

"We're Just Like Other Kids"

The Homeless Families Project

A report into the needs of homeless
children and families in Leeds

May 2003
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The Homeless Families Project (2003)

The Homeless Families Project is a partnership project between Leeds City Council Housing Department and Carr Gomm, supported by Leeds Children's Fund.

Leeds Children's Fund funds projects which encourage preventative approaches to issues which impact negatively on children. It focuses on those that use partnership to achieve both changes in policy and practice that promote children's wellbeing.

Leeds City Council Housing Department manages the Families hostel where this project worked. Their co-operation and support allowed the research to take place.

Carr Gomm is a charity and national housing association supporting people with many different needs. In Leeds it provides a floating support service for families. As the lead organisation for the project it provided day to day management and a base for the work.

A steering group guides the project with members from many statutory and voluntary agencies with an interest in the wellbeing of homeless families.

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Foreword

Sylvia Shatwell sent me a copy of her report when it was in its final stages of drafting and asked me if I would agree to write a foreword to it. Having read it, I immediately accepted because it is clearly an important piece of work, and I am sure you will feel the same. We should also be grateful to the Carr Gomm charity, working with Leeds City Council and supported by the Leeds Children's Fund, for making it all possible.

Home is central to our lives. It's where we feel safe, seek shelter from the outside world and nurture our families and ourselves. For all these reasons, having to leave your home - however caused - is a traumatic event that affects everyone involved, but particularly children. Sylvia Shatwell's report tells it straight about this impact, often through the words of children themselves. It should make us think about both the questions the report raises and how we can try to minimise this trauma better in future.

I hope you will find it as useful and stimulating as I did.

With best wishes

Hilary Benn
MP for Leeds Central

Homeless Families Project

1. Introduction

“We’re just like other kids”...comments a child on being asked about life as a homeless family living in a Leeds hostel. It is both an aspiration and protest. It is about wanting opportunity and a normal life whilst indicating just quite how unlike ‘other kids’ their experience has become.

Listening to these children shows they are acutely aware of their circumstances. Comments such as “I don’t want my friends to come here. I don’t want them to know where I live” show their embarrassment and isolation. Others such as ‘I don’t go to school on Mondays ‘cos my mum has to go and get her money’ show how normal life and schooling have been interrupted. Their aspirations though... a computer to go on the Internet, a playground where it is safe, places to play, trips out...are utterly those of their peers.

These children are from families where they have experienced the most traumatic of circumstances such as crime, violence, substance use, and subsequently loss of friends and home. Yet although being some of the most vulnerable children they find themselves in the sparsest of environments “...Here there’s nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

Parents struggle with new schools, or travel to old schools, finding new healthcare, working on their housing situation, finding training or work, the additional parenting of a child made rootless...their hands are very full. Services exist to help but are scattered throughout a new locality unfamiliar to them and finding the time and confidence to use them is hard.

Hostel workers are not blind to these concerns. However their resources and skills are, and cannot be, all encompassing.

Understanding these issues and finding a way forward is the substance of **The Homeless Families Project**.

Leeds City Council eager to understand more about homeless children contacted Leeds Children’s Fund who in turn identified Carr-Gomm as a lead organisation and proposed the research. It is this partnership that has facilitated the report. It is however the children in the hostels in East Leeds who have brought this piece of work to life. They have shown remarkable resilience and exuberance during an extremely difficult part of their lives and it is hoped this report is given careful consideration in acknowledgement of this.

2. Recommendations

Introduction

The health, education and general welfare of children living in temporary accommodation is seriously affected by the lack of support and services in the city's hostels.

Homelessness affects all aspects of children's lives and families living in temporary accommodation come into contact with a variety of statutory and voluntary agencies.

No one agency is responsible for addressing the problems faced by homeless families and no one agency can deliver the whole solution. However, there is a collective responsibility for these children and a statutory duty to provide for a huge group of children who are most definitely 'in need'.

At a strategic level, more collaborative ways of harnessing the contributions of existing services to the children of homeless families could be achieved in the following ways:

- | | Action |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to take responsibility for developing indicators to measure the situation regarding homeless children, and against which improvements and outcomes can be regularly reviewed and monitored by this group. | CYPSP |
| 2. The Strategic Partnership Group to incorporate measures into the final Local Preventative Strategy to ensure that the needs of homeless children are explicitly identified and addressed | CYPSP |
| 3. Recognition to be given to the fact that homeless families are not always able to access existing services and the specific targeting of services to the children of homeless families may be needed to ensure that provision is inclusive. | Leeds City Council |

This could be addressed by including the specific needs of the children of homeless families in the Local Authority's Homelessness Strategy and in the commissioning and delivery of any services informed by this.

In terms of the more specific issues raised in this report, the following recommendations are made:

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| 1. A firm protocol to be developed and implemented between education support agencies, Education Welfare Service and schools to ensure that vulnerable children are supported and their continued attendance | Education
Leeds |
|--|----------------------------|

Action

encouraged whilst living in temporary accommodation. Welfare Officers are currently attached to specific schools and there is no specific monitoring of children in hostels.

A designated liaison Education Welfare Officer / inclusion worker with a remit for the city's hostels could liaise with schools and other support services and offer parents advice regarding Pupils Admissions procedures. At the very least, a statistical return could be made to Education Leeds' Behaviour and Attendance Service, linking in with its information sharing protocols regarding 'mislocated children'. This in itself ties in with the introduction in every authority of the Identification, Tracking and Referral system (IRT).

Education Leeds

2. The role of the Link Social Worker between area teams and hostels could be greatly extended. The previous link between Richmond Court hostel and the Richmond Hill area social work team was established to provide regular advice on child protection procedures and referrals, offer a limited amount of support to families and generally improve communication between the two agencies.

Leeds Social Services

The link worker would continue to work with families in a supportive role in times of crisis, offering support, advice and liaison with schools and Education Welfare. Additionally, the worker could liaise with other area offices and co-ordinate support packages as families move in and out of the area.

With the appropriate authorisation from Social services Department, the remit of the link worker could be extended to make referrals to other agencies such as Family Resource Centres or Therapeutic Services. Short term interventions in times of crisis, could be accessed more quickly and could reduce the number of cases which are referred, await allocation, in which time delayed support to families leads to a deterioration in the situation.

The role of hostel/ link social worker could be a pilot scheme, which if monitored, evaluated and proved effective, could be promoted nationally as an example of good practice and attract recognition for the authority.

3. The roles of Education Welfare link worker and Social Services link worker could be undertaken by members of a 'virtual' multi-disciplinary team. This would mean that workers could be deployed from existing services thus preserving their own line management support. If effective the 'virtual' team model could be extended to include workers supporting children in different types of temporary accommodation such as dispersed tenancies and Bed and Breakfast facilities, and from e.g.

All Agencies

Action

Youth Services, Mental Health Services or other voluntary support organisations.

The idea of a 'virtual' team would need to be supported at strategic levels and clear commitments made in terms of workers' designated time and remit to ensure that objectives are achieved on a structured rather than 'ad hoc' basis.

4. A Children's worker to be employed at each of the hostels using the Leeds Women's Aid model to assess the needs of each child, make appropriate referrals and support vulnerable children and parents. The worker could offer advice and information on childcare and play provision in the area and liaise with existing providers to attract 'on site' service delivery.

**Leeds
Housing
Department**

Conclusion

These recommendations are not prohibitively costly, particularly given that costs could be spread across different Departments.

For a relatively small cost, the implementation of these recommendations could effect substantial changes in the delivery of integrated services for children living in temporary accommodation.

These recommendations signpost a way forward for the delivery of co-ordinated services and it is fervently hoped that they will be given the most serious consideration.

