Introduction

Shelter secured funding to pioneer a pilot programme of children’s services between 2007 and 2011, in some of the most deprived areas of England and Scotland. The programme was developed in response to Shelter’s Million Children Campaign (2004), which raised public awareness of the hidden nature of child homelessness.

Services were collectively branded ‘Shelter Keys to the Future’ and the programme consisted of 11 projects: seven locality-based services in England and Scotland working directly with children, young people and their families to prevent or ameliorate child homelessness, a dedicated advice line for frontline staff in England’s statutory and voluntary sector children’s services, a legal service in England offering casework consultancy and bringing legislative change through important test cases, co-ordinated national policy and influencing work in both England and Scotland, and co-ordinated promotion of best practice to mainstream agencies across London, the South East, South West, North West and North East of England.

Commissioned researchers at the University of Birmingham’s Institute of Applied Social Studies carried out an independent evaluation of this programme between 2007 and 2011. For consistency, the whole programme is referred to as Shelter Children’s Services in the report.

Programme aim and objectives

Shelter Children’s Services wanted housing to be recognised as a key factor influencing the ability of children to achieve positive outcomes in life, promoting the importance of good housing as essential for their happy and healthy development. Services set out to work with children ‘at risk’ due to their circumstances and experiences, particularly of homelessness creating social, educational and psychological disadvantage. The aim was to improve circumstances where possible and ameliorate negative impacts before they became significant for the children’s wellbeing.
Objectives of the programme were to:

- prevent children and young people becoming homeless
- mitigate the effects of homelessness on children who have experienced it
- secure legal, policy and practice changes to produce better outcomes for homeless and badly housed children.

The focus of locality-based services differed. Those in Scotland and the London Borough of Newham aimed to improve educational attendance and attainment of homeless children and those in temporary or poor accommodation, refuges or hostels. Knowsley’s service sought to prevent ‘intentionally homeless’ situations due to antisocial behaviour, addressing the impact of this behaviour on both families and communities. The Bristol service focused on the economic wellbeing of homeless and temporarily housed children and families, where family debt or parents’ drugs or alcohol misuse put some children ‘at risk’. Gloucestershire ran a peer education and support service aimed at preventing youth homelessness. This was delivered by homeless young people themselves in schools and other youth settings. All, except Gloucestershire, worked with families who had complex needs and offered tailored packages of support as part of their intervention work.

National policy and legislative influencing work in Scotland promoted early intervention with ‘at risk’ children and families, inter-agency work around issues of homelessness, child poverty and education. It also lobbied for an extension to the right to additional learning support for homeless children and highlighted good practice to prevent evictions. In England, good practice models and tools were also developed which sought to effect changes in the policies and practices of mainstream agencies working with children, young people and families. Interventions made by Shelter Children’s Legal Service helped to develop greater awareness of the impact of eviction on children and families, and its work highlighted the importance of human rights legislation in housing law.

**Evaluation framework**

The University of Birmingham's report summarises research findings over a four-year period, using a ‘Theories of Change’ framework that, in longitudinal studies, helps to identify changes effected by such a programme over time.

The overall aim was to evaluate whether the services met stated aims and objectives, by assessing the extent to which:

- homelessness was prevented among families with children
- outcomes improved for homeless children in terms of their education, safety, health, ability to make a positive contribution, and economic wellbeing
- children from harder-to-reach and excluded communities benefited from services
- interventions effected changes in the law, and policy and practice of mainstream agencies working with children
- the programme, particularly locality-based services, were value for money.

Evidence on outcomes was drawn from methods including: reviewing internal Shelter monitoring and related data, case file samples, focus groups, observation and individual in-depth interviews with children, parents, Shelter staff, management, and external stakeholders. The body of evidence includes stakeholder quotes to illustrate common themes, outcomes or views.

Full details of research methodology can be seen in Appendix 2 of the University of Birmingham Final Report. This publication is available on the [Children’s Service pages of Shelter’s website](http://www.shelter.org.uk/).
Programme performance

The programme began with an ambitious three-year target to help 16,719 children as beneficiaries, agreed with funders without the benefit of a baseline. Start up of services was staggered, so delivery across them operated to differing timelines. Once delivery was underway, quarterly monitoring revealed some outputs were unachievable within the timeframe due to the challenging external context for services, so the overall target was revised to 13,412 beneficiaries. However, Shelter Children’s Services have gone on to support a total of 14,258 children and young people (6 per cent above target), and this figure will increase as two locality-based services were still ongoing at the time of final data analysis.

