

Good practice briefing: The role of Housing Services in safeguarding children

Introduction

This briefing highlights the important role that Housing Services¹ have in safeguarding children and young people. Safeguarding can range from promoting health and wellbeing, to protecting children from abuse and neglect.

Recent reports commissioned by the Coalition Government stress the importance of intervening early in children's lives.² Frontline housing workers are in a good position to identify families who may need support from other agencies or departments, while housing managers and strategists can develop joint protocols and plans with these services, giving a co-ordinated response to the needs of vulnerable families and young people.

This briefing outlines the ways in which Housing Services can promote safeguarding by:

- identifying support needs at an early stage
- housing families near to their existing support networks and schools, wherever possible
- working with other agencies, using the Common Assessment Framework where appropriate
- sharing information in line with agreed protocols
- agreeing eviction protocols as well as joint protocols for homeless 16- to 17-year-olds with Children's Services
- being represented on the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

Our recommendations follow at the end of this briefing.

¹ The term Housing Services is used to encompass housing providers, housing options and housing strategy departments.

² Frank Field, *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults*, the Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances (2010); Graham Allen, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government (2011); Eileen Munro, *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system* (2011)

Early identification

When Housing Officers sign up a family to a tenancy, visit a property, or investigate a complaint of harassment or antisocial behaviour by or against a tenant, there may be early indications of a family's support needs or evidence that warrants a child protection referral. Housing Options' staff may similarly become aware of issues when assessing a family's homelessness application.

While Housing Services will have clear guidelines in place for making referrals to Social Care in cases where there are child protection concerns, it can be harder to deal with cases adequately when concerns fall short of this threshold. It is helpful to develop a working knowledge of local services for children and young people, and to form a good relationship with agencies that provide these services. Using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF)³, after appropriate training, can also help housing staff to identify and address the needs of families in partnership with other agencies.

Case study

First Choice Homes Oldham (FCHO) has a Designated Safeguarding Officer (DSO) in every one of its teams. DSOs can be consulted by team members on safeguarding matters, as well as carrying out their normal duties. They benefit from dedicated training, developed in partnership with the council's safeguarding team, which they can then roll out to their own team members.

All FCHO staff have attended a theatre workshop highlighting a range of safeguarding issues, and can get advice from the Designated Safeguarding Officers when needed. A flow chart clearly outlines their responsibilities and the next steps, and it prompts them to consider using a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in cases where a child needs support but is not at risk of significant harm.

This forms part of a larger safeguarding initiative, which is ongoing.

Multi-agency working

The Shelter report *Chance of a lifetime*⁴ details the detrimental effects of poor housing and homelessness on children's health, wellbeing and future life chances. Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to grow up with respiratory illness and poor mental health, and they are twice as likely to leave school with no GCSE qualifications.

It is expected that social landlords will already be promoting health and wellbeing in ensuring their housing stock meets the Decent Homes Standard,⁵ that they have strategies in place to tackle overcrowding, and are working to improve neighbourhoods and promote community cohesion.

In addition, social landlords and/or local authority Housing Options departments should strive to:

- house families near to existing support networks and schools wherever possible
- use the Common Assessment Framework and attend multi-agency meetings when housing issues are part of the presenting problem
- implement a joint eviction protocol with the Children's Service, to minimise the risk of eviction⁶ in situations where a family has unmet support needs.

³ The CAF is a standardised approach to conducting an assessment of a child's needs. See 'Further reading' for more information.

⁴ Lisa Harker, *Chance of a lifetime: the impact of bad housing on children's lives*, Shelter (2006)

⁵ The previous Labour Government set local authorities a target for their housing stock to meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010.

⁶ For more information on preventing eviction, see *Good practice briefing: 'Eviction – assessing and meeting the needs of children'*, Shelter, March 2011

Information sharing

Poor housing, homelessness and high mobility feature in a significant number of Serious Case Reviews (SCRs).⁷ An SCR is undertaken when a child has died or suffered serious harm, to establish whether lessons can be learned and safeguarding procedures improved.

Example

Serious Case Review in respect of Family Q undertaken by Sheffield LSCB in association with Lincolnshire LSCB, August 2009

The Q family moved 67 times within Sheffield and Lincolnshire between 1973 and 2008. The father was eventually convicted of sexually and physically abusing his daughters over a 35-year period. The multiple moves hindered professionals' ability to monitor and protect the children, even though three of them were subject to child protection registration. The review found: 'There was a failure to recognise the implications of the house moves for the development and wellbeing of the children and continuity of professionals providing services.'

Multiple moves may be a calculated attempt to prevent the local authority's Social Care department from identifying and monitoring abusers, but in other cases it may be involuntary. Families in the private rented sector with assured shorthold tenancies may need to move frequently through no fault of their own. Repeated disruption of education and community networks can be damaging to families and exacerbate any underlying problems.

The Localism Bill proposes that local authorities can discharge their homelessness duty by housing applicants in the private rented sector. There have already been reductions in the amount of Local Housing Allowance payable to private sector tenants since the Coalition Government's housing benefit reforms of April 2011. These factors will make it more difficult for some families to find a secure and affordable home. Some may be unable to afford their current accommodation and be forced into taking cheaper tenancies, living in homes that are overcrowded or in a poor state of repair.

Information-sharing protocols between Housing and Children's Services can help a family to continue to access relevant services when they move. In addition to benefiting the family, and encouraging continuity, this also reduces the risk of the local authority losing track of vulnerable children.

