

Good practice briefing: Engaging with homeless children

Guidance for education professionals

Introduction

This briefing explores the measures that education professionals can take to assist homeless children, or children living in bad or temporary housing, to achieve at school. It also identifies good practice initiatives to illustrate the lengths to which some schools and organisations go in order to ensure homeless children are supported.

In 2006, Shelter produced the report *Chance of a lifetime*¹, which stated the damaging impact that bad housing² conditions can have on children's learning. The report identified that homeless children have lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of absence from school.

Bad housing can impact upon a child's health and physical safety, reducing their ability to make a positive contribution throughout school. It also significantly affects their opportunity to enjoy and achieve in life, which impacts strongly on their life chances. Children living in bad housing are nearly twice as likely as other children to leave school without any

GCSEs.³ This can then result in reduced employment opportunities.

Children living in temporary accommodation face a number of practical considerations including: transport to and from school, moving from one school to another, and not having suitable space and equipment in which to do their homework.

Often temporary accommodation is small and space is shared with several family members. The lounge may double up as a bedroom; bed and breakfast accommodation can be just one room which has to accommodate an entire family, with no cooking facilities provided. In these circumstances it can be very difficult for children to complete or concentrate on homework tasks.

Education professionals need to be aware of these circumstances, their effects on pupils, and to know how they can support children experiencing housing problems.

1 Harker, L, *Chance of a lifetime*, Shelter, November 2006.

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

3 Rice, B, *Against the odds*, Shelter, November 2006.

Homeless children

Homelessness is a term that is often misunderstood, with many people believing that the definition is restricted to those who sleep on the streets. However the legal definition is far wider, and there are many instances in which a person would be considered legally homeless.

An individual is considered to be homeless if they:

- have no home where they can live together with their immediate family
- can only stay where they are on a very temporary basis
- do not have permission to live where they are
- have been locked out of their home and are not allowed to return
- cannot live at home because of violence or threats of violence, which are likely to be carried out against them or someone else in their household
- live in a vehicle or boat and have nowhere to put it.

An individual will also be considered homeless if it is not reasonable for them to stay in their home, for example if:

- they cannot afford to stay where they are
- their home is in very poor condition.⁴

The local authority (LA) has a legal duty to advise those who are homeless.⁵ 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.⁶ Someone may be ineligible for assistance if they have lived abroad or come from abroad.⁷ Those considered to be in priority need include a pregnant woman or someone she lives with, and someone who lives with dependant children (this includes children who are under 19-years-old and in full-time education).

Temporary accommodation can include self-contained private rented and social housing, as well as hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation. There is no choice offered to the applicant and the standard of accommodation varies greatly. However, all accommodation 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 that an applicant is expected to stay in the accommodation can be a factor in assessing suitability. The length of time a family will remain in temporary accommodation will vary considerably, from a few weeks to several years.

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 accommodation can be unsuitable for vulnerable people and is rarely suitable for minors.

Families with children can only be housed in bed and breakfast accommodation when no other accommodation is available, and they can only stay there for a maximum of six weeks before the LA is legally required to find them more suitable interim accommodation.⁸ However, occasionally families remain in bed and breakfast accommodation for longer, and can be moved a number of times before they are rehoused permanently. This may mean many school changes for the children and the resulting loss of friends, familiar teachers, and their own support networks.

Issues faced by homeless children

In 2003, the Government published the Green Paper *Every Child Matters*, which identified five outcomes that are most important for children and young people. These outcomes serve as universal ambitions for every child and young person, irrespective of circumstances or background. Education professionals should ensure that they work to improve the outcomes of all children and young people. Shelter's report *Chance of a lifetime* illustrates the devastating results that bad housing can have on these outcomes.⁹

Be healthy

The standard of some accommodation, for example damp, cold, overcrowded, 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

4 s.175–177 Housing Act 1996.

5 s.179 Housing Act 1996.

6 s.188(1) Housing Act 1996.

7 s.185(2) Housing Act 1996.

8 Art.4(1) The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2003, SI 2003/3326.

9 *Chance of a lifetime*, op cit.

- experience long-term ill health and disability
- experience slow physical growth
- have delayed cognitive development.

Stay safe

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.

Enjoy and achieve

Living in bad housing greatly reduces children's enjoyment and achievement in life.

