

Good practice briefing: Engaging with homeless children

Guidance for children's centres

Introduction

This briefing discusses how bad housing or homelessness affects children, and the ways in which children's centres can engage more effectively with homeless children and their families. Children's centres have a responsibility to engage with, and provide for, all children, with particular emphasis on improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged.

Children in bad housing¹, or those who are homeless, can be seriously affected by their housing situation. It can impact upon their health, schooling, physical safety, enjoyment and achievement in life, and their 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. Living in bad housing, for example conditions that

are damp or overcrowded, can cause health problems for children such as respiratory issues or slow physical growth etc.

This briefing identifies good practice examples in three children's centres throughout England, and discusses the services that they offer. While many children's centres are working well with other agencies and specialists including health and education practitioners, it appears that links with housing providers and the homeless sector are not as well developed.

Homelessness and temporary accommodation

Homelessness is a term that is often misunderstood, with many people believing that it is restricted to those who sleep on the streets or in shop doorways. In fact, the definition is far wider than this.

There are several ways in which a person can be legally defined as homeless.²

¹ Bad housing includes a range of issues including homelessness, overcrowding, insecurity, housing that is in a poor physical condition and living in deprived neighbourhoods.

² sections 175–177 of the Housing Act 1996.

- They have no accommodation in the UK, or abroad, which they have a right to live in and is available to them.³
- They have a right to continue to occupy accommodation but cannot secure entry to it.⁴
- Their home is a moveable structure, such as a houseboat or caravan, and they have nowhere to place it and reside in it.⁵
- There is nowhere for the whole household to live together.⁶
- They have accommodation but it is not reasonable to continue to occupy the accommodation, for example due to poor conditions.⁷
- They, or a family member, will be at risk of domestic violence, or other violence, if they remain in their accommodation.⁸

The local authority (LA) has a legal duty to advise those who are homeless.⁹ In addition, if the LA believes that an applicant is homeless, eligible for assistance and in priority need then they must provide interim accommodation until a decision is made as to whether a main housing duty is owed to the applicant.¹⁰ Someone may be ineligible for assistance if they have lived abroad or come from abroad.¹¹ Those considered to be in priority need include a pregnant woman, or someone she lives with, and someone who lives with dependent children (this includes children who are under 19-years-old and in full-time education).

Homeless applicants can be housed in different types of interim accommodation, including bed and breakfast hotels, hostels, housing association and LA properties, or private rented properties arranged through the LA. There is no choice offered to the applicant, and the quality of accommodation varies greatly. However, all accommodation offered must be 'suitable'. 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, but often there is no suitable access to cooking facilities. Bed and breakfast is often unsuitable for vulnerable people and is rarely suitable for minors.

Pregnant women and families with children can only be housed in bed and breakfast accommodation when no other accommodation is available¹² and can only stay there for a maximum of six weeks before the LA must find them somewhere more suitable to live.¹³

How bad housing and homelessness affects children

Improving the outcomes for children and young people underpins the work of children's services and should be a key aim for all local authorities. In 2006, Shelter commissioned and published the *Chance of a lifetime* report which illustrates the devastating outcomes for children and young people that can result from bad housing¹⁴:

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

3 section 175(1) of the Housing Act 1996.

4 section 175(2)(a) of the Housing Act 1996.

5 section 175(2)(b) of the Housing Act 1996.

6 section 176 of the Housing Act 1996.

7 section 175(3) of the Housing Act 1996.

8 section 175(1)(a)-(b) of the Housing Act 1996.

9 section 179 of the Housing Act 1996.

10 section 188(1) of the Housing Act 1996.

11 section 185(2) of the Housing Act 1996.

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

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

14 Harker, L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, 2006.

- experience slow physical growth
- have delayed cognitive development.

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.

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

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

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

- The high costs of temporary accommodation can mean it's difficult to make working financially worthwhile, trapping homeless families in unemployment, which is strongly associated with poverty and reduced life chances.
- Living in bad housing as a child, carries a risk of low educational achievement; this in turn results in an increased likelihood of 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 pre-occupied with practical problems, such as trying to make rent or arrears payments, and therefore 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.

Homeless families in a period of transition, for example staying in temporary accommodation, find it difficult to access support services like children's centres, 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 children's centres beyond using them for support in resolving very practical problems, such as providing childcare.

Homeless families moving from temporary accommodation to permanent accommodation face a key time of change. Families continue to need support as they establish themselves in a new community.

What children's centres can do and why

Children's centres need to respond to the specific needs of their locality. Consultation with workers and parents at children's centres identified action that would enable centres to engage more effectively with homeless families or those at risk of homelessness.

Families at risk

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

Children's centre workers need to establish and maintain a relationship of trust with the centre users, enabling them to find out about the families practical, emotional and personal development needs.

Children's centres 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 centre 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).¹⁵ The CAF provides an assessment of a child's strengths and needs, taking into account the role of the

¹⁵ For more information visit www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/caf

parents, carers and any environmental factors 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 directly delivered by the children's centre or referrals can be made to other appropriate services.