4. Context

To understand the rationale for this piece of work, it is helpful to locate it within a framework. This framework is shaped by the government's current political agenda, which in turn drives local authority strategic planning and policy, and informs service delivery to specific groups and communities.

Government agenda

The Government's commitment to tackling poverty and improving the strategic co-ordination of services for children and young people at risk is outlined in the 2002 Spending Review covering the years 2003 –2006.

This commitment is evident in the work of the Children and Young Peoples Unit, which co-ordinates policies that affect 0 – 19 year olds across Government, and whose Overarching Strategy for all Children and Young People will integrate ideas on the local delivery of co-ordinated, preventative services.

The cross-cutting review of children at risk that informed the spending review emphasised the need for the targeting and co-ordination of mainstream services to be focused on disadvantaged communities and families in order to reduce inequalities.

Additionally, the review recommended the early identification of need to ensure preventative services are available before children, young people and families hit crisis as part of its approach to supporting 'at risk' children and families.

Part of the Government's financial settlement has been to provide sustained funding to support the 150 Children's Fund Partnerships across England to enable them to develop a strategic approach and fund appropriate services for 5 – 13 year olds.

The Government's green paper on 'Children at Risk' will be published later this year, and will inform the overall strategy on supporting children and young people.

Running alongside the Government's settlement for Children and Young People is the proposed plan to support and protect homeless families, outlined in December 2002 by Minister Barbara Roche, as part of the Government's developing Homelessness legislation.

Speaking at a seminar on child poverty and housing, Mrs. Roche said

”we have to help homeless families more effectively; not only to give them and their children a better future but because of the cost to the wider community and public services.

”It is fundamental to the Government’s approach to homelessness that we (also) seek to understand more about the people who find themselves homeless and caught up in a cycle of despair.”

Accordingly, funding has been set aside to support new research to assess the impact of temporary accommodation on health and education

The last major study of temporary accommodation and homelessness was in 1987 and focussed on the physical aspects of the accommodation. The new study will focus much more on the personal factors and will serve to highlight the support needs of families that should be included in local homelessness strategies, and to emphasise the wider education, health and other social benefits of approaches that minimise the use of temporary accommodation.

The Homeless Families Project, funded by Leeds Children’s Fund can therefore be seen as a piece of work that is very much driven by the current themes of consultation, identification of need and focus on disadvantaged or marginalised communities as conceived at a national level.

Local policy

The Local Authority is developing its own Local Preventative Strategy for the development and delivery of children and young people’s services in Leeds. While this Strategy will not be finalised until the outcome of the green paper on ‘Children at Risk’ is known, its key aims are those of shared vision and co-ordination of service delivery supporting multi-agency working across existing services, child focus and effective prevention.

Again, the Homeless Families Project aligns itself well with current planning at a local level.

Richmond Court and ‘real kids’

Living in temporary accommodation can have devastating effects on the well being of children. Research including and beyond my own, has shown the negative effects in terms of school attendance and educational attainment, health and access to health services. These factors are compounded by the trauma of sudden and often repeated moves and isolation.

While the support needs of homeless people without children have been increasingly recognised, those of homeless families have received much less attention. There has been a tendency in the past to regard homeless families as simply being in need of accommodation to resolve their problems.

One of the main tasks of the **Homeless Families Project** has been to undertake a small piece of research based primarily around Richmond Court hostel, to gather the views and experiences of homeless children and families and the people who work closely with them.

To achieve this has involved getting to know children and families and gaining their trust over time. Children and their parents have talked openly with me about painful experiences, losses and difficulties; I have witnessed first hand the stresses and frustrations faced by families living in temporary accommodation and observed the effects of these on children.

I have joined in with children's games and spent time playing with them or just chatting and 'hanging out'. As one twelve-year-old boy explained to me, "we're just like other kids".

All this has brought a very human, personal element to the project and a heightened awareness that these children are not merely the subjects of research, but 'real people' whose experiences now will help to shape their lives.

It is this final consideration that gives the Homeless Families Project its true context.

4. Previous Studies / Current Policy

Because the scope of this study was limited by time, and the fact that it was undertaken by one person, it was necessary to examine some previous studies, which provide supporting evidence. Very little research focusing specifically on the needs of children was found, but the following studies were helpful and informative.

'No Room to Play'

Shelter's submission to the 2002 Spending Review, 'No Room to Play', reinforces the message that for the Government to deliver on its pledge to end child poverty in a generation, action must be taken to address the plight of homeless children. The submission reviews a wealth of research, which shows, quite simply that homelessness is bad for children and can do lasting damage in terms of education, health, happiness and belonging. (See Appendix)

The Shelter report offers solutions, which would ensure that support to homeless families and children could be improved in key areas.

One of the solutions is the extended use of **personal advisors**. This scheme, which has already been successfully pioneered in other fields, could be extended to homeless families. This would give them a single point of contact to provide advice, support and advocacy, ensuring that families can register with GPs, get their children enrolled at schools, and are able to access the benefits and support services to which they are entitled.

A further improvement put forward by Shelter is that better targeting of mainstream services is needed to ensure that they reach those who are 'hardest to help'.

'More than a Roof'

The DTLR report, 'More than a Roof', published in March 2002 provides an overview of the Government's range of new policies to tackle social exclusion and observes that while these will be taken forward by joining up policy at a national level, Local Authorities will need to do so locally.

The ideal opportunity to do this is provided by the requirement brought about by the Homelessness Act (2002) for each Local Authority to review its homelessness policy and develop a strategy for its area. The legislation is formulated with multi-agency partnership working in mind and is underscored by the Government's social exclusion agenda.

As well as bringing together partners from health, social services and the voluntary sector, it is important to consider others such as homeless families themselves, the police, schools and colleges and agencies with wider social exclusion responsibilities.

Victoria Tischler of Leicester University conducted an exploratory study into the needs of homeless and vulnerably housed families in order to inform the development of a family outreach support worker service for this population. She makes the point that "homeless families tend to be invisible" as they are housed out of sight in hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation and that "we (as agencies) have been slow to recognise the kinds of services they need."

'Waiting for a Home'

Three relevant local studies have been carried out in **Leeds** since the 1990s. The first, 'Waiting for a Home' (1994) undertaken by Pat McGeever for South Leeds Health for All focused on the health needs of families living in Brett Gardens hostel. 47 of the 132 families then resident in the hostel took part in the study.

Part of this study looked at the effects of living in a hostel on children's health and behaviour. 43% of the residents who responded to questionnaires felt that their children's health had deteriorated and highlighted the following areas of concern

- Sleeplessness
- Sleepwalking
- Diarrhoea
- Chest complaints
- Asthma
- Viral infections
- Tiredness and lethargy

52% of respondents stated that their children's behaviour had worsened and that the deterioration included

- Acting out of character
- Deep insecurity and 'clinginess'
- Rowdiness
- Moodiness
- violence

At the same time, the report stressed the negative effects that hostel life can have on parenting.

“the odds are stacked against ‘positive parenting’ while living in a hostel. Developing a fruitful family life and displaying good parenting skills is extremely difficult when faced with homelessness, coupled with unemployment, low income, lack of privacy, cramped conditions and worry about the future – while trying at the same time to keep the children occupied and well cared for with the minimum of facilities”

The same issues were identified in a later study of 113 homeless families in Birmingham, which found that a substantial minority of children (29%) had behavioural and emotional difficulties “of sufficient severity to require referral for treatment” and that almost half of homeless mothers had mental health problems, mainly depression. (Vostanis *et al*, 1998)

The ‘Waiting for a Home’ report informed a proposal for ‘The Provision of Services to Homeless Families living in Temporary Accommodation’ by Debbie Forward in 1996. The intention of the proposals was to “help limit the impact of homelessness on children living in temporary accommodation by ensuring that child care services are provided or accessible for their use”.

