families and clearly presented. In 42 per cent of cases the advice resulted in resolving the Children's Centre client's problems.

While the survey was not repeated in 2009, interviews with representatives from Children's Centres and HomeStart indicate continued high levels of satisfaction with the Advice Line. One Children's Centre manager commented: 'An excellent service; good, clear advice with plenty of back up material which has given our [staff] a much greater confidence in passing on advice and knowing that they can do something effective about families' housing.'

## Children's Legal Service

The targets set for the Children's Legal Service are as ambitious: there are targets of 150 case interventions per annum and six successful test cases over the three years of the service. Between October 2007 and August 2009, legal advice had been given in 263 cases – indicating what this element of the service will achieve over its lifetime. The Children's Legal Service won judgment in the high profile case of *Redstone Mortgages v Welsh and Jackson* (2009), which protects families entering into a rent-back arrangement where a property has been sold to the family's mortgage company to cover arrears.

Shelter Legal Services has also taken a case to the House of Lords, *Moran v Manchester City Council* (2009), which extends housing protection to women – including those with children in a women's refuge following domestic violence.

## Regional Children's Co-ordination

Co-ordinators noted that a substantial amount of their time (estimated at over 50 per cent) had been dedicated to promoting the Children's Service Advice Line. With the team's expansion, there has been increased capacity to develop a stronger focus on influencing policy and the roll out of good practice to local authority areas. This has involved:

- an initial online audit of local authority policies on joint working between housing and social services to address the needs of children and young people who are homeless or living in poor housing
- a more detailed review of good practice examples in local authorities
- analysing the extent to which the Government's Every Child Matters framework incorporates targets and measures that reflect the impact of homelessness and bad housing on children's wellbeing and considering additional targets that are needed
- intensive work with district (housing) and county (social services) in Devon to develop joint policies and procedures on accommodation and support for 16- to 17-year-olds

- Regional Children’s Coordinators, together with a representative from Shelter’s national Policy team, working to develop nine cross-cutting policy objectives to address the impact of homelessness and bad housing in children and young people (see Appendix 2 for further details)
- the development of a benchmarking guide for joint working to improve outcomes for children and young people in housing need.<sup>3</sup> The intention is to roll out this guide through training and related events with local authorities over the final quarter of 2009 and early 2010.

This policy and practice groundwork places Shelter in a strong strategic position for the coming year. The opportunities presented are addressed in the final sections of this report.

3 Shelter, *Improving outcomes for children and young people in housing need: A benchmarking guide for joint working between services*, 2009



## Impact and outcomes

### **Raising awareness**

Influencing work is having an impact at local, regional and national levels. For example, a Children's Centre manager has noted that the Children's Service Advice Line, Regional Children's Co-ordinator presentations and training events/joint seminars 'are raising awareness amongst staff about housing and its impact on children. They are also becoming more confident that they can do something about it and the [advice] line is extending the range of services we can offer to families'.

### **Keeping housing on the 'child poverty' agenda**

Having an impact on policy change in the current climate (with budget cuts and service retrenchment to focus on core business rather than service development and partnership working) has been difficult. A key outcome, therefore, as identified by a regional government representative, is that Keys to the Future's influencing work has been 'keeping housing on the child poverty agenda'. Across external stakeholders, this was seen as a key achievement of the programme, both nationally and at a regional level in particular:

'It's been useful in policy circles regionally. Worklessness and benefits have come to dominate the whole child poverty agenda. So having a constant reminder of the housing dimension, and having housing in there as part of the solution, is invaluable. Otherwise it would just slip off that agenda.'

**Regional government representative**

At a national policy level, Shelter jointly organised a workshop on child poverty and housing with the cross-departmental Child Poverty Unit (September 2008) and, in the subsequent Child Poverty Strategy (March 2009), housing is explicitly recognised as a 'building block' to help alleviate child poverty.

## Strategic opportunities

While the test case strategy has been slower to develop, the appointment of a new Children's Legal Services Solicitor, with experience in policy and campaigning (plus pro-bono support from Freshfields), and the extension of the Regional Co-ordination team has given national influencing work new momentum. Crucially, the influencing work undertaken to date presents Keys to the Future with significant strategic opportunities in the immediate future.