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

Make a positive contribution

Living in bad housing can be detrimental to schooling, self-confidence and the ability to deal with life changes and challenges.

- 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.

Achieve economic well-being

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

- The high costs of temporary accommodation can make it difficult to make working worthwhile financially, 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 in temporary accommodation and bad housing

In the Shelter report *Against the odds*, a child surveyed for the report provided an insight into the reality of life in temporary accommodation:

'Here we have a living room, but at the last place (I lived in) it was really difficult. I had to do my homework on top of the fridge...'¹⁰

Nearly all secondary school pupils aged between 11 and 15 years (97 per cent) feel that doing well at school is important to them.

'If you don't do your work when you're older you'll be a dosser.'¹¹

Children in bad housing are even more likely to feel that doing well at school is 'very important'. But the harsh reality is that they are significantly less likely to fulfil this aspiration than children not living in bad housing. GCSE results are the most widely used indicators of educational achievement for children up to 16 years. This investigation found that one in four children living in bad housing gains no GCSEs, compared to around one in ten children not living in bad housing. Children living in acute bad housing are twice as likely to not attend school compared to children who are living in adequate housing.

The report *Living in limbo*¹² revealed that 42 per cent of parents surveyed stated that their children were 'often unhappy or depressed.' Due to their housing situation children, on average, miss 55 days of school, which is equivalent to a quarter of the school year. This is usually due to disruption caused by moves to, and between, temporary accommodation.

Where there is a lack of suitable accommodation within the LA area, families are sometimes placed in accommodation outside the borough. This can be very problematic, as the journey to school can take hours, sometimes requiring the use of several buses. Longer journeys which involve the use of public transport can also be unaffordable for the parent(s) at a time when finances are extremely limited.

Shelter's Keys to the Future Children's Service in Newham carried out a survey¹³ at a project user involvement event, which revealed that two of the four secondary school pupils questioned said that they had to get three buses to school. Some said that they had to leave home as early as 6am to be on time and that they had got into trouble for being late, even though this had been out of their control.

¹⁰ *Against the odds*, op cit.

¹¹ *ibid*.

¹² Mitchell, F, Neuburger, J, Radebe, D, and Rayne, A, *Living in limbo*, Shelter, June 2004.

¹³ The survey was performed on 24 October 2007, interviewing five primary school pupils, four secondary school pupils and three parents.

What can be done to improve outcomes for homeless children?

Every Child Matters: Change for Children¹⁴ states within its aims that every child, whatever their background or circumstances, should have the support they need to enjoy and achieve throughout their life, from school to employment.

It is important that education professionals do all they can to support these children without marginalising them further. It can be difficult for schools to identify children whose families are homeless, unless for instance, they are living in a hostel with an address that would indicate this. Housing departments do not currently have a duty to notify the school if they place a family in temporary accommodation.

Teachers need to be aware that pupils going through housing issues may unfortunately be the target of schoolground bullying:

'There are some mean girls. They tease me sometimes. They say you haven't got a home and names and that.'¹⁵

All teachers should be aware of this, and ensure that such behaviour is dealt with as soon as practicable. It may also be pertinent to educate the pupils as to the reality of homelessness and bad housing, which may prevent bullying occurring.¹⁶

For this briefing, Shelter interviewed a group of seven children about their educational needs when living in temporary accommodation. Six children said that living under these circumstances made attending school, and learning, more difficult. Three said that teachers or staff at school did nothing to help them with their problems. It is reassuring that the remaining pupils had received some form of help, but there is still clearly a lack of consistency in support for homeless children. Examples of the help they had received included a learning mentor, extra maths lessons, special classes, teachers listening to them and their concerns, and teachers finding them a friend. When asked what more schools could be doing to help, the children said sending work home when they have had to take time off school, assistance with homework, help when they feel upset, and being able to stay at the same school throughout their families' housing difficulties, which would allow them consistency through a difficult period.

Children staying at existing schools

A child's personal situation is confidential and should not be disclosed to other pupils. If a member of staff

becomes aware that a child is homeless they should inform other teachers and relevant support staff. This will allow them to offer appropriate support to the child and take their circumstances into consideration when necessary. The school should include details of the support they offer to families experiencing housing issues in correspondence with parents of new pupils, and also in any school information packs or prospectus, as well as existing parents.