The proposals identified included the following

- the provision of play group facilities for children within the hostels, including supervised sessional care and crèche facilities to enable families to have respite periods, go to the shops, attend interviews and appointments
- organising play schemes for holidays for children in all temporary accommodation
- the development of group work for resident parents and children on such topics as confidence building, self-help, parenting skills
- ensuring that families have access to knowledge of children's services available to them in the area

At the time, discussions were held between the then Under Eights Service, the Housing Department and the National Children's Society. The creation of full-time children's workers at each of the hostels was proposed, with great enthusiasm by all agencies. Staffing and equipment costs were calculated and the question of line management addressed. It was anticipated that these workers would provide services directly to families in hostels as well as carrying out aftercare and advocacy work to enable families in 'second stage' accommodation to gain access to child care services within the area they moved to.

'Life on Hold'

'Life on Hold', the research report completed by Tricia Holder *et al* in October 2002 for Leeds City Council's Supporting People Programme presented a comprehensive overview of the housing and support needs of homeless families living in temporary accommodation in Leeds.

As well as analysing a much wider sample than was possible within the scope of the **Homeless Families Project** and providing a valuable source of statistical data, 'Life on Hold' also served as a 'signpost' for the small piece of research into the needs of children living in temporary accommodation.

The writers discuss the idea that the focus on the main reason for a family's homelessness can result in the needs of other members of the family being ignored or hidden. Very often these people are the children within families.

It is the specific needs of children living in temporary accommodation that this report seeks to address.

Methodology

Aims

The overall aims of this project were to

- research the needs of children living in temporary accommodation in East Leeds in order to identify gaps in the provision of services
- map existing services
- make recommendations about future developments in services
- identify examples of good practice nationally

Limitations

The project was undertaken by one worker over a six month period, which limited the scope and depth of the research element. For this reason, the project focused primarily on the children of families living in Richmond Court Hostel, although some interviews were undertaken with children and families in East Leeds' other providers of temporary accommodation – Nowell Court and several dispersed tenancies.

The aim was to interview the whole hostel population of families with children during the 2 month fieldwork period. The rationale behind this was that a 'snapshot' sample of the children and families in the hostel taken at any given time would give some indication of the needs of the population of homeless children in East Leeds in general.

In practice this proved impossible due to the transient nature of the hostel's population and some families' wish not to be involved. However a sample from the three provisions, Richmond Court, Nowell Court and dispersed tenancies provided what was effectively equivalent to one and a half times the population of Richmond Court hostel. Families in the dispersed tenancies had all lived in hostels previously.

31 families with a total of 47 children were interviewed.

Children's views

Central to the research was the wish to consult with the children themselves to ascertain their views and experiences. A great degree of flexibility was required in this respect due to issues of age, confidentiality and consent, and children's spontaneity. It soon became apparent that informal meetings and activities with children elicited a lot more information than structured settings.

Fun activities were organised as a way of engaging the children, including 'Anger Management through Boxing' sessions run at the hostel and linking in with another Children's Fund group, 'The Project', who ran a very well received drama workshop.

A video film has been produced by Vera Media Film Company. This provides the essential focus of the **Homeless Families Project** and a vehicle for the children's views.

Overall approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, but as the sample of parents and children was relatively small, supporting evidence has been included.

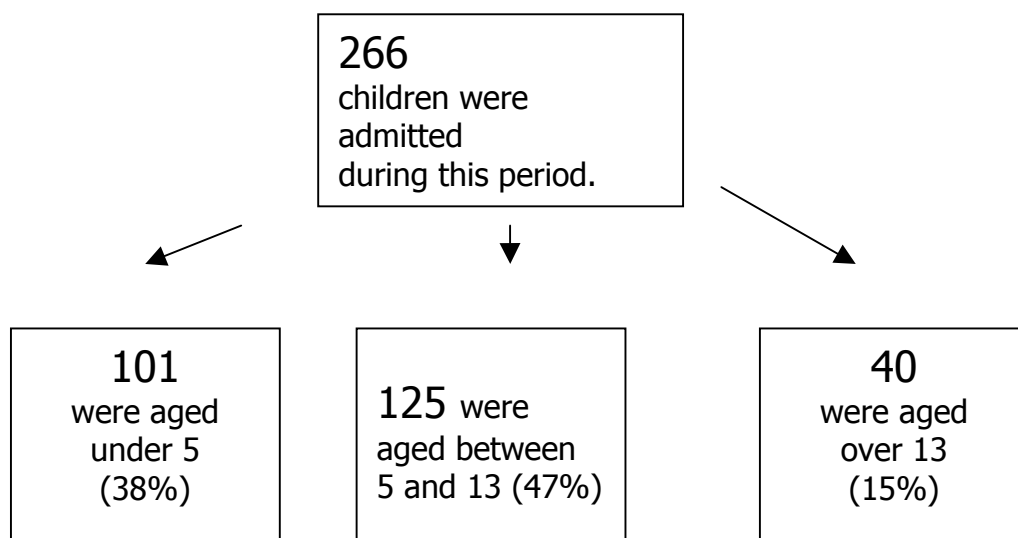
Data was derived from the following sources:

- questionnaires were completed by hostel staff, GPs and Headteachers
- 31 in depth interviews with families were conducted
- informal consultation was undertaken with over 60 children, some of who took part in the filming of the video
- a telephone conference was undertaken with the Shelter Manchester Education Project
- Statistical information was taken from records at Leeds City Council's Family Accommodation Team and Richmond Court hostel
- Literature was gathered and reviewed from a range of sources
- A visit was made to Newcastle's 'Supporting Families Project'

Additionally, a multi-agency Steering Group guided the project and provided advice, information and suggestions to promote the **Homeless Families Project**.

6. Homeless families in East Leeds

Between January 1st and December 31st 2002, 118 families of one or two parents with one or more children were admitted to Richmond Court hostel. As this study focuses on the needs of children, childless couples were not included in this count.



Reasons for Homelessness

Fleeing violence within the home	47%
Fleeing violence outside the home	9%
Fleeing harassment	5%
Loss of rented accommodation	4%
Parents/ friends unable to accommodate	5%
Asylum seekers / refugees	12%
Other	4%
Rent arrears	5%
Leaving prison	1%
Reason not recorded	7%
Relationship breakdown	1%

<u>Ethnic origin of children</u> (as recorded on hostel records)	
White British	164
African	21
Afghan	19
Black British	12
White Irish	12
Iraqi	12
Kosovan	6
Iranian	5
Pakistani	5
Lithuanian	3
Asian Mixed	2
'Middle East'	2
Romanian	1
Turkish	1
French	1

71 children admitted during this period spoke a native language other than English as their first language

This figure does not include children admitted to Nowell Court, to dispersed tenancies or 'hidden' in other situations.

An example of another situation is the families who turn to friends or family as an immediate respite from violence or other circumstances.