Over 2008/09, Keys to the Future undertook an audit of services for 16- to 17-year-olds who were homeless and/or vulnerable. This brought together county social services and district councils/housing providers to develop a set of joint protocols. This intensive work was completed as the House of Lords issued a landmark decision (*G v LB Southwark*) on housing and social services' responsibilities for vulnerable 16- to 17-year-olds. This required greater co-ordination between local authority departments to ensure the greater protection of housing and safeguarding rights and responsibilities for, in particular, care leavers at 18 years of age. As a result of the protocols developed, Shelter's Children's Service and Shelter Training are in a unique position to 'roll out' good practice in this field across local authorities in England and develop national policy work in this area.<sup>4</sup>

Regional Children's Co-ordinators have also undertaken a national audit in England of good practice published in November 2009 with a supporting programme of events to publicise this benchmarking report. This places Shelter in a strong position to strengthen both policy and practice nationally in terms of connecting homelessness guidance with Children's Trust arrangements to more effectively address the safeguarding needs of vulnerable children and young people.<sup>5</sup>

Shelter's Children's Legal Service has been refining their test case strategy. According to a staff member in England, this has focussed on 'making the connections between purely technical housing legislation which, for example, only takes note of rent arrears, and human and children's rights legislation'. This is a timely development, as the publication of the Ministry of Justice Green Paper<sup>6</sup> on a constitutional framework for citizen's rights and responsibilities (March 2009, with public consultation between November 2009 and January 2010) includes specific discussions on the child's right to protection and the duties of statutory agencies to ensure that services work effectively together to meet the needs of children. Although the Green Paper is unlikely to enter the legislative process prior to a General Election, the possibility of constitutional change in the longer term presents Shelter with the opportunity to ensure that children's rights and protection issues are integrated with housing/homelessness legislation within a fundamentally different human/citizen's rights framework.

4 In November 2009, Shelter's Children's Legal Service published and disseminated a briefing setting out the facts of the case and the impact this has for local authorities and those advising young homeless people: *Responding to youth homelessness following the G v LB Southwark judgment*.

5 Following lobbying in the Lord's stage of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill, housing has now been included in accompanying statutory guidance on Children's Trusts.

6 Ministry of Justice (2009) *Rights and Responsibilities: developing our constitutional framework*. MoJ, London



## Lessons learnt

### Process model is robust

The influencing and policy development element of Keys to the Future's work programme is increasing momentum. The evidence to date suggests that the process model of learning from experience at the local level, evidencing good practice and then using these to inform policy change, is robust. As one staff member described it: 'The press isn't really interested in statistics. It wants a good human story. The same is true of politicians. They are overwhelmed with statistics. What moves them to action is the direct example of what is happening to a child or a family – but backed up with strong evidence that this is not a 'one off' thing. Story, then evidence, is what changes policy.'

### Competing priorities

Experience from the development of the Children's Service Advice Line shows that housing and homelessness are not always key priorities for partner agencies, such as social services and Children's Centres, delivering children's services. Where partners are under pressure to improve the delivery of their core services, particularly in the light of recent public inquiries and audits, it can be difficult for them to prioritise engagement with agencies offering additional support services. For example, one central government official commented: 'We know that prevention is a priority, that helping clients get a holistic service is important. Helping them access advice, which helps them sort out their problems, is important. But management and staff are under huge and increasing pressures to deliver day to day, are often simply responding to crisis situations... So 'seeing the bigger picture', for them, is really difficult no matter how important they know this is.'

## **Change takes time**

A key learning point from Keys to the Future is that effecting change in legislation, policy, and practice can take longer than expected. As one staff member notes: 'Such work takes a long time. And it is one thing to influence a policy statement or good practice guidance. It's another thing to get that good practice embedded on the ground.'

Also, in terms of influencing policy and practice, Regional Children's Co-ordinators have recognised that often they are working to the timeframes of other agencies or government bodies that might not align with their own need to achieve against targets. As a three-year pilot initiative, Keys to the Future may provide the foundations for future change that are not measurable in its own lifetime.