Homeless children are less likely than others to have access to computer equipment, so staff must be aware of this when setting homework that requires the use of a computer. If money is required for a trip or special supplies, staff should check that this will not cause a problem and the school should consider using school funds to allow pupils to take part in activities. This would mean that they are not left out from important educational pursuits, nor are they ostracised further from their peers. If a child is frequently late this may be because the journey to school is long and/or difficult. Staff should find out more about their situation and try to find possible solutions rather than introducing sanctions.

Schools should introduce the pupil to the welfare services in the school (for example, a Connexions worker and learning mentor) and ensure communication between teachers and these professionals is maintained so that they can co-ordinate support.

Children moving to a new school

When a family moves to more permanent accommodation it can sometimes mean a move to a different area, which can mean a change of school. In this situation, schools need to be extra sensitive to the needs of the pupil, as they will be going through a very difficult time in their personal life. They may be nervous and worried about fitting in at a new school as well as worrying about their home situation. Staff should try to meet with them regularly to check how they are settling in and to ensure there are no problems. Staff could appoint a 'buddy' to look after the new pupil for the first few days to show them around the school.

Teachers should invite the parent(s) to meet with them and the pupil to have an informal chat to check on how things are going for them. This also provides an opportunity for teachers to share any concerns or update on progress with parents, which is particularly important if the family has moved several times and have missed parents' evenings.

14 www.everychildmatters.gov.uk

15 *Chance of a lifetime*, op cit.

16 Teachers may wish to use Shelter's education resources in order to achieve this. See www.shelter.org.uk/publications for further information.

After-school activities give children an opportunity to make new friends and allow them space away from their home situation. Staff should find out what interests the child has and support them to get involved in related activities at the school. The activity leader could personally invite them to join the club or team; some may need a teacher to go along with them to the first session.

Exclusion

In a single year over 57,000 children living in bad housing in Britain are excluded from school.¹⁷ Exclusion tends to be due to problems with the pupil's behaviour at school – the link between growing up in bad housing and behavioural problems in children is highlighted in Shelter's *Chance of a lifetime*¹⁸ report. The triggers for behavioural problems can include the stress involved with living in bad housing and problems sleeping. Teachers and support staff should ensure that behaviour such as this is treated in context. Exclusion should only be used in extreme circumstances and as a last resort, where there is no alternative option. Children going through housing issues such as homelessness, living in bad housing or in temporary accommodation will need more support and attention than other pupils, and it is important that this is noted and acted upon where resources are available and relevant. Schools that do not make any concessions for children going through extreme personal difficulties should rethink their policies on such behaviour.

Good practice initiatives

There are a number of initiatives run by Shelter and other organisations that make a positive impact on the education of homeless children. They help schools in their work with homeless pupils and their families, ensuring that they are supported throughout their housing problems. Education professionals may wish to replicate some of these ideas in their schools, allowing them to provide further support to their pupils.

Keys to the Future Children's Service

Shelter's Keys to the Future Children's Service, situated in Newham, and Bristol, works to keep homeless children in school and achieving. The projects address a child's emotional needs, helping to build confidence and social skills, while small-group tuition sessions and homework clubs

prevent children falling behind with schoolwork. Community volunteers act as reading buddies who help to make learning fun. The service offers parents practical support and encourages pupils to speak to professionals about their experiences of homelessness and their needs. This enables the children to influence what happens to them.

Case study

The Kings Cross Homelessness Project referred a family to the Keys to the Future Children's Service in Newham, as the children had ceased to attend school. The family consisted of three boys (all secondary school age) and their uncle. They had been living in temporary accommodation for a number of years, and during the course of their last move the boys had stopped going to school. Contact between the education system and the family ended as the school did not possess a forwarding address. The boys wanted to return to school, and were supported by their uncle in this. However, they did not want to go to any school they had previously attended.

The Children's Service worked with all three boys over the summer; while they were helping the boys in applying for schools, they worked on educational topics of interest to the boys, alongside preparation for their return to lessons.

The project also worked with the uncle, identifying reasons that had previously prevented the boys from returning to school. The boys explained that their previous negative experiences had had a direct effect on their reluctance to return. These experiences included: receiving detentions or being shouted at for being late due to long travelling times; being bullied; a lack of response to their concerns; and feeling that they were not learning anything while there. The boys have since returned to school and are happy and excited to be learning again. They continue to be supported by the project as they settle in and take part in lessons and extra-curricular opportunities. They are also being provided with emotional support to allow them to deal with the trauma that their housing and educational situation has caused.