7. The experience of homelessness for families in Richmond Court Hostel

The 31 parents consulted gave the following reasons for their families becoming homeless:

Breakdown of violent / abusive relationship	10
Fleeing violence from neighbours	7
Fleeing violence from family member	1
Rent arrears	4
Fleeing partner after sexual assault of child / young person	1
Fleeing neighbours after sexual assault of child / young person	2
Mental health problems in wider family	1
Arguments with family	4
Non-violent breakdown of relationship	1

58% of this sample were fleeing violence

25 children from the 31 families had witnessed or experienced violence themselves

Education

The 31 parents interviewed had a total of 47 children between them. Of these,

8 children were below school or nursery age

3 children had left school

16 children were attending school regularly

Of these, 6 had been transferred with relative ease to local Primary schools

9 children were 'out of school' since moving into temporary accommodation

8 children were poor or sporadic attenders due to distance and / or costs involved to stay in original school

3 children were poor or sporadic attenders due to problems at school

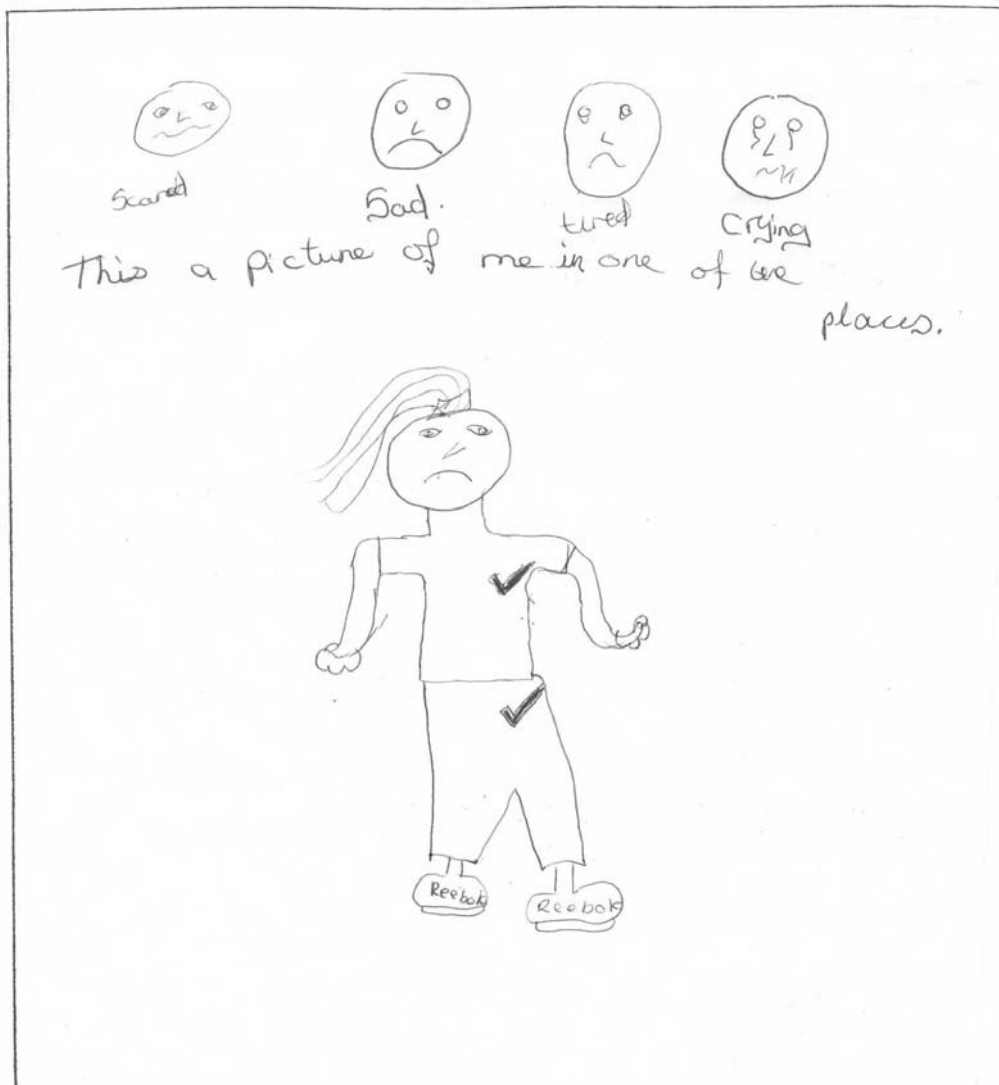
Within this sample, 36 children were of school age. Of these,

- 25% were out of school as a result of becoming homeless
- 22% were poor or sporadic attenders as a result of the financial impact or physical distance of moving to a hostel
- 17% had changed schools as a result of becoming homeless

This means that 64% of children in this sample had experienced some kind of disruption to their education. This does not include the 8% poor attenders experiencing problems at school, which may have been exacerbated by moving to the hostel.

8. Children's views

Throughout the 6 months of the project, I spent varying lengths of time with 86 children and young people at Richmond Court hostel.



Much of this time was unstructured and included talking or playing with children in the playroom, joining in with organised activities, taking them out and visiting them at home. Some children contributed to the interviews conducted with parents during the fieldwork period. Others wrote accounts of their experiences or drew pictures to express their feelings. The views, opinions and experiences of the children and young people were gathered from tape-recorded and written materials and from my own recorded observations.

30th January

Katie came to see me in the playroom today. She talked about school and about the book her class is reading at the moment – The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Katie is enjoying the story and we talked about the characters. I later learned that the family may have to move to another hostel following an incident at the weekend. This would mean another school move for Katie.

7th February

The two younger children are looking drawn and worried. Richard has only been to school 2 out of 5 days this week. He says he has a sore throat, but he's also told me that he's worried about his mum.

15th February

I saw Rebecca on Wednesday. She told me that she'd not been to school that morning because her dad had been "carrying on". When I asked her what she meant she said that he'd been out drinking until the early hours of the morning and she and her sisters had been up with her mum, who was worried about what would happen when her partner returned from the pub. Rebecca is 8 and is already aware of the strain that her dad's drinking and violence is having on her family.

Some children remained at the hostel for the duration of the project and were seen several times a week. Most of the children were keen to talk, whether or not they understood my role.

The key issues that emerged from consultations with children and young people were:

- Loss of belongings, friends, family and a 'normal' home
- Many children have experienced or witnessed violence
- Disruption to education and involvement in after-school activities
- Lack of play and leisure activities for children and young people of different ages
- Anxiety about parents and about the future
- Impact of depleted family budgets on many aspects of children's lives including clothing, transport to school, leisure and holiday activities

'Normalisation' of traumatic events

A striking observation was the matter of fact way in which children talked about deeply disturbing experiences.

"I've been in a couple of hostels but my mum kept going back to her boyfriend. On and off we've been here about 3 months this time. We've not been in hostels all the time. She's gone back to her boyfriend and then he's booted us out" (boy aged 13)

"My dad had trouble with guns and that. Someone tried to shoot him and they put a knife to his throat" (girl aged 8)

"My mum went to hospital after she'd been beaten up and when she came out we didn't have a house so we got sent to Leeds" (boy aged 9)

"We should all think we're lucky to live in a hostel because if we didn't have hostels we'd all be on the streets" (girl aged 12)

"upset because I was the second to last to know. I can't say what happened but I was very upset over it" (girl aged 13)

"we had to leave our dog behind" (girl aged 8)

"I don't want my friends to come here. I don't want them to know where I live" (girl aged 7)

"there are times when I feel really mad. Once I pushed my mum on the floor and I was going to hit her but I stopped myself. I 'twocced' a car once, but we didn't really nick it, it was already nicked" (boy aged 13)

"we were sleeping in the streets 'cos I didn't want to sleep at my mum's with him there. I went to sleep at my mate's but he had a fight with his mum and she kicked him out, so we went out at night time and wandered around" (boy aged 14)

School

"sometimes I don't go to school 'cos we sleep in" (girl aged 7)

"I don't go to school on Mondays 'cos my mum has to go and get her money" (boy aged 12)

"I go to Brownhill but I used to go to another school. I've settled in and made some friends. Most of them are from the hostel" (girl aged 8)

"I've not been to school for 3 months or something like that 'cos we've been moving around and 'cos I haven't got a school uniform and 'cos of living far. School don't really know what's going on 'cos I haven't rung them" (boy aged 13)

The Playroom

Richmond Court has a purpose built, simply equipped playroom.



