Introduction

This briefing explains why families with complex needs are most at risk of housing problems and sets out the good practice local authorities and housing providers are recommended to adopt to reduce the risk of homelessness and ensure that children in such families have their needs assessed and met.

Families with complex needs are more likely to have housing problems than other families. The older family members' parenting skills may be a cause for concern, and their inability to adequately parent children may result in anti-social behaviour. Their struggle to cope or function can mean that tenancy agreements are not adhered to, and families may build up rent arrears or keep the property in a condition that risks health or safety.

Such problems may place families under threat of eviction which, if followed through, could result in homelessness.

Invariably, homelessness will increase families’ needs and unless appropriate support is put in place, such families will experience a cycle of repeat homelessness. This, in turn, will impact on the younger generation who, in later years, are likely to develop a similar pattern of complex needs leading to homelessness.

Having a stable, good standard home is a basic necessity for a child’s development. Research has shown the impact that homelessness has on all aspects of a child’s life – including health, safety, life chances and level of achievement. Improving the outcomes for children and young people underpins the work of children’s services and should be a key local authority aim: a child’s safety and welfare is everyone’s responsibility.

Throughout this briefing, the term ‘children’ refers to children and dependent children up to the age of 18.

1 The government defines families with complex needs as those at risk of statutory intervention but who fall below the threshold for services. Needs can range from drug/alcohol problems to child protection issues.
3 Harker, L, Chance Of A Lifetime, Shelter November 2006.
What works?

In 2007, Shelter set up its children’s service as a response to the low priority homeless and badly housed children or those at risk of homelessness were given. It included the setting up of a number of pilot support projects called Keys to the Future (KTTF). All the pilots will be completed by the end of 2011, and an independent evaluation will examine the outcomes and indicate which areas of the projects’ work have been most successful. Those findings are the basis for this briefing.

The key elements of the project models are:

- working with the whole family – parents and children
- addressing the presenting problem first
- developing trust
- addressing the underlying problem using highly tailored support/intervention
- advocacy for the family
- clear ‘contracts’
- time/duration of interventions
- persistence and reliability of project staff.

Outcomes for the families supported by KTTF projects are:

- tackling the underlying causes of homelessness (debt, behaviour etc)
- improved family functioning
- enhanced parenting skills including boundary setting
- improvements in socialisation/social skills
- positive housing outcomes
- improved behaviour in school
- increase in punctuality/school attendance
- evidence of increased attainment
- access to appropriate services
- addressing anti-social behaviour/risk factors
- addressing debt and benefits issues.

In summary, the key to success when working with families with complex needs is to provide a service that includes the following as a minimum:

- early identification and intervention
- addressing the presenting problem then working on the underlying problem(s)
- longer interventions and persistence in building a relationship with the family.

Early identification and intervention

Research estimates that in England 2 per cent of families have multiple and complex needs. In most localities, only a small number of residents will fall into this category. The housing professional’s aim, when working with families with complex needs, should be to prevent homelessness (or if unavoidable, to ensure access to suitable accommodation) and provide appropriate support. The key to success is the early identification of families with complex needs and an early assessment of the whole family to ascertain the type of intervention required.

Among the early indicators of families at risk of housing problems and/or in need of support are:

- mounting rent arrears
- accommodation visits that show a poor standard of living
- complaints from neighbours
- external agencies’ contact with the family.

Housing professionals cannot be expected to provide support across the entire range of problems faced by families, and setting out to build and maintain relationships with other departments and organisations is vital. One of the key partners in supporting families is children’s services (mainly children’s social care or children’s centres).

Working closely with children’s services should enable information sharing, joint assessment of need and a smoother referral process.

Housing has a key role in safeguarding children (Section 11 Children Act 2004). Frequent changes of accommodation are an indicator of potential concerns, and housing professionals are often well placed to notice families that have occupied a number of properties in a short time period.
Addressing presenting problems

KTTF projects prioritised tackling immediate/presenting problems, such as poor/inappropriate housing conditions, lack of transport to attend school etc, as a basis for building family trust and addressing underlying and more complex needs. In doing so, KTTF combined practical support (for example, access to travel passes etc) with longer-term educational and emotional support. This is reflected in the quantitative data collected by Shelter, which suggests that the complexity of family need only emerges long after initial assessment and that ‘situations may get worse before they get better’ as families acknowledge and begin to address underlying, rather than presenting, issues.