Performance against target, assessed at June 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service and target outputs to directly help children</th>
<th>Number achieved</th>
<th>% success against target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bristol service</strong> (Jul 2007 to Jun 2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>728 unsettled children's support needs assessed (housing needs assessment)</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177 unsettled children provided with tailored support</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>122%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Service Advice Line</strong> (Sep 2007 to Mar 2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,866 number of cases (to open)</td>
<td>2,051</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,840 number of children helped</td>
<td>3,909</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gloucestershire service</strong> (Jun 2007 to July 2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,000 children educated on housing and homelessness issues</td>
<td>7,785</td>
<td>130%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 children and young people receive peer-support sessions</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>101%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 peer educators trained</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>165%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowsley service</strong> (Dec 2008 to Nov 2011)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>452 homeless children's support needs assessed</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>334 multi-agency support plans developed</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 homeless children provided with tailored support</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newham service</strong> (Jun 2007 to May 2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>450 children benefiting from educational support</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>107%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 children receiving one-to-one tailored support</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 children will have mentoring and peer-support opportunities</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>107%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scottish Education Liaison Project</strong> – 3 services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>526 school-age children will receive a needs assessment</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>212 children with more profound needs will be helped to attend homework clubs</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 children will have increased their level of school attendance as a result of receiving an intensive tailored-support package</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shelter Children’s Legal Service</strong> (Oct 2007 to Sep 2010)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct 450 cases</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>396 children supported</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>112%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Services in Scotland were hampered by closure of Shelter’s Edinburgh office, staff changes and subsequent re-allocation of a designated post to Glasgow. In England both the advice line and legal service experienced initial challenges. The Children’s Service Advice Line (CSAL) needed to broaden its reach from delivering advice to frontline workers in Children's Centres to providing this service for other agencies supporting children and families. Shelter Children's Legal Service had to develop partnerships with other children's legal services and national network groups to increase referral rates. On the whole, most services reached their revised targets with the service in Gloucestershire overachieving on its outputs.

**Programme reach**

Locality-based services effectively reached target age groups, some extending their reach (ie Knowsley, Newham and Scottish services all reached 13- to 16-year-olds, though set up to support 6- to 12-year-old children who had little statutory service provision). Bristol's service reached a higher proportion of 0-5s within its range of up-to-16s, while Gloucestershire’s service specifically targeted 13- to 19-year-old young people.

Harder-to-reach (eg newly arrived migrants, asylum seekers, refugee families, the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities) and excluded communities (eg travellers, drug or alcohol users) all benefited from the programme. Services in Newham, Bristol and Scotland in particular engaged with and reached children from these communities.

The advice line was successfully taken up by children's services’ staff in London and the South East (39 per cent of 2,866 cases opened). Greater geographical coverage was achieved following targeted marketing in the regions. Gloucestershire’s peer education service stretched its reach across six district council boundaries and set up an outreach office in rural areas.

The programme provided tailored support for those vulnerable families with multiple social, economic and educational needs. Half of those worked with in Scotland were already known to Social Services, while in England the figure was estimated at between 20 and 25 per cent. Services capturing data show between 6 and 10 per cent of children had some form of learning difficulty or physical disability.

**Policy context**

The programme has lived through a changing policy environment. Provision for better outcomes for children was high on the national agenda with the previous administration’s Every Child Matters (ECM) framework and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The CAF was introduced to co-ordinate cross-agency responses to vulnerable children’s individual needs in England. Subsequently the Cabinet Office publication of *Think Family (2008)* shifted focus from child-centred models to ‘whole family’ approaches. Shelter’s Bristol, Scotland and Knowsley services reflected this change, employing an approach that was both child-centred and family focused.

While the previous administration stressed that early identification of ‘families with problems’ and preventative interventions were important, its ‘Respect’ agenda moved to a sanction-based approach to poor parenting, with Parenting Orders, Child Safety Orders and Anti-social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). However, following a change of government, the Allen Review (2011) retained three key themes from the previous administration against which Shelter Children’s Services can deliver positive outcomes:

- The importance of prevention and early intervention.
- The need for improved, though devolved, service co-ordination.
- A focus on ‘whole family’ interventions.