Volunteer basic skills tutoring support

Shelter's Children's Service uses volunteers who offer tailored one-to-one educational support to homeless and unsettled children. This includes teaching basic skills, which children may need extra help with if they have had long periods out of school and fallen behind. The service has proved to be highly successful and

¹⁷ *Against the odds*, op cit.

¹⁸ *Chance of a lifetime*, op cit.

is very popular with young people as well as being welcomed by the schools they attend. If a child is not attending school, the tutoring sessions offered nearly always result in the child feeling able to take up and sustain a school place.

The volunteers work with schools, pupils and their families to provide individualised educational support. This can happen in a range of settings, wherever the child will derive the most benefit including schools, libraries, learning centres, community centres or in the family room at the Children's Service. One of the most important aspects of this service is building the pupil's confidence in their ability to learn. The Children's Service works alongside the volunteers, offering young people opportunities to achieve in other activities such as climbing or sailing. Being able to achieve in one activity helps to build self-esteem in other areas of the child's life, including schooling.

Case study

John¹⁹ aged 13 had only attended school for a few weeks at a time since he was 4-years-old, due to frequent moves. He was very embarrassed about not being able to read and write; he told his children's service worker (CSW) that when he did attend school he used certain strategies to ensure that no-one would discover his lack of basic skills including hitting the teachers, swearing, and fighting to get himself excluded as soon as possible. John had individual tutoring sessions once a week for 12 weeks, during which he started attending a local school part-time. John was able to sustain his education and increase his attendance to full-time; and he actually said he enjoyed learning things. He never missed his tutoring and told his CSW he really looked forward to the sessions and liked doing the tasks he took home.

Shelter Families Project, Lanarkshire – transport scheme

This project is based in South Lanarkshire, Scotland and is funded through the Changing Children's Services Fund (CCSF). The CCSF is made available by the Scottish Executive and is administered by South Lanarkshire Council. By providing transport, the Shelter Families Project transport fund helps children to remain in their school while in temporary accommodation. This is generally by paying for taxis or bus passes. The fund aims to minimise the disruption to children's education while they are facing homelessness; to maintain existing support networks for homeless children, enabling them to cope more

effectively with loss and transition; and to prevent the development of behavioural difficulties, and reduce the likelihood of truancy or poor school attendance.

A family who uses this transport scheme has commented that '...if it hadn't been for Shelter's school transport fund my children would have had to have changed schools twice.'²⁰

School-Home Support

School-Home Support (SHS) is a national charity that builds bridges between home and school to enable children and young people to make the most of their education. They currently operate in London and the South East, Darlington, Nottingham and Yorkshire.

They provide trained and experienced workers and learning mentors to become part of a school's pastoral care team.²¹ SHS recruit, induct and manage the workers, who are supported by a member of senior school management. They are commissioned by local authorities and/or head teachers.

The work is based on three key principles: early intervention, child-centred practice and a partnership approach to working with parents. They offer schools help in four specialist areas: school attendance and punctuality, transition, curriculum support through learning mentors, and working with families. This means that school staff are able to teach while the SHS supports the children and young people who need it most.

The difficulties faced by homeless children can prevent them making the most of their time at school. Having school-based workers to support their learning not only improves their life chances but also frees up teaching and leadership time.

Case study

SHS worked with a family (two adults with seven children), who were living in a two-bedroom council flat. The parents slept on a sofa bed in the lounge and the children were split between the two bedrooms. Homework was done on the top bunks of their beds and there was very little space. In such cramped conditions infections spread easily, and so the family frequently suffered ill health. SHS advocated for, and supported the family while they were waiting to be rehoused, and eventually they were moved to a larger and more appropriate property. The children's progress at school has changed dramatically and they are now thriving.

¹⁹ Name has been changed to protect anonymity.

²⁰ Shelter Families Project, South Lanarkshire.

²¹ www.schoolhomesupport.org.uk

Good practice example

Roundhay School, Leeds

Roundhay School employs an attendance and welfare mentor. The post was originally funded for half a day per week but the school now considers it to be an essential role and so funds the post full-time.