Initial analysis of questionnaires completed by parents on case closure suggests a correlation between the resolution of immediate/presenting problems (for example, suitability of accommodation) and positive outcomes in terms of family/social relationships and educational outcomes such as attitudes to, and attendance at, school.

Longer interventions

In times of austerity, it is tempting to offer short periods of support in order to reduce costs. However, reducing the time that support is available may not cut overall costs – in the long term it often results in families being re-referred for further support. For example, from a total of 180 referrals to Shelter’s Knowsley KTTF project, 18 families were re-referred to the service less than a year after their original cases were closed. The support for ten of these had ended. In these cases, the average length of support given on the first occasion was 13 weeks. The Department for Education’s families at risk division agrees that what works with families with complex needs is an unlimited period of support.

One of the keys to success that takes time is the persistence and patience of workers in building relationships with clients who are often facing a crisis. The University of Birmingham’s KTTF evaluation found that ‘Shelter services were persistent in contacting and chasing up parents who were initially reluctant to engage. This engagement was the basis for effective advocacy’.

From the start, workers also developed clear contracts with clients and set out expectations on both sides. This provided a solid record of work that both parties had agreed and reduced the risk of complications or altercations further down the line due to unrealistic expectations on either side.

Recently, a number of organisations have attempted to calculate the cost benefit from intervention services. A government-commissioned evaluation found that for every £1 intervention services spend, £8 is saved. The University of Birmingham concluded that for every £1 invested, Shelter’s model saves between £1.22 and £4. In the case of a threatened eviction and children put at risk, the cost of Shelter support was £4,828 but without intervention the amount would have been £12,250 (£9,500 eviction costs and £2,750 social care assessment and monitoring costs), a saving of £7,422.

4 Evaluation of Shelter’s Children’s Service was undertaken by the University of Birmingham. The full and final report is due to be published in November 2011.

5 Reaching Out: Think Family (families at risk review), Cabinet Office 2007.
Case studies

The names and some details in the following case studies have been changed to protect the identity of Shelter clients.

Shelter Bristol Housing Support Service
(children’s service)

Complex needs – child protection and ESOL (English as a second language)
Mum and Dad live with five of their children (three boys and two girls aged 16, 10, 8, 7 and 5). When Shelter started working with them, they lived in a two-bedroom property with the children sleeping in one room on a mattress on the floor. The children had no beds or toys. The youngest child has epilepsy. The family are Polish and Mum and Dad speak little English. Social care staff had previously been involved because of fighting between siblings, and possible physical abuse from parents and members of the local community.

The family secured a new council property with four bedrooms on the other side of Bristol. They had little furniture and the house needed repairs. Language difficulties meant the parents needed a lot of support in accessing doctors, dentists and education – and with benefits and bills.

A referral was made to social care, but this was not accepted. However, Shelter has instigated a common assessment framework (CAF) assessment and social care will attend the CAF meeting. The oldest child ran away from home to stay with his adult brother but has since gone missing. The 10- and 8-year-old boys have problems with soiling, which tests show is psychological rather than physical. Despite this, child and mental health services (CAMHS) will not work with the family because of the language barrier.

This family is an ongoing case but so far support from Shelter has achieved the following positive outcomes:

- family now lives in a home which is not overcrowded
- four youngest children and parents like their new home and have furniture they need, including beds
- four youngest children are settled and happy in their new school
- children visited their new school before attending to limit their worries
- good communication established between professionals
- family engagement with Shelter support gives positive indication that family will engage in a CAF
- children have art equipment so they have something to do at home
- family registered at local doctors’ and in process of registering at dentist
- epileptic child is safer. An interpreter was used to communicate important advice from a specialist nurse. The new school has been given the nurse’s contact details and encouraged to set up a meeting.

Shelter Knowsley Keys to the Future

Multi-agency working
Mr Johnson lives in Merseyside with his three daughters, Kate, 14, Susan, 11 and Bethany, 8. They live in a regeneration area with many boarded-up houses and large areas of derelict land. Anti-social behaviour is rife as are gangs.

Mr Johnson has a diagnosis of schizophrenia, which is managed by his community psychiatric nurse (CPN) and medication. However, he is very vulnerable and has a lot of unmet needs. His main carer is his mum who visits six days a week.

The family was referred to Shelter by children’s services after Kate became involved in anti-social behaviour and was putting the tenancy at risk. With no child protection issues to consider, children’s services were about to close the case, but there was still concern about unmet needs which were below the threshold for intervention. CAMHS had also carried out an assessment of Kate, but had not deemed her to have a mental health issue. She had also previously had support from young carers, who were no longer involved.