Though still committed to 2020 child poverty targets, the Coalition Government’s deficit reduction strategies are impacting on legal and children’s services. Welfare reform and Local Housing Allowance changes will affect security of tenure and the rights of homeless households. This will impact specifically on the vulnerable families Shelter works with.

Programme outcomes

Preventing homelessness
In line with its charitable purpose, Shelter Children’s Services carried out a needs assessment to establish and address issues of homelessness or poor housing first before tackling a child’s difficulties with educational, emotional or social development. These issues were either handled directly by the key worker working with the family or referred to other Shelter/external advice and support services.

Primary prevention outcomes:

■ Sustained tenancies
With help to access housing benefits, reduce rent arrears, address antisocial behaviour, and inter-agency work to address alcohol or substance misuse, children and families at risk of eviction were able to sustain their tenancies.

■ Improved housing conditions
Families in hostels or temporary accommodation were accepted on to council or housing association waiting lists, moved to more suitable temporary housing or supported to negotiate offers of permanent housing. Advice through CSAL contributed to this outcome.

■ Increased knowledge of housing rights
Homeless young people trained as peer educators were more confident asserting their housing needs, better able to negotiate tenancies and knew how to access support to avoid repeat homelessness. Frontline workers’ awareness of housing issues/rights was raised through contact with CSAL and they were better able to support clients or signpost to Shelter for further support.

■ Extension of housing rights in case law
Shelter Children’s Legal Service extended the legal framework for preventing homelessness for vulnerable groups, through its successful test cases.

Primary prevention through education outcomes:

■ Homelessness stereotypes challenged
Receiving peer education in Gloucestershire, young people learned that homelessness can happen to anyone, any time, and homeless people are not archetypal.

■ Increased awareness of the implications of youth homelessness
The young people retained key messages about the realities of leaving home in a hurry, sofa surfing, sleeping rough and surviving with no money, from real life experiences peer educators shared. Teachers’ awareness was raised of how homelessness affects a young person’s behaviour and attainment in school.

■ Increased knowledge of housing support for young people
Recipients of peer education learnt about the Connexions service and different housing options in the area, so were better able to plan a move and find help if they became homeless.

Mitigating the impact of homelessness
In addition to housing issues, families using Shelter Children’s Services suffered multiple-deprivation with debt, poor health, addiction, inter-generational worklessness or poverty. A holistic approach to each child and family enabled linked outcomes. Against the Shelter Children’s Services assessment framework, overall levels of risk to children were reduced and the following outcomes achieved.

Education:
Poverty, poor housing and homelessness are recognised factors influencing educational attainment, with poorer children being much less likely to do well in school. This trend proves hard to reverse as children move into secondary education.
Improved school attendance

- **Removal of financial barriers to school attendance**
  External grants and some service budget flexibility that helped pay for uniform, equipment and travel costs improved school attendance. Education Maintenance Allowance enabled older children to go on to, or remain in, college.

- **Improved access to school**
  Families were supported to apply for school places near or within easy travelling distance of their temporary housing, or helped to appeal when inappropriate school places were allocated to their children.

- **Parents understand the importance of school attendance**
  Parents were encouraged to see the value of school and to raise their own and their children’s aspirations.

Improved school attainment

- **Improved ability to engage with education**
  Children were supported to control their own behaviour, actions and responses. They reported being more able to express themselves in class, wait their turn and be less impulsive, and teachers noted improvements in their ability to listen and concentrate for longer.

- **Bullying issues addressed**
  Dealing with bullying improved children’s personal safety and their relationships with peers and teachers in school.

- **Attainment of qualifications**
  A majority of young people recruited as peer educators were defined as NEET (not in employment, education or training). After volunteering, two went on to further education or university and 9 gained a nationally recognised BTEC qualification.

Emotional and social wellbeing:

Emotional and social wellbeing can be severely affected by homelessness and poor housing and this has long-term implications for a child’s ability to aspire and achieve. The intensive support provided addressed the whole family’s social and emotional needs as part of a tailored package of services, including housing support. Service users and stakeholders reported the following outcomes:

- **Improved emotional literacy**
  Children were better able to acknowledge and to deal more appropriately with their feelings, particularly anger. This helped them get on better with their family and peers.

- **Increased confidence**
  Children were better able to try new things, meet new people and ask for help if needed as confidence and self-esteem grew. This came from encouragement to broaden their experience and take part in a range of social activities.