The playroom is used most regularly by a local Health Visitor and a Family Worker who run a weekly daytime session. Parents are able to bring younger children for basic health checks and advice. The two workers offer sessions on health focused issues such as diet, relaxation and stress-management. These sessions are funded with small donations administered through East Leeds Health for All.

These two workers, by virtue of goodwill, also take some responsibility for the physical upkeep of the playroom, which is used, from time to time, as a storage space for furniture or donated clothes and toys.

Until earlier this year the same Family Worker and a Youth Worker from Parent Partnership also ran a weekly youth club, attended by young children and some teenagers. Parent Partnership's involvement in this capacity has now ended due to the refocusing of the service.

12 weeks' funding to pay a worker to co-run the youth club with the Family Worker has now been secured from two voluntary organisations, but the youth club will have to close when this money runs out.

“There’s nothing to do here”

All of the children consulted, without exception felt that there were too few play or activities opportunities at the hostel. Older children and teenagers felt that there was nothing for them to do and that the scant activities provided were aimed exclusively at young children.

Leeds Student Action run weekend outings (Sunday Sunshine) and regular weekend ‘Outdoor Mix’ trips. Their involvement is purely voluntary and they have agreed that several places on each activity will be designated to children living in the city’s hostels. There is a strict 8-12 age limit for these trips, which means that older or younger children are excluded.

Many children complained that they were “bored” and that “there’s nothing to do here”. Many more asked repeatedly “when’s the playroom open?” or told me that “it’s not fair that we can’t go on the trips” or “there’s nothing for the older kids to do”.

I observed a general air of boredom and listlessness amongst children, hanging out in the courtyard, poking round in the scrubby grass or kicking an illicit football over the wall.

While it is almost a cliché for children and young people to complain of being bored, it is a very real experience for children in temporary accommodation. Their choices are severely restricted; their environment is impersonal and unfamiliar; their parents lack the money, and often due to their own distress the motivation to provide occupation for their children. As one child put it,

“It’s different in here. At least when you’re at home you’ve got your friends and your things around you. Here there’s nothing. Absolutely nothing” (girl aged 13)

Brighter Futures

Three members of hostel staff along with the local Health Visitor and Family Worker have set up a small voluntary organisation, ‘Brighter Futures’. Again this is organised and run on a ‘goodwill’ basis and funded partly through small donations from East Leeds Health for All and local businesses. The aim of Brighter Futures is to organise and fund activities for the children and families at the hostel. Examples of activities include Christmas parties and a ‘Fun Day’ in the summer. Because of the day to day pressures on hostel staff, the work of Brighter Futures happens on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, and no dedicated work time is designated to this activity.

Wish List

Children from Richmond Court and Nowell Court were asked what services or support should be available for children. Included in their answers were the following suggestions:

Places to play,
trips out and more
activities.

A children's
keyworker so that
they could talk about
children's problems,
how they're feeling,
living here and things
like that

Maybe a computer so we
can go on the Internet...
more trips out and tickets
for the pantomime and
stuff

I think there
should be
more for us
younger ones
to do. I don't
like doing
washing and
shopping with
my mum

I had an Individual
Support Worker
before. I'd like
another one, or Youth
Club every night, 'cos
you've got something
to do then

A playground where
it's safe where we
can all play out – like
at Women's Aid. It's
better for children
there

9. Parents' Views

Effects of living in temporary accommodation on children

All but 3 parents felt that the experience of moving into temporary accommodation had had negative effects on their children. Their responses fell into 3 broad areas: Loss, Behaviour and Activities.

The losses described included loss of school, friends, extended family, pets, places to play out in, clothes, toys and other belongings.

Changes in behaviour varied from babies being unsettled and out of regular routines, clinginess, tearfulness and withdrawal, to 'attitude problems', 'getting mixed up in offending', being on the receiving end of bullying at school, refusing to speak or go out in one case and collapsing through 'stress' in another (girl aged 13).

In 2 cases, children had actually been assaulted at school after having being taunted for being homeless.

All but 1 respondent felt that the problems experienced by their children were exacerbated by the lack of activities for children in the hostel, lack of safe spaces to play and general 'boredom'.

One parent told me that her teenage son had started smoking cannabis since moving to the hostel. She felt that this was preferable to him "going out and getting into trouble" because she at least knew where he was.

One parent felt that the effects on her child had been positive – that their relationship had improved since moving into the hostel, that her daughter was getting into better routines and that she had made friends.

One parent felt that one of the positives of moving into the area was that her child was now in a better school. Another parent was pleased that her child now had her own room.

Parents' views on children's understanding of their situation

Of the 47 children of the parents interviewed, 10 children had become homeless for reasons that did not involve some sort of violence either towards their parent/s or themselves. Parents reported that in 8 cases, their children had been told and understood why they were living in temporary accommodation. 2 children were felt to be too young to understand.

37 children had become homeless for reasons that involved violence. Of these:

- 25 children had witnessed the violent assault of a parent and / or been assaulted themselves
- 5 children had not been present but had been told or 'picked up on' the fact that their parent had been assaulted
- 3 children were felt to be too young to understand although 2 of these were reported to be 'unsettled' or 'affected in some way'
- 1 child had been told a 'story' to protect him
- 3 children were said to 'have an idea' of what had happened but hadn't been told

Parents views on levels of support

Parents generally felt that hostel staff were supportive of them as adults. Hostel staff and dispersed housing staff were able, parents felt, to support them with Housing and Benefits applications, rent arrears advice and information about local services such as schools and doctors. The degree of adult support they felt they received ranged from "brilliant" to "they can only do so much".

Four other sources of adult support were identified:

- social worker 3
- Domestic violence group 1
- Addiction Unit 1
- Another resident 1

Support for children

12 parents felt that their children were receiving no outside support. Of those who felt their children were receiving support, the following sources were identified:

- School or nursery 4
- Social worker 5 (14 parents said there was a Social worker currently involved with their family)
- Student volunteers 2
- Addiction Unit worker 1
- Health Visitor 3
- Home Start 1
- Child and Family Unit 1
- Victim Support 1
- Parent's foster mother 1

10. Workers' Views

Detailed questionnaires were completed by 12 of Richmond Court's 13 staff plus the Housing Department's Emergency Services co-ordinator. Their collective experience of working with homeless families amounted to 71 years and therefore provided an extensive source of information and opinion.

The questionnaires were long and fairly complex and workers spent several weeks completing them to allow time for reflection. The themes that the questionnaires aimed to draw out were as follows:

- Reasons for homelessness
- Effects on children
- Support and services available
- Perceived gaps in support and services

Every single respondent cited 'domestic' violence – violence experienced by women fleeing "known men" or partners, and drug-related violence as the most frequent **reasons for homelessness**. Violence and harassment from neighbours and wider family members also came high on the list of reasons.

"Domestic violence has always been a big cause of homelessness. Anti-social behaviour, violence and harassment within communities is ever increasing and much of it is drug-related in some way or another."

Other reasons for homelessness given were financial problems, eviction / rent arrears, mental health problems, relationship breakdown, unemployment, and drug and / or alcohol dependency. It was also observed that,

"we have seen an increase in the number of refugees who require temporary accommodation following a decision from NASS".