Concerns about a child may be raised by any of the staff team, for example form tutor, subject teacher, head of year, or staff at the homework club. Lack of attendance at school is the main indicator that there may be problems. The school prides itself on a child-centred approach; staff feel that they know their pupils on an individual basis, making it easier to spot changes in behaviour and potential problems. The welfare mentor has worked with many children, including those living in hostels, unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, children in care and children who are looked after by a family member.

Homeless or badly housed children are often at a disadvantage educationally, and are more likely than others to have a learning mentor for support. On some occasions the learning mentor will identify that a child has practical problems such as needing a uniform. The school collects used uniforms and other children's clothes, which they launder and store tidily so that they look like new. Children in need of items can choose them from the store discreetly without feeling that it is old and second hand. This initiative has worked very well and has little cost attached to it.

If a child does not have facilities or appropriate space at home to do homework, the school will arrange for the child to go to homework club. This is staffed four

evenings per week and staff support and computer facilities are available for four hours per day during all school holidays, excluding bank holidays. The club provides support to help pupils get up-to-date if they are behind with their work, or just space and support to carry out normal homework tasks. This is of particular benefit for children who have missed school because of a number of moves or ill health.

The school offers mediation to children and their parents who are not getting along with each other, when required. This is provided by the mentors and the Connexions worker. Home visits are made if necessary, even for minor issues if the mentor feels it will assist them to resolve a problem. The Connexions worker can also offer housing advice to older children who may need to leave their family homes.

On occasion when a child living in temporary accommodation moves further away from the school, the school has offered financial assistance with travel costs so that they can continue attending. This support is not automatic and is assessed on an individual case basis.

Roundhay has held a number of multi-agency days that have brought together many different professionals within the school setting. In addition, the Connexions worker has links with a local youth advice agency and sits on the Leeds Young Person's Homelessness Forum.

Further Information

Shelter

www.shelter.org.uk

Children's Centre advice line: 0845 421 4444. Lines open Mon–Fri 10am–4pm.

Pages related to Shelter's Children's Service can be found at www.shelter.org.uk/childrens_service

Teachers TV

www.teachers.tv

A website for teachers featuring good practice examples.

Roundhay School

www.roundhayschool.co.uk

Their Ofsted report is featured at:

<http://tinyurl.com/5pedfx>

School Home Support

www.schoolhomesupport.org.uk

School Home Support is a national charity that builds bridges between home and school to enable children and young people to make the most of their education.

Recommendations

There are many things that education professionals can do in order to effectively support homeless children.

- Identify children living in temporary accommodation or bad housing by getting to know pupils as individual personalities. This can make it easier for teachers to identify changes in their behaviour or character and make any necessary concessions.
- If a child is identified as being homeless all relevant teachers and support staff should be informed.
- Provide staff-supported homework facilities both during the school day and out of school hours, including school holidays.
- Offer access to funding for transport to and from school for homeless children who have been forced to move a considerable distance away from the school.
- Provide funding for special supplies required for schoolwork or extra-curricular activities or school trips that may not otherwise be affordable.
- Introduce children to welfare staff, such as mentors or Connexions staff as they may be nervous about making contact with these people independently. It is important that education professionals have regular meetings with the child, allowing them to keep up-to-date with how the child is progressing, and to ensure there are no further problems.
- Make contact with parents for an informal chat if they have missed parents' evenings, ensuring that contact is maintained between the school and the parents.
- Include details of support that is on offer from school in any correspondence to parents of new pupils and in any information packs or prospectus.
- Where a child has been moved to a new school as a result of their housing situation, it can be beneficial to pair the child up with a 'buddy' to look after them while they settle in.
- Allow staff, including Connexions staff, the time to develop links with local organisations that may be useful for signposting children or parents to. For example, this could include developing links with a local housing advice agency or forum.
- Have designated members of staff for pastoral care who do not have teaching responsibilities.
- When providing additional help and support to a child, care must be taken to ensure that this is done in such a way as to not single them out from their peers.
- Take the time to speak to the child about their interests, and where relevant offer invitations and support which will allow the child to access after-school activities and clubs.
- Take each individual's personal situation into account when issuing sanctions, eg when a child is persistently late, as this could be because the child has been moved to temporary accommodation a substantial distance from the school.
- Keep a store of school uniform for those pupils whose parents have insufficient funds to purchase a new uniform.
- Be creative in problem solving, there doesn't always have to be a large monetary cost to solutions.

Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity

Righting housing wrongs

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www.shelter.org.uk/goodpracticebriefings

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

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