- **Improved behaviour**
  Support with behaviour management strategies enabled improvements. Children were better able to connect with and relate to peers. Their relationships with teachers and other adults improved.

- **Increased parental resilience**
  Activities, such as parenting courses, parent partnerships and adult education classes, contributed to parents’ ability to cope and be ‘good’ parents. They said stress levels reduced and they felt less depressed, describing how coping strategies staff shared with them offered them structure and a way forward. Children felt safer as a result, knowing their parents were happier and better able to deal with problems.

- **Improved family functioning**
  Families developed firmer social and emotional bonds from better communication and co-operation, and a reduction in stress and anxiety was helped by social ‘fun’ elements of the service. Opportunities were provided for the family to do things together, eg a trip to the cinema, and parents finding time to play with their children. This was particularly valued by lone parents or those of larger families.
Improved social skills
Children met new people through the service, attending regular group activities and developing new friendships.

‘It just took a little bit of support and someone to believe in you for me to get my life back on track. If someone believes in you, you can do things for yourself.’

Parent, Knowsley

Increased participation:

Children were offered a range of ways to participate through Shelter Children’s Services. They were involved in decision-making about services, helping to design or plan group activities. They developed new skills (debating, negotiating, group decision-making and influencing decision-makers), gained better understanding of how decisions are made and how to contribute. This increased their confidence, self-esteem and aspirations through being taken seriously. It also improved services so they became more responsive to the needs of users. Children and young people reported being more motivated to get involved at school and in the wider community.

Broader participation
Children and young people from harder-to-reach communities influenced services, contributing to resource materials (eg DVDs, animations or other web resources) that were widely disseminated locally, regionally and nationally.

Improved consultation practice in partner agencies
Young people made effective contributions to consultations they organised. In Gloucestershire, a council’s promotion leaflet on housing for young people was amended and improved after consultation with peer educators. The stakeholder agency said their involvement made it a powerful and useful process, while the young people themselves reported feeling more confident about expressing opinions and took pride in having made a difference.

Economic wellbeing:

Interviews with parents indicate that repeat patterns of poverty and homelessness were common in families accessing Shelter Children’s Services. Those providing intensive support effectively addressed economic issues for children and families identified through a needs assessment.

Improved access to benefit entitlements
Casework files show successful applications made for previously unclaimed benefit entitlements.

Access to additional funds
Families in need benefited from one-off sums of money and discretionary funding.

Supported referral to other agencies
Staff arranged for other agencies, eg Citizens Advice Bureau, to deal with debts or rent arrears when necessary.

Improved financial capabilities
Peer educators improved their personal money management skills once they were able to access financial advice and support services.

Increased economic aspirations
Parents reported raised personal aspirations and were encouraged to think about future employment, while some considered taking up volunteering options to improve their work prospects.

Access to work experience
Peer educators in Gloucestershire said learning about the ‘routine’ of work (eg turning up on time, dressing appropriately, minding their language) was a useful experience. Four of them moved into employment afterwards, at least two took up further volunteering, and five achieved recognised awards for their volunteering with the service which, together with improved CVs and references, enhanced their job prospects.
Influencing policy and practice at national, regional and local levels

Shelter Children's Services highlighted the impact of homelessness on children and promoted recognition of their needs within national, regional and local policy and practice. England’s Regional Children's Co-ordinators and the National Policy and Practice Officer in Scotland developed links with regional and national structures and networks to disseminate learning from the programme. The locality-based services credibly demonstrated what could be done for homeless children and families, thereby influencing the policies and practices of other organisations.

National changes in legislation and case law

- **Legislation influenced**
  In Scotland, the programme lobbied for clauses in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, ensuring homeless or temporarily housed children’s access to additional learning needs services.

- **Case law influenced**
  In England, Shelter’s Children’s Legal Service successfully pursued three test cases that resulted in:
  - greater security of tenure for families in ‘sale and rent back’ accommodation (Redstone Mortgages v Welsh and Jackson [2009])
  - access to social housing and related housing benefits for families with children born in the UK applying for indefinite leave to remain (Clue v Birmingham City Council [2010])
  - clarification on rights of vulnerable young people within the criminal justice system and in contact with the Youth Offending Service to Social Services assessment and support in housing matters (TG v LB Lambeth [2011] following the G v LB Southwark [2009] judgment).