One worker concluded that,

Families who are homeless have multiple problems. Many of the problems are interlinked and cannot be dealt with in isolation"

Effects on children

The following extensive list shows what hostel workers believe to be the effects of hostel life on children:

- Disruption to education
- Disruption to friendships
- Loss of security
- Feelings of fear, insecurity, isolation, anger
- Lack of guidance / boundaries due to parents' problems

- Having to learn survival skills
- Withdrawal or aggressive behaviour
- Loss of confidence / self esteem
- Disruptive behaviour resulting from boredom
- Feelings of shame / stigmatisation
- Having to adapt to new situations
- Issues regarding separation and loss of friends, family, own environment, toys, belongings
- Fear of unfamiliar surroundings
- Anxiety about parents
- Change in routine
- Drifting into anti-social or offending behaviour
- Being bullied by other children
- Children have to become adaptable and resilient beyond their years
- Relationship problems between children and parents
- Effects on children's emotional / physical health
- Picking up negative behaviours from peers and parents

“children who, with their families are re-referred back to hostels see this as a way of life. In my experience I've seen the children, once grown up, admitted to the hostel with their own children”.

Positives

Workers identified two positive effects on children of living in hostels:

- Security – being away from the trauma that is affecting their lives
- Mixing with children from other backgrounds and cultures

Effects on children of different ages

The structure of the questionnaire attempted to draw out distinctions between effects on children according to their ages.

It was acknowledged that this was a difficult issue to gauge as all children are individuals and therefore interpret and respond to their experiences differently,

“I believe that each child will react in a unique way to their life in a hostel. However, I do believe that life in a hostel affects children in different ways depending on their age. The common factor is that they have all experienced homelessness.”

In general terms, it was felt that there were some observable differences in the effects on children of different ages.

Teenagers and older children

All respondents believed that the effects of living in temporary accommodation are more easily recognised in older children and teenagers. The reasons given for these views were that

- The older the child, the more aware they are of their predicament and more able to express their feelings through words and behaviour
- Older children seem to be more ashamed of their circumstances and feel stigmatised
- The restrictions placed on teenagers in terms of being able to see their friends and continue with a 'normal life' are more keenly felt
- Older children find it harder to adapt to hostel life than younger children
- Older children / teenagers often refuse to stay in the hostel and go to stay with friends / family
- Teenagers who have witnessed violence towards their mothers might feel a sense of 'blame' for not having protected them

Some of the problems faced by teenagers are summed up by one worker, who commented that,

“teenagers tend to understand what is going on at a practical level, but perhaps not on a deeper level. Their friends from school are often particularly important to them for support but they may not be able to meet up with them for security reasons, because of distances from home or because they're out of school”

Younger children

Opinions about the effects of homelessness on younger children were mixed. 5 of the 13 respondents felt that younger children were more able to adapt to new surroundings in hostels and schools and make friends more quickly.

One worker felt that the experience of homelessness is more difficult for children aged between 5 and 11,

“I believe that children are more directly threatened by hostel life at this age than at any other. They have an understanding of sorts but are powerless to influence their situation in any way. This can have deep and negative effects. A variety of parenting methods within a hostel can mean that children of this age particularly can be influenced by other children. This can be distressing for parents, which can further contribute to the child's alienation. Children of mothers fleeing violence are particularly vulnerable at this point.”

Babies and toddlers

6 workers felt very strongly that babies and very young children who are not able to understand their situation are nonetheless affected in the following ways,

- Disturbed by the increased stress within families
- Frightened / unsettled by unfamiliar surroundings, maybe having to share space with strangers
- Unsettled by changes in routines
- Some children exhibit more 'tantrums' or become withdrawn
- Babies pick up on stress of parents and are frequently reported to be not sleeping

Types of support most frequently asked for by parents

- Advice and assistance with Benefits and Housing problems
- General help in negotiating an unfamiliar system
- Referrals to Social Services
- Referrals to other agencies e.g. Counselling, Domestic Violence, anger management, drugs and alcohol services
- Support with parenting and children's behaviour
- Just to have somebody to talk to

Hostel workers are trained and /or experienced in many of these areas,

- Getting children into school
- Accessing healthcare

Hostel workers provide residents with information and advice about local G.P's and schools. They are also able to contact schools and education welfare officers and 'signpost' parents. However, it falls outside the remit of their job to follow up school applications or to liaise with education support agencies.

- Child care
- Play provision, outings and activities for children

Workers are unable to provide childcare and there are no designated workers to do so. Play activities are provided on an 'ad hoc' or goodwill basis.

Outings are provided by Leeds Student Action on a purely voluntary basis. Volunteer students take children on 'Sunday Sunshine' outings, and occasionally away for activity weekends. These are extremely popular but restricted to children between the ages of 8 and 12 which means that younger and older children are necessarily excluded.

Perceived needs of children living in hostel....

- Access to professional, child-centred counselling for children who have experienced or witnessed violence
- Continuity of education
- More play provision / recreational activities
- Transport to original schools
- Stability
- Somebody to talk to who'll listen to them when maybe their parents can't
- Stimulation
- Confidence-building
- Support with emotional problems

.... and possible solutions

Workers were asked to suggest ideas about services or support that might better meet the needs or improve the lives of children living in hostels. These are some of the suggestions:

- Regular organised play sessions.
- Activities specifically for teenagers
- Child care worker
- Registered child care provision
- Crèche
- After school/homework clubs
- Hostel visits by for example, Benefits workers (for refugees, people who don't know the Leeds area, and for lone parents with several young children)
- More efficient use of the play room
- More and better links with local services and amenities
- Transport and staff to provide outings and family trips
- Regular link with local GP/ in hostel surgery
- Link social worker
- Hostel visits by a drugs worker

Problems with education

The contributions of two head teachers in the Richmond Hill area identified some of the problems faced by homeless children.

“All children are affected by moving schools, but usually because of circumstances children from the hostel are generally more ‘needy’ - traumatised, slow learners, have behavioural, social and emotional needs. The children are often transient and have a poorer educational background. Reports and records are often scanty.”

Both teachers were concerned that schools don't know where pupils have gone or come from if outside the authority, and children often 'disappear' out of schools when they leave the hostels. This results in their names remaining on schools rolls until notified otherwise, which from the schools' point of view affects attendance statistics.

They were also concerned that children from hostels are poor attenders and that nobody other than their parents takes responsibility for keeping track of this and liaising with education support services. In some cases even Education Welfare Officers don't know what's happening to these children.

Both teachers felt that the long delays between children coming into the area and being admitted into schools has a negative effect on children's performance and on their ability to form peer relationships.

An Education Welfare Service manager based in the Richmond Hill area reported that she had received a phone call from the hostel in 2002 to say that 24 children were 'out of school'.

11. Summary / Conclusions

The Government's current agenda for 0 – 19 year olds emphasises the need for the targeting and co-ordination of local, preventative mainstream services focused on disadvantaged communities and families.

The Local Authority is developing its own preventative strategy, in line with Government requirements, for the development and delivery of services to children and young people.

Similarly, the key change in the Government's approach to tackling homelessness recognises that to do so more effectively, the personal and social problems that cause homelessness need to be addressed. Current Housing legislation requires each Local Authority to review its homelessness policy and develop a strategy for its area.

The support needs of homeless children have received little attention. They tend to be hidden or 'invisible' as they are housed out of sight in hostels or Bed and Breakfast facilities. As such they represent a disadvantaged part of the community and may be at risk of exclusion from mainstream services.

Research evidence shows that homelessness is 'bad for children' and can do lasting damage in terms of education, health, happiness and belonging. Studies at both national and local levels show that further and considerable negative effects are experienced by children in terms of behaviour and the effects of poor parental mental health on parenting capacity.

Recommendations of the South Leeds Health for All report, made in 1996 informed proposals for the funding of childcare development workers and play provision at each of the city's hostels. Neither of the hostels in East Leeds offers this type of service.