The initial assessment showed that the family were struggling financially, the children had poor attendance at school, and Mr Johnson was very vulnerable and suffering harassment and financial abuse from local people. When he tried to confront abusive neighbours, they made false allegations about his fitness as a father to police and children’s
services, which led to an investigation. As a result, Mr Johnson is reluctant to report the neighbours or discipline the children in case he gets into trouble.

Since starting to work with the family, a CAF has been put in place for the children and the first CAF meeting resulted in a number of agencies offering the family support. The meeting included representatives from education, young carers, parenting team, Connexions, the Turnaround project (for young people not engaging in school) and education welfare. Arranging the meeting was, however, a slow process which took more than four months. Outcomes achieved for the family include:

- the child support worker (CSW) worked on the children’s confidence and self-esteem and helped increase their social skills through group working
- the CSW focused on behaviour and respect issues, with sessions on the consequences of behaviour, the importance of boundaries and healthy lifestyle choices
- the CSW worked hard with the school and parenting team to support Mr Johnson in getting the children to school
- Shelter referred Mr Johnson to community care to ensure he was getting all the benefits and services he was entitled to
- Shelter supported the family in liaising with the housing association to get the badly maintained hall and bedrooms decorated free of charge
- a referral to Making Space led to Mr Johnson being allocated his own support worker who visits two days a week so he feels stronger and more able to cope
- the children’s attitude to school and attendance has improved and Kate has stopped being involved in gangs and anti-social behaviour
- the tenancy is no longer under threat.

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

**Anti-social behaviour**

A single mother with four children was referred to the Family Intervention Project in Rochdale. The mother had convictions for dealing drugs, and anti-social behaviour by the family and visitors included rowdy parties and criminal damage to neighbours’ property and possessions. The eldest two children were terrorising neighbours, including other children on the estate and the severity of the eldest child’s offending behaviour was enough to warrant a custodial sentence.

Following a detailed assessment, the family was assessed as requiring level 2 intervention, and eligible to be re-housed in a new area where they would have no history of anti-social behaviour. All the children were allocated a children and young persons’ worker, who worked with them on issues including anger management, bullying, fire and water safety, diversity awareness, self-esteem and confidence building. The mother engaged well with a parenting course and successfully completed it. The two older children completed work on substance misuse and agreed to a referral on to specialist workers.

The family support worker worked with the mother on maintaining the tenancy. This included managing visitors, getting rid of unwanted visitors, avoiding conflict with neighbours, maximising her benefits and addressing health issues and drug usage, which involved referral on to specialist services. The support worker worked closely with housing to identify an appropriate property in an area that would give the family the best chance of a new start. The worker liaised closely with the new housing officer to build up good working relationships so problems could be acted on early. The family have successfully moved to the new area and there have been no further complaints.
Conclusion

It is essential, from a moral and financial viewpoint, that early and intensive support is given to families with complex needs in order to prevent homelessness and improve the life chances of children.

Housing professionals are often best placed to identify families at risk and co-ordinate support for them. As explained in this briefing, the key elements of a successful model of support are:

- the early identification of families at risk, including:
  - established protocols between housing and children’s services to identify such families and provide support
  - one key worker as liaison/contact point
  - thinking family – assessment of housing needs and other needs of the whole family (including adult services). Use of whole family CAF

- continuity of accommodation where possible
- provision of intensive support
  - provide support for as long is necessary.

If this type of support service is not provided in your area, it is worth lobbying commissioners to explore the possibility of developing one. Gathering evidence on the level of need in your area and how a support service will reduce future problems and costs would be the first step in the process.
Further information

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. Guidance for housing professionals, Shelter, 2011

Chance of a lifetime, Lisa Harker, Shelter, November 2006

Independent evaluation of Shelter’s Children’s Services: England and Scotland. University of Birmingham. Due to be published November 2011

Independent evaluation (interim report) of Shelter’s Children’s Services: England and Scotland. University of Birmingham, November 2010

For more information or guidance and to access our publications, please visit our website shelter.org.uk/childrensservice

From other organisations

Joint working between housing and children’s services: preventing homelessness and tackling its effects on children and young people. CLG/ DCSF guidance, 2008


The foundation years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the independent review on poverty and life chances. Frank Field, 2010


A new approach to child poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families’ lives. DWP/DfE, April 2011


Intensive family support: the evidence. Action for Children, April 2011
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.