- **Raised awareness of the impact of homelessness on children**
  Within the legal system, awareness of the impact of housing law on the whole family and of eviction on children has been raised together with understanding of the need for interaction between housing and human rights legislation.

- **National guidance informed**
  Scotland’s policy work produced Guidance on Standards of Temporary Accommodation (2010) for ‘adequate living space’ to include space for children to play or do homework, contributed to the child poverty agenda, and was instrumental in moving Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) up the agenda of other agencies beyond education.

- **Resources produced**
  Reports, good practice briefings, workshops and conferences came out of the programme to promote and share best practice. External policy and service management stakeholders found these positive with approaches likely to facilitate change.

- **Policy and service developments informed**
  Work by Regional Children’s Co-ordinators in England and their counterpart in Scotland secured development of more proactive eviction prevention services (Scotland), inclusion of youth homelessness issues in Homelessness Strategies, and development of outreach work from England’s Children’s Centres to support families in temporary accommodation.

Regional level work

Regional Children's Co-ordinators worked to ensure that housing providers and voluntary organisations were actively involved in Children's Trust arrangements.

- **Strategic relationships built**
  Knowledge from Shelter Children's Services informed housing, children and family policy development.

- **Child Poverty Needs Assessments influenced**
  Shelter helped shape the process of assessments and accompanying local government guidance, ensuring housing needs are recognised as an integral part of child poverty.
- **Briefings and publications produced**
  The programme produced legal briefings on housing support for vulnerable young people and good practice models to effect joint-working between housing and children’s services. These included briefings for housing professionals about eviction and working with families who have complex needs, tailored guidance for children and family service providers on supporting homeless children, and workshops and briefings on the likely impact of changes to Housing Benefit and tenancy rights. In addition, the report *In their own words (2011)* on what works through peer education, and age-appropriate advice packs like *Your first home: some stuff you really need to know (2011)* were produced with the aim of preventing homelessness. These publications are available to download from shelter.org.uk/childrensservice.

- **Local level work**
  Locality-based services also influenced the people they worked with, building on local agency relationships to share knowledge of how poor housing and homelessness affect children’s life chances.
  - **Raised awareness of the impact of homelessness on children**
    Schools and other service providers know how the adverse effects of homelessness impacts on children’s education, emotional wellbeing and aspirations.
  - **Other children’s services are better able to respond to housing need**
    Information, advice and guidance for frontline children’s services enables them to respond to housing issues. In Newham, questions about housing status are now included on school admission forms.
  - **Shelter recognised as a provider of children’s services**
    Working in partnership with other agencies in Knowsley and Bristol established Shelter as a competent lead in the Common Assessment Framework process for vulnerable children.
  - **Homelessness Strategies influenced**
    Peer education was recognised in Homelessness Strategies of all six district councils in Gloucestershire as a means of preventing youth homelessness.
  - **Good practice disseminated**
    Local authorities welcomed Shelter Children's Services’ contribution to practice change. For example, it helped Blackpool Council’s work to identify young people at risk of homelessness, and their commissioning team is using this work to review its service design and delivery.
  - **Scope of other children’s services extended**
    Promotion ensured CSAL now contributes to the package of advice and support of a wider range of local children’s services. Practitioners, policy makers and other stakeholder agencies see Shelter Children’s Services as a valuable resource. For instance, it has been instrumental in helping other charities, such as Home Start, to include housing advice as part of their delivery to children and families.

- **Cost-consequence economic analysis**
  Current deficit reduction strategies put pressure on agencies to show long-term value for money in service delivery. To demonstrate this for Shelter Children's Services, four case studies representative of the work of locality-based services were selected. These cases focused on intensive interventions with children and families with complex needs. Costs incurred for each were set against the costs other agencies might have incurred over a one-year period, if there had not been early intervention.

  These case studies show that for every £1 invested in Shelter Children's Services' intensive support, potential savings of between £1.92 and £2.54 could be achieved. This suggests that as well as contributing to the wellbeing of children and families the investment in prevention and early intervention made good monetary sense. Full details of the case studies and the cost-consequence analysis can be seen in Appendix 4 of the *University of Birmingham Final Report*. 
Independent evaluation of Shelter Children’s Services: England and Scotland

What works – the learning from Shelter Children’s Services

Effective approaches against programme objectives

Evidence was captured, as the programme developed, of what works in prevention and early interventions with children and families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The key lessons from the programme are captured below.