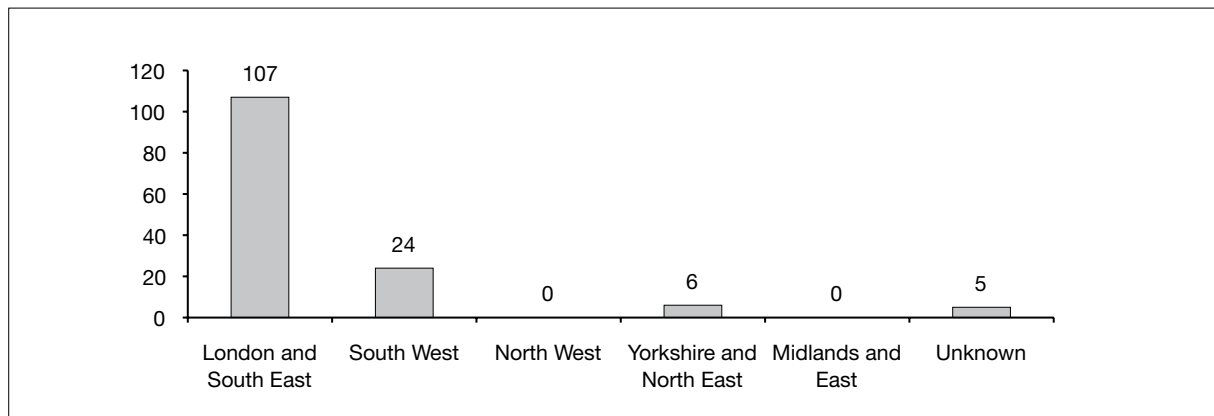
## **Building networks**

Learning from the development of the Children's Service Advice Line, and the role of Regional Children's Co-ordinators, highlights the importance of raising awareness and building networks when initiating a new national service. The use of marketing and training to promote the service through wider children's services' networks appears to have been successful in raising the profile of the new service.

Children's Regional Co-ordinators have also invested time to develop an understanding of the different local configurations of housing and children's services across the regions, and to build regional networks that place Keys to the Future in a strong position to launch its benchmarking report and to consequently further influence policy and practice across local authorities nationally.

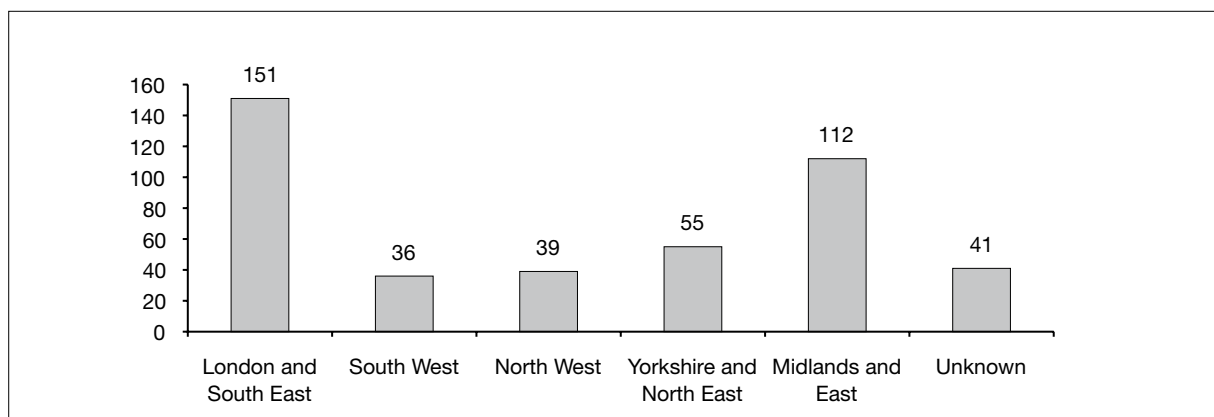
# Appendix 1: Shelter Children's Service Advice Line – Take up by region, Children's Centres