Case study

Web-based information sharing, tracking temporary accommodation movements, NOTIFY London

NOTIFY is a web-based information and notification system for use by all London's councils. It is a register of homeless single people and households who are allocated accommodation under the Homelessness Acts and move into another borough. It is designed to support the continuity of Social Care, Education services and NHS care.

The system aims to improve a household's access to services by notifying relevant services of the placement or movement of statutorily homeless households living in temporary accommodation in London. This is particularly

important in relation to the movement of families with children and, for example, enables Children's Services' access to information.

The local government association body, London Councils, supports the exchange of information with the consent of individuals and families directly involved, and it encourages staff in Housing Services, Children's Services and Education to discuss how they will ensure the information is used effectively. London Councils is offering a course that sets out the duty of information sharing and how protocols can properly assist the exchange of information between statutory and voluntary agencies.

See <http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/services/notify/default.htm>

⁷ A report on SCRs in London between 2006 and 2009 found that 47 per cent of cases had rent arrears, had been evicted, or were on the verge of eviction, London LSCB, 2009.

Safeguarding homeless 16- to 17-year-olds

The landmark R (on the application of G) v LB Southwark [2009] House of Lords case confirmed that 16- and 17-year-olds who have been excluded from their family home are likely to need more than just help with their housing, and that they should be referred to Children's Social Care for assessment.⁸

Two Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) have outlined tragic consequences when the multi-agency working between services breaks down and local authorities do not have effective protocols in place. In Cornwall, an SCR into the death of a homeless 17-year-old girl

during 2009 found that the youth protocol between Housing Officers and Social Workers had 'fallen into disuse'.⁹ Cornwall County Council has since launched a new protocol. In Eden, a 17-year-old girl, with a troubled history of offending and suffering physical and sexual abuse, also died following a number of multi-agency failings. One of the SCR report's many recommendations was for a county-wide sign up to joint protocols for homeless 16- to 17-year-olds, to be monitored by Cumbria Housing Group.¹⁰

Effective protocols and joint working between Housing Services and Children's Services are crucial to the safeguarding of this vulnerable group.

Case study

Involvement of Housing Services in Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB), Stockton-on-Tees BC

Stockton Borough Council was keen to work in partnership with other agencies to create a network of support for children and young people. A Housing Representative on the LSCB has been in place for many years and there is recognition from the parties involved that homelessness is a safeguarding issue for children and young people.

Through coming together on the LSCB, Housing Services and Children's Services, including Education and Children's Social Care, have fostered an open and effective joint-working relationship. They are better able to identify how and where they can work jointly, and what training and awareness opportunities are useful. Raised awareness among Housing Officers about child protection issues has ensured quick referrals to Children's Services when necessary and, through their expertise in housing legislation, Housing Officers have been instrumental in providing advice to practitioners across Stockton's Children's Services.

Resources across the authority are shared between services to meet the needs of children and young people. For example, the Housing Options department and registered social landlords in the area allocate and provide suitable accommodation for young people to better enable Children's Services to carry out their duties to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds as identified in the Children Act 1989. Joint assessments are carried out by practitioners across these services, to determine a young person's specific needs. The support and accommodation offered is tailored to meet the individual's needs.

Stockton Borough Council's commitment to improving joint-working practices has had many benefits. The presence of Housing Services on the LSCB has led to practices that have reduced the number of young people presenting as homeless, reduced the number of young people experiencing repeat homelessness, and reduced the number of families with dependent children at risk of eviction actually becoming homeless.

8 *Shelter Children's Legal Service briefing: 'Responding to youth homelessness following the G v LB Southwark judgment'*, Shelter, November 2009

9 Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LSCB, Executive Summary of a Serious Case Review on a young person, February 2011

10 Cumbria LSCB, Executive Summary of the Serious Case Review in respect of a child known as Child E, December 2010

Recommendations

Early identification and support

- To promote early support for vulnerable families, housing staff should have a good working knowledge of local services for children and families, and a thorough knowledge of safeguarding procedures.
- Use of the Common Assessment Framework and attendance at multi-agency meetings should be encouraged, with relevant training provided.
- There should be designated, trained safeguarding team members working in all housing teams.
- To maintain a family's continuity of services, staff should take existing support networks and schools into account when allocating housing stock.

Multi-agency working and information sharing

- There should be robust information-sharing protocols in place, to ensure that vulnerable children do not 'disappear'.
- Pre-eviction protocols should be developed jointly with Children's Services, to try to prevent eviction and maintain continuity of services wherever possible.
- There should be clear and effective protocols for homeless 16- to 17-year-olds.
- Housing services should be represented on the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Further reading

Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are required to produce and publish an annual report on the effectiveness of safeguarding in their area. They may also publish details of training opportunities. LSCBs usually have their own website, linked to the local authority site.

Information and materials on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) are available at: www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/caf

Working Together to Safeguard Children (March 2010, DCSF) includes a section on homeless families. The Coalition Government has made changes to the Serious Case Review requirements in Chapter 8, and the document should therefore be read with reference to the current Department for Education website.

Safeguarding Children Across Services: Messages from Research, C Davies and H Ward, October 2011

From Shelter

Improving outcomes for children and young people in housing need: a benchmarking guide for joint working between services, Shelter, September 2011

Good practice briefing: 'Eviction – assessing and meeting the needs of children', Shelter, March 2011

Shelter Children's Legal Service briefing: 'Responding to youth homelessness following the G v LB Southwark judgment', Shelter, November 2009

Good practice briefing: 'Working with families with complex needs', Shelter, Sept 2011

To download these publications, please visit www.shelter.org.uk/childrensservice

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