Homelessness prevention
Achieved through:
- raising awareness of homelessness and poor housing
- advocacy
- referral for housing advice
- awareness raising of frontline staff from other agencies.

Mitigating the impact of homelessness
Achieved through:
- advocacy
- tailored packages of support for education
- structured approach to improving emotional and social wellbeing
- events and celebrations
- opportunities to make friends
- providing support with parenting skills and behaviour management
- trips and social activities
- tackling bullying and antisocial behaviour.

Influencing policy and practice
Achieved through:
- awareness raising and advice for frontline workers/managers
- regional co-ordination of dissemination of learning
- cross-service co-ordination
- legal test cases
- persistence and responsiveness
- networking
- case studies
- organisational experience.
‘What Shelter did was provide case studies of the impact of temporary accommodation on children and this makes the guidance much more real… and it is practical, rather than good intentions that cannot be delivered at the local level.’

Policy maker, Scotland

Cross-programme learning
One of the main findings from research is a high level of client satisfaction due to parents, young people and children feeling valued, respected and listened to by Shelter staff. In assessing interventions across the programme, it was always the intention of Shelter Children’s Services to build up a body of learning that would be of use to other providers.

Advocacy
Many families felt they had been ‘fobbed off’ previously by agencies and were unsure of how to navigate the system. Shelter staff were tenacious, persistent and could articulate the rights and entitlements of families in language other professionals understand. They also gained leverage by bringing Shelter’s housing expertise and credibility to the table. Service users were given practical help with forms, applications for housing, claiming benefits and school places.

Tailored packages of support
Shelter’s model of working allowed services to be tailored to the needs of the child and family, in contrast to other agencies constrained by entrance thresholds or rigid parameters. Shelter was flexible in responding to issues facing a family and proactive in putting together packages of support from relevant services to meet individual needs. Families benefited from interventions over dedicated time periods of up to six months – or over if they had particularly complex needs. However, Shelter Children’s Services identified four to six months as the optimum period for intensive interventions to achieve sustainable positive outcomes for children.

Shelter worked with families to prioritise their issues and then address them. The underlying causes of long-term cycles of low income, debt, rent arrears, homelessness and non-attendance (contributing to poor achievement) at school were tackled in a way that made sense to children and families. This significantly helped improve outcomes for children. Gloucestershire developed its service to accommodate fluctuations in peer educator engagement, in an understanding and non-judgmental manner, recognising the sometimes chaotic circumstances of the young homeless people.

Multi-agency working
A multi-agency approach was recognised as key in prevention and early intervention work. Shelter staff were actively involved in Common Assessment Framework (CAF) processes, sometimes taking the Lead Professional co-ordinating role. Using a CAF helped provide improved co-ordination and continuity of services for families moving from one area to another.

Staff networked with other service providers and developed reciprocal referral systems. Referral might be necessary for help with debt, immigration issues, educational psychology or speech therapy. Six or seven other agencies could be involved with a family with complex needs at any one time. The strength of Shelter Children’s Services was their persistence to follow up agencies who had committed to actions, to ensure children and families got the services promised.

Strategies for building effective relationships with families
Services were child-centred yet also holistic, working with parents to resolve problems. Staff did not create barriers to service access, were patient, and did not give up on a family if initial appointments were broken. They were determined, within clear parameters, to reach and work with families who had disengaged from other services, could be in crisis or have chaotic lifestyles.
Shelter Children’s Services developed clear contracts with service users from the start, identifying the goals of interventions and setting out expectations on both sides. Staff provided consistency in interventions. The presenting problem was addressed first, building family trust, then underlying problems dealt with without judging or criticising. Parents and children reported trusting staff because they did what they said they would do. Service users had a planned withdrawal from services to avoid the distress that can be caused by an abrupt case closure.

**Approaches to improved family functioning**

A ‘positive regard’ and ‘starting from family strengths’ model was key in supporting positive behaviour changes and encouraging a child and family to communicate better. Staff introduced parents to reward-based behaviour management and boundary setting strategies. Children were supported in intensive one-to-one sessions to manage their own emotions and behaviour. All locality-based services provided families with social opportunities, ‘fun’ things to do, trips or days out to interesting places as a means of developing improved family functioning.