Children's centres 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 provision of services for the child, and acting as a single point of reference for the child and family. Appointing a lead professional is central to the effective frontline delivery of services for children with a range of additional needs.

Children's centres need to establish contact and work with an existing lead professional in each child's case. Alternatively, centre workers could themselves be lead professionals, allowing them to provide a more integrated approach to providing support to children or young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Families in temporary accommodation

Outreach services are essential as families experiencing a crisis will not automatically seek external support. Children's centre workers need to establish and maintain a good working relationship with temporary accommodation providers and their staff. In order to achieve this, centres should objectively review their services to establish how to make them more accessible, for example is it easier for the centre to take its services to the families living in temporary accommodation?

Centre staff need to have a basic working knowledge of debt, housing and homelessness issues, which will allow them to identify problems at an early point and intervene where necessary.

Information about play sessions and other children's centre services should be publicised in LA advice centres and all temporary accommodation providers. Centres should also work with partner organisations such as health services, children's services, and social workers to encourage them to provide services in temporary accommodation settings. See the Carlisle South Children's Centre good practice example opposite.

Hostels should be encouraged to refer families to children's centres. 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, as accommodation is 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 like to spend as much time as possible away from hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation. Children's centres should encourage the use of their facilities, and services in other venues. Nursery placements are useful as they provide respite for both parents and children.

Centre workers should ensure that they are aware of the needs of estranged fathers – those in temporary accommodation may need space to have contact with their children.

In areas where there are high numbers of families in temporary accommodation a specialised worker role is effective. See the Susan Lawrence Children's Centre good practice example on page 6.

Multi-agency working

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. Children's centres are ideally placed to take a key role in identifying families in need and to support referrals to other services such as health, housing and children's services, and social care. Children's centres can help other agency representatives to build links and trust with users of children's centres by holding networking or information sessions. See the Green Gates Children's Centre good practice example opposite.

This approach follows the Department for Education guidance, which states that:

'Sure Start children's centres are part of the local system of universal children's services, providing easy access to a range of community health services, parenting and family support, integrated early education and childcare, and links to training and employment opportunities for families with children under the age of five'.¹⁶

16 Department for Education and Skills, *Sure Start Children's Centres: planning and performance management guidance*, page 3 para 1.

Families in permanent accommodation

Children's centres have the potential to prevent repeat homelessness by keeping in contact with families when they move into settled accommodation and signposting or referring them for support. Some families may require support to keep their tenancy and prevent them from becoming homeless again, and children's centre staff could take a lead role in this.

Centres need to recognise that when families move into settled accommodation they may lose touch with them. It is important to be aware of this in advance and encourage them to continue to use the service, and to refer families moving out of the area to the relevant children's centre. See the *Susan Lawrence Children's Centre good practice example* on page 6.

Good practice examples

Carlisle South Children's Centre: Pro-actively promoting services

Carlisle South Children's Centre receives monthly information on all new births, and families with children aged under five who register with a GP in the area. They then send each family a newsletter every school term which contains information on children's centre services.

Staff make monthly contact with the local homeless hostel to ascertain the number of families staying in the accommodation; they provide the hostel with 'play packs' full of materials for families to use with their children, along with children's centre information.

Hostel staff keep contact details for the children's centre and maintain contact with them to discuss the children and their needs. Therefore, children's centre staff are able to identify the specific needs of the children residing in hostels, and address them as appropriate. Recently, a 'sensory suitcase' of resources was loaned to a family with a child with disabilities staying in the hostel.¹⁷

Impact Housing Association, based in Carlisle, employs a teenage pregnancy floating support worker and a domestic violence floating support worker. Carlisle also has a multi-agency teen 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.

Carlisle South Children's Centre has established good links with Impact Housing Association and Carlisle Housing Association. Centre users experience housing problems other than homelessness: bullying and harassment, neighbour disputes, and feeling, or being, unsafe in an area. These issues can have a negative impact on the children. Carlisle South Children's Centre refer these families to various agencies for support, including befriending/advocacy services, a domestic violence service, a family support worker, a benefits adviser, and Carlisle Housing Association, among others.

The children's centre has a good knowledge of service provision in the area, as they actively network and attend multi-agency forums. Information on services in the area is regularly shared across the team, ensuring that everyone is kept up to date.

Green Gates Children's Centre, Redcar: Link to advice services

In the catchment area for Green Gates Children's Centre, homeless families tend to be housed in self-contained temporary accommodation rather than bed and breakfast hotels or hostels.

Referrals to the children's centre are received from a variety of sources, including schools, health visitors, social workers and self-referrals. Centre services are promoted via the Community Development Team, who are pro-active in the community as they co-deliver play sessions, give out information, and build relationships. Green Gates have agreed with

¹⁷ A sensory suitcase is a collection of resources used to stimulate and encourage development.

the housing department that the Sure Start What's on information and registration form is given out to all families when taking up a new tenancy.