The **Homeless Families Project** has endeavoured to keep the very real experiences and views of children as its focus.

The 266 children who were admitted to Richmond Court hostel represent only a proportion of children who experienced homelessness in East Leeds in 2002. This figure does not include children admitted to Nowell Court, to dispersed tenancies or 'hidden' in other situations.

86 children including children of the parents interviewed were consulted during the project.

Violence is a significant feature of the experiences of many children. 58% of families in this study were fleeing violence and 53% of their children had witnessed or experienced violence. Many of the children consulted spoke about violence within the family as if it were 'normal'.

At least 64% of children in this study were experiencing disruption to their education. Non-school attendance is one of the main problems identified by hostel staff. The Education Welfare Service designates officers to specific schools, which means that children who move around the city may become 'mis-located' within the system and lose contact with the Education Welfare service.

A hidden consequence of non-school attendance is that children miss out on school health surveillance

The emotional, psychological and social effects of homelessness on children are undoubtedly profound but very hard to quantify. It is difficult to understand how children of varying ages will interpret their experiences, or the precise effects that these will have on their development.

It is clear from this study that the experience of homelessness, at the very least, raises children's levels of anxiety in general, and more specifically about their individual circumstances.

Homelessness results in huge losses for children in terms of family, belongings and stability. These combined with disruption to schooling and reduced opportunities for play and leisure activities impact negatively on children's overall welfare, identity and social development.

Parents recognise the effects of homelessness on their children but are often at their most vulnerable and under enormous pressure whilst temporarily housed. Relationships between parents and children may be damaged or further damaged by changes in children's behaviour resulting from their experiences of homelessness.

Parents may feel that they have little support to offer their children whilst trying to deal with the enormity of their own problems. This may partly explain parents' views that the most helpful types of support would be childcare and more activities for children of different ages.

Residents do not generally feel part of their 'temporary community' and therefore are not highly motivated to take part in general provision. Consequently, while services exist to support children and families, they may not be accessed due to lack of information or the specific co-ordinated targeting of temporarily housed families.

Hostel workers are able to offer support and advice to parents about services for children but do not have the training, time or remit to offer practical support themselves.

Despite having a purpose-built playroom, play and leisure activities for the children of Richmond Court hostel are offered on an *ad hoc*, voluntary or goodwill basis. The playroom is an underused resource. Nowell Court has no playroom. The children at both hostels are bored and frustrated by their circumstances, and have very little power to change them.

12. Examples of Good Practice

The following projects, one local and two in other parts of the country are examples of practice that offer support specifically to the children of homeless families, in attempts to minimise some of the effects of homelessness.

Together, these three examples highlight how much work is being done in other parts of the country to measure and address the needs of homeless children and to assure them better outcomes.

Services have been developed which recognise and prioritise the educational, emotional, physical and social needs of children. Recognition is given to the effects of poor parental mental health on parenting capacity, and to the advantages of on-site multi-disciplinary workers' being able to reach parents who might not otherwise access their services.

The complexities of school non-attendance are tackled by taking into account the compounding problems of school transport and uniforms for children who face stigmatisation.

These three examples serve to emphasise the failure of Leeds agencies to meet the needs of homeless children, none more so, paradoxically, than the Leeds Women's Aid project.

This project highlights the huge disparity between services and support offered to homeless families in Leeds dependent on the availability of 'bedspace' on the day a family becomes homeless. If the family is sent to Women's Aid the children will be supported by a children's worker, if the family is sent elsewhere the children, arbitrarily, will not.

Similarly, homeless children who have a father or male adult in their family and would not therefore be accommodated at Women's Aid miss out on the support of a children's worker.

The following three examples provide valuable models of practice, which could be adapted by Leeds to ensure that the needs of homeless children in the city start to be addressed.

'Newcastle Supporting Families'

Newcastle's 'Supporting Families' project is based at the city's Hill Court homeless accommodation facility. Hill Court is the main facility for homeless families in the city and comprises 59 self-contained one, two and three bedroomed flats.

Hill Court and the city's nine-roomed hostel at New Bridge Street, see an average of 250 children and their families passing through the system each year. The length of stay for families can be from a couple of weeks to several months.

The 'Supporting Families' project is a partnership between Newcastle Housing Department and 'Children North East', a local voluntary organisation. The project works alongside Hill Court's housing staff and multi-disciplinary team.

The project has evolved over the past four years. It was initially set up as a crisis, home-based babysitting service, which enabled children to be cared for together when a parent was, for example, arrested, or had to attend an urgent appointment.

At this time, the small project was jointly funded by monies from Social Services and Grant Aid from the Housing Department.

Historically, the service developed, as the issues affecting homeless children were perceived as increasingly problematic. Hill Court's manager recognised that children were becoming involved in shoplifting, vandalism, 'gangs' and group conflict.

Outings, day trips and other off-site activities were organised for children as the next step of the project's development. These taught the hostel's staff important lessons about staff to children ratios, boundaries, and most importantly children's vulnerability. Sylvia Copley, the project's initial worker and current manager, observed that "homeless children play in the same way as every other child".

The children and families evaluated the trips and outings very positively and Hill Court staff felt that a lot of pressure was taken off them. Hill Court's manager, Neil Munslow felt that it would be a good idea to open up one of the flats as a playroom and the project got off the ground.

Funding and staffing

The project is now joint funded by Children North-East, Newcastle Children's Fund and Grant Aid from the Housing Department, which also provides rooms, heating, repairs and security. Additionally Sure Start 'buy in' the project's services. Further funding is constantly being sought, and donations

are secured from local benefactors, charities and “here, there and everywhere”.

The staff team comprises a project manager, two project workers and an outreach worker. The Project takes placement students from Northumbria University’s Play Work course, one of who is currently developing the project’s play strategy.

Playroom

The project’s playroom provides a safe space for supervised and informally structured after-school and holiday-time activities. Ongoing consultation with the children ensures that they are involved in the planning of projects and activities.

The playroom is open from 4pm to 7pm each school day and from 10am to 4pm in the school holidays. Children attend in small groups and choose the types of activities they wish to pursue. Recent activities have included bread making, collage and a photography exhibition which helped the children express their feelings about becoming homeless. Children have access to computers to complete schoolwork too. The ethos of the project is very much about enabling children to have their experiences validated and about flexibility and quality of service. Special occasions such as birthdays and moving on from Hill Court are marked with parties.

Under 4’s service

This part of the project focuses on families with young children and works closely with Sure Start and the hostel’s health visitor to co-work and provide a comprehensive package of support to families and to ‘fill gaps’ that might otherwise be missed. Families are offered up to three weekly sessions, which are tailored to meet the families’ specific need.

Under 4s can be registered at the project’s crèche.

Outreach support

Focus groups, facilitated by outside agencies and set up to evaluate the project have generated very positive responses, but also identified further needs. One of the main issues arising from evaluation is that when families move out of Hill Court into the community, they often find it very difficult to settle, which can result in a return to temporary accommodation.

In view of this need, an Outreach Support worker was appointed. Her involvement begins while families are still living at Hill Court and follows them into the community as they move on. She liaises closely with Education Welfare workers and works with children who are out of school.

A small partnership of local charities donate money which is used to purchase new school uniforms, as lack of uniform is one of the stigmatising factors which prevent children from attending school.

The project has access to sessional childcare workers who work with families in their new homes, or take the children out. The project recognises that out of school clubs in the community are often beyond the financial reach of families settling into new areas.

Across the project, links have been developed with two Sure Start programmes, education support workers and an asylum-seekers project (also funded by the Children's Fund).

The project is expanding. Further recruitment is planned and play sessions are about to start at the New Bridge Street hostel.