**Use of multi-media and drama**

Multi-media, art and drama activities, were a powerful means of engaging children and young people at the Gloucestershire, Newham and Scotland services, while DVD and films were also used as information resources on homelessness and housing options for policy makers and service providers in other agencies – extending the reach of services.

Gloucestershire’s peer education service had a multi-media element from the start. Young people worked with a film-maker to practice and hone their stories before delivery in schools. They explored the language they might use and tailored delivery to be effective and appropriate for each group worked with. With students from the University of Gloucestershire, they also produced an inter-active Forum Theatre piece exploring youth homelessness. The audience of young people could stop the action, ask characters questions or tell them what to do next. This was reported as an effective way to explore the implications of leaving home or making rash decisions.

In Newham and Scotland, there were successful animation projects on the issues of homelessness and temporary accommodation for children in those services. The Newham animation was also shown to managers from key local services. Another innovation was working with a performance poet to address issues of identity and belonging with young men (of 16 to 25) from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

**Budget and other flexibilities**

Budget flexibility existed in services to purchase small items, such as helping families buy uniforms or paying travel costs to school if needed. The needs could be attended to quickly, without protracted application processes. Services also negotiated with other agencies or charitable trusts to obtain grants, helping to remove some of the practical barriers faced by families.

‘Looking back, I think it was some very basic stuff that made a difference. Getting the children school uniforms virtually overnight. But because they sorted it out quickly, it made a difference.’

*Learning mentor, Knowsley*

**Volunteering opportunities**

Shelter added value to its services by developing volunteer roles. Mentors helped children with reading and handwriting to improve educational attainment in both Newham and Bristol. Volunteers were also brought in as role models to help raise children’s aspirations. In Bristol, they gave practical help to families with redecorating or gardening. Gloucestershire’s peer educators delivered their sessions as volunteers, but felt very much a part of the Shelter team, and this helped improve self-esteem.
Conclusion

Shelter Children’s Services aimed to ensure housing was recognised as a key factor influencing children’s ability to achieve positive outcomes. It also promoted an understanding of the importance of good housing for the health and wellbeing of children. From 2007 to 2011, the programme helped 14,258 children and young people. All of those referred to locality-based services were vulnerable children and families with housing and other needs. They have benefited from tailored packages of support.

Findings of the evaluation indicate that the models used effectively provided the framework for Shelter Children’s Services to achieve its aim. The experience and learning from locality-based services ‘grounded’ the programme's policy and legal work in practice, thereby enhancing its applicability and credibility.

Shelter Children’s Services worked to prevent homelessness at two levels. Primary prevention was achieved through peer education and by working directly with children and families to secure better accommodation or prevent eviction. The programme was also successful in mitigating against the harmful effects of homelessness on children, with improvements achieved in four main areas – educational outcomes, social and emotional outcomes, increased participation and economic wellbeing outcomes.

Four case studies of intensive interventions with children and families with complex needs were selected for cost-consequence analysis to assess the value for money aspects of the programme. The analysis indicates that for every £1 invested in Shelter Children’s Services’ intensive support, potential savings of between £1.92 and £2.54 could be achieved. This suggests that even within a relatively short one-year post-intervention timeframe, Shelter Children’s Services have contributed to the wellbeing of children and families and achieved potential cost savings through early intervention.

Positive outcomes were achieved for children and families by providing flexible and tailored packages of support. Advocacy and proactively co-ordinating inter-agency work were key to helping children and families to address the underlying causes of homelessness. Shelter Children’s Services built effective relationships with families, improving how they functioned through its model of ‘positive regard’. Creative ways of working were developed, including multi-media techniques to engage children and young people, and involvement of volunteers added value. The programme’s learning about what works is of relevance to statutory and voluntary sector agencies working in education, children’s services and housing.

Shelter Children’s Services successfully combined support for children and families with strategic and policy influencing activity that stressed the impact of homelessness and poor housing on children’s life chances to bring about policy and practice change.

Overall, it has delivered against its programme objectives and generated, and disseminated, models of effective working with children, young people and families. The Children’s Service Advice Line continues to provide advice and support for frontline childcare professionals, and Shelter is actively seeking more funding to develop a new programme of services that build on learning from its Knowsley and Bristol models. Good practice identified through the programme will be used to inform policy and practice as well as develop future services.
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.