## Year 2007/08\*

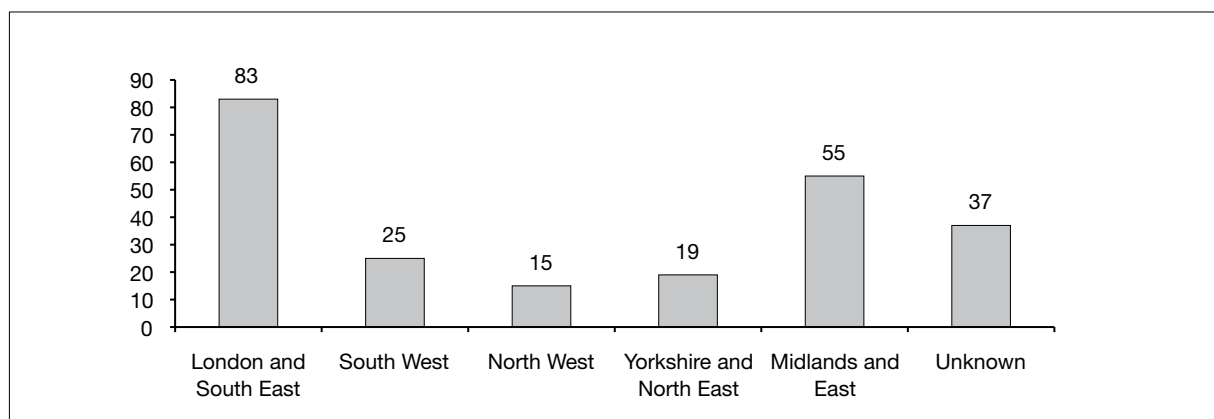


\* The Children's Service Advice Line was piloted in London and the South East, the South West and Teesside regions in September 2007. The service was launched nationally in April 2008.

## Year 2008/09



## Year 2009/10



# Appendix 2: Children's Services – Policy Objectives

Regional Children's Co-ordinators, together with a representative from Shelter's national Policy team, have developed the following cross-cutting policy objectives to address the impact of homelessness and bad housing in children and young people:

## **Policy objective 1**

Ensure local authorities assess and meet the needs of all children in homeless families living in temporary accommodation.

## **Policy objective 2**

Use the Every Child Matters outcomes framework to incorporate targets and measures that reflect the impact of homelessness and bad housing on children's wellbeing.

## **Policy objective 3**

Local authority structural arrangements for the provision of services to children to include formal integration of housing, and joint strategies are developed to identify and address the needs of homeless and badly housed children.

## **Policy objective 4**

Children's Centres required to have a trained, designated member of staff with responsibility for housing.

## **Policy objective 5**

Improved statutory guidance that ensures local authorities take into account children's needs for a safe and secure home when pursuing eviction.

## **Policy objective 6**

Provide support for families with children that have been deemed intentionally homeless to sustain their tenancy.

## **Policy objective 7**

A statutory duty on local authorities to develop and publish protocols between housing and social services to ensure that homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are adequately housed and supported.

## **Policy objective 8**

Local authorities to take into account, when providing temporary accommodation to homeless families, the preference that this does not lead to children having to miss out on school, travel unreasonable distances to school, and change schools frequently.

## **Policy objective 9**

Funding to be made available to local authorities to establish peer education services and support services aimed at preventing and alleviating the damage of homelessness.

# Appendix 3: Advice and influencing – evaluation methods

In addition to reviewing internal Shelter reports, policy papers and submissions, the findings in this report are based on individual interviews and focus groups with Regional Children's Co-ordinators, Shelter's management, Children's Service Advice Line and Children's Legal Services staff, as well as external stakeholders – including sponsors, representatives from Communities and Local Government, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and Children's Centre and HomeStart managers.

In total, 14 representatives from Shelter and nine external stakeholders have been involved in the evaluation process. A separate report has been produced about service delivery, influencing, and policy work in Scotland.

## Until there's a home for everyone

We are one of the richest countries in the world, and yet millions of people in Britain wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their home altogether. Bad housing robs us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter helps more than 170,000 people a year fight for their rights, get back on their feet, and find and keep a home. We also tackle the root causes of bad housing by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

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