A number of female single parents faced the possibility of possession proceedings as a result of failure to comply with tenancy conditions such as maintaining gardens. They often don't have the skills or equipment to carry out such tasks. As a result of this, Green Gates developed links with Women's Aid to deliver outreach services to the local women's refuge. This encourages the women to make use of the other resources offered by the centre. Initiatives have included links with the local college to deliver 'DIY For The Terrified' courses to residents so that they develop the practical skills they need for living independently when they move on. When the women from the refuge are rehoused, Green Gates works with the main housing provider Coast and Country, to try to rehouse people in the children's centre catchment area so that these links can be maintained and continuity of service ensured.

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. The refugee support worker has extensive knowledge of the immigration system and processes, which allows for targeted specialist support. 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.

Green Gates have worked with the local housing department regarding the demolition of some housing in the area, and have held fun days in partnership with other agencies to support families staying in the area that was being redeveloped.

The Susan Lawrence Children's Centre: London Borough of Newham Specialist worker

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, who produce 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 needs of the family are assessed and an offer of support from the centre is outlined. There are also self-referrals to the service from families already using centre services who are experiencing housing difficulties.

The Susan Lawrence Children's Centre offers playgroups for children in temporary accommodation in local community centres. Families in Manor Park have a choice of six to eight weekly sessions to attend and several toy libraries that enable families to borrow toys and games.

A teenage parent group in Newham provides assistance to 10 families in supported accommodation for up to two years. A parent involvement worker runs a weekly parent and toddler group there.

The centre previously developed links with Shelter's Keys to the Future (Newham) service, which provided educational support to children in temporary accommodation. The service ended in 2010.¹⁸

Staff from the children's centre attend Every Child Matters meetings, which are multi-disciplinary meetings involving children's services, social care, health, education and voluntary organisations. At these meetings, the centre can refer families in need to other services and concerns about children or families can be raised. Other organisations may take this opportunity to refer families they work with to the children's centre. The agenda at these meetings includes discussion of transfer-ins, new births, families in temporary accommodation and their access to services, service awareness of homeless families, and potential development of further provision.

When families move on from temporary accommodation, the TAW supports them by linking the family into children's centre services in their new area.

¹⁸ For more information about Shelter's Keys to the Future (Newham) service visit <http://tinyurl.com/62r6btt>

Recommendations

There are measures that children's centres should adopt to assist families and children at each stage of the homelessness cycle.

- Increase their awareness of bad housing and homelessness and its effects, particularly in relation to the five Every Child Matters outcomes.
- Ensure children's centre staff are trained on basic housing rights, allowing them to provide initial housing assistance, or make appropriate referrals to external organisations where necessary.
- Attend and participate in local housing and homelessness forums, ensuring that all centre staff are aware of the housing and social issues in the locality.
- Develop links with the benefits agency, allowing centre staff to provide centre users with more information regarding benefits they may be entitled to.
- Create a simple referral process so that the children's centre can be told about any child in temporary accommodation or at risk of homelessness.
- Develop and maintain an ongoing working relationship with temporary accommodation providers, ensuring they are provided with up to date information on centre services.
- Provide outreach services and activities to families in temporary accommodation. Many families prefer to spend time away from their temporary accommodation, therefore local community centres and children's centre facilities should be utilised for sessions.
- Provide childcare for parents who need to dedicate time to their housing/financial issues, or would benefit from respite time.
- Take on the role of, or liaise with, the lead professional for each child in temporary accommodation.
- Establish links with housing advice services and caseworkers in order to address housing problems. Centres 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 are maintained between the family and the centre when families move into more settled accommodation, to ensure that the family continues to receive appropriate support.
- It is imperative that children's centres refer families to other children's centres when they move on to settled housing outside the area.

Further information

For more information or guidance, please contact one of the following organisations:

Shelter

shelter.org.uk/childrensservice

Children's Service Advice Line: 0845 421 4444.

Lines open Mon–Fri 8am–8pm.

Sure Start

Children's centre practice guidance concerning how to deliver services and practice issues based on learning from Sure Start local programme evaluation and other research can be found in section 21 of the following document: <http://tinyurl.com/4e3594l>

Together for Children

A toolkit for reaching priority and excluded families can be downloaded at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk

Until there's a home for everyone.

In our affluent nation, tens of thousands of people wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their home altogether. The desperate lack of decent, affordable housing is robbing us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter believes everyone should have a home.

More than one million people a year come to us for advice and support via our website, helplines and national network of services. We help people to find and keep a home in a place where they can thrive, and tackle the root causes of bad housing by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

Visit **shelter.org.uk** to join our campaign, find housing advice, or make a donation.

We need your help to continue our work.
Please support us.

Shelter
88 Old Street
London EC1V 9HU
0300 330 1234
shelter.org.uk

Registered charity in England and Wales (263710)
and in Scotland (SC002327)

Shelter