The project is underpinned by thorough Child Protection, Health and Safety, Confidentiality and Equal opportunity policies, which are explained carefully to parents who register their children.

Hill Court's multi-disciplinary team

As well as Hill Court's 'front of house' staff, who deal with admissions and the day to day running of the facility, the office is home to a multi-disciplinary team made up of a Health Visitor, Community Psychiatric Nurse, Benefits Advice Worker and Approved Social Worker. A G.P visits twice a week and residents do not need to make appointments.

The team has been at Hill Court for 8 years and was set up as it was found that mental health issues amongst homeless people were not being addressed. The whole team operates an open access policy. They have found that being on site and having opportunistic contact with people with chaotic lifestyles means that people who might repeatedly miss appointments are able to access services.

Again, this team works very closely with housing staff and with the Supporting Families project.

Manchester City Council / Shelter partnership

This partnership was set up after Manchester Education Authority recognised problems regarding homeless children accessing schools. The Authority recognised that lots of children living in interim accommodation were out of school for long periods of time. The problems faced by these children were recognised as being complex and affecting not only their education, but also health and housing.

The Council approached Shelter who responded by discussing ways of addressing these issues. These discussions ended in a partnership being set

up between Shelter and the Education Welfare Service to develop a model of education focused support.

The project currently has one worker whose main role is to link in with Educational Support Services to ensure that children in interim accommodation are able to focus on education as a priority and engage parents in supporting this. It is acknowledged that this is difficult given the circumstances of homeless families.

60% - 70% of homeless families in Manchester are fleeing violence (the same figure as in the current piece of research at Richmond court hostel). This means that children are not able to stay in their original schools. There are also new families moving into Manchester from areas outside the city, which means that there is increased demand for limited school places.

Rather than move homeless children into the area of the interim accommodation, the Shelter project aims to identify families' areas of choice for re-housing and attempt to secure school places in those areas.

Transport

Transport to school has emerged as a huge problem, as it has in Leeds. Parents are encouraged to overcome the practical barriers in order to ensure that their children get to school, but financial and emotional barriers add an additional burden and the problems appear to be insurmountable.

Shelter plan to recommend to the Education Authority that a transport scheme is set up. It is hoped that if this goes ahead, funding could be secured from Council core funds, or Children's Fund.

The project needs to evidence the nature and extent of need for transport to demonstrate why homeless children need transport whilst those children who are not homeless do not.

An interim evaluation or service review of this model is to be completed to determine whether this type of project is viable and whether fuller evaluation is to be carried out. If deemed viable, recommendations would be made to Manchester City Council and further funding could be applied for. The pilot would be extended for a longer period, possibly a further two years and an independent evaluation would then be carried out.

Information could be used to lobby the ODPM and DfES for further funding for the children of homeless families. Shelter's policy and external affairs teams could engage with the Government if Shelter are able to demonstrate this need for homeless children. Local Authorities may find it difficult to develop this type of service without additional financial support from Central Government.

In addition to the Shelter project Manchester Education Welfare Service have dedicated a part-time Education Welfare Officer based at one of Manchester's hostels. As a result of this, 90% of the children in this hostel are now attending school. No figures however were given on what the percentage was before.

The Shelter Education Support worker works with the city council's Resettlement Team to address the issues when children move into new schools. These include induction, bullying and alienation from friends and integration into a new community. It is recognised that children need support in new schools even if there are no immediately apparent problems as the trauma and disruption of homelessness affects their willingness to engage and integrate and therefore achieve at school. They may still want to be in their old schools and don't want to co-operate in new schools, which can lead to behavioural problems.

Another strategy that is being considered is that learning packs, produced for travellers' children could be sent to children 'out of school' living in hostels. It is acknowledged that this is not ideal and that a further consequence is that children lose the actual skills of learning in a classroom environment, which are hard to pick up again. Resources would have to be dedicated to ensure learning support is available to implement use of learning packs – ideally this would be provided by teachers or teaching assistants dedicated to providing services to homeless children out of school.

Jayesh has expressed interest in our small Leeds project and plans to contact Shelter's regional office in Leeds to inform them of the project's work. He will be included on the invitation list for the presentation in May.

Leeds Women's Aid

Leeds Women's Aid employs 2 children's workers who are currently piloting an assessment scheme. The workers conduct initial visits to families and set up admissions to local primary schools for children who have fled from other areas. There are good links with three local primary schools.

A second visit or 'parent consultation' is undertaken to gather further information about family dynamics and relationships, behaviour, problems associated with violence that children have often witnessed, and generally to establish children's support needs.

The third session is undertaken with the child/ren, to establish relationships and gain children's views in order to identify their needs.

A support plan is then drawn up identifying these needs and looking at how they might be met.

Work is done with children, in some cases on an individual basis and support is provided through play and other activities.

The workers refer on to other agencies as and when appropriate. These include Social Services, 0 – 16 team, Family Service Unit, Health Visitors etc.

The workers run an after-school group in a local hall, as well as regular outings, residential breaks and holiday playschemes.

The children's workers work with children aged up to 12. There is a youth support worker who works with young people aged 13 – 19.

12. Mapping Exercise

One of the tasks of the **Homeless Families Project** was to map out existing services available to homeless families in East Leeds. Over a short period of time the focus of this task shifted as it became apparent that this was too big a task to undertake within the 6 month period and that in some ways it would be duplicating work already being done. For example, the audit of health services in East Leeds, undertaken by East Leeds Primary Care Trust and the mapping of play provision city-wide by Leeds Play Forum.

Additionally, it soon became apparent from spending time with families that what was needed was information about very local services and amenities. It also became clear that families living in the hostel do not always access existing services even when they know about them, maybe because they do not feel part of the local community.

One solution was to compile a very localised directory of services and amenities in the immediate vicinity of the hostel. This includes services as basic as the local Post Office and Supermarket, as well as schools, GPs etc. The directory also includes several helplines and 'signposting' organisations across the city, but its primary function is to help families new to the area find their feet.

The directory has been created as a template on Leeds City Council's computer system and can be accessed by hostel staff for inclusion in Richmond Court's 'Welcome Pack'.

Strengthening links with various support agencies across the city as a means of raising the profile of this project and the visibility of these children has been another method used to address the issue that families do not access services.

Links have been made with Parent Partnership and with East Leeds Education Action Zone, both of which organisations have made a commitment to physically bring information about their services into the hostel through the use of 'bridge workers'.

Appendix

Effects of Homelessness on children, from 'No Room to Play': Children and Homelessness, Shelter's submission to the 2002 Spending Review

EDUCATION

- frequent moves leads to frequent changes of school – with negative consequences for children's education
- educational attainment can be lower compared to their peers
- homelessness can lead to impaired language and speech skills
- overcrowded conditions make it hard to read or do homework
- stress and health problems affect a children's learning and behaviour
- schools with higher pupil mobility incur extra costs and poorer results

HEALTH

- infectious respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases among homeless children are common
- the stress of living in cramped conditions can cause strains on family relationships and mental health problems
- cramped conditions lead to poor hygiene
- homelessness increases the risk of low birth weight
- limited cooking facilities can lead to a poor diet

HAPPINESS

- behavioural problems such as mood swings, hyperactivity, depression, reluctance to eat, disturbed sleep and bed-wetting are more likely
- children living in cramped conditions have no personal space for development
- children cannot bring friends home to play
- additional stress on parents can lead to increased risk of abuse
- confidence and expectations of life can be severely affected

BELONGING

- homeless families are often placed in accommodation far away from where they lost their last home
- access to health, social services and initiatives such as Sure Start can be restricted because service providers do not know families are there
- loss of support networks of friends and family increases insecurity and ability to cope

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