



Carr-Gomm



Homeless Families Project – Summary Report

“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.

The Homeless Families Project started with Leeds City Council’s desire to know more about homeless families. Leeds Children’s Fund, when approached, agreed to finance a project where Carr Gomm – a national housing association and support provider, took a lead in organising and carrying out the project.

Using a combination of questionnaire, interview and qualitative recording of children’s conversation and play, the families living at Richmond Court Hostel in Leeds were key to this study.

Key Findings

The key findings were:-

- **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.**
- Children and young people talked about:
 - ❑ Loss of contact with friends, belongings, family and a ‘normal’ home.
 - ❑ Their experiences of seeing violence in the home.
 - ❑ Disruption to their education and after school activities.
 - ❑ The lack of play and leisure activities available to them.
 - ❑ Their anxieties about their parents and the future.
 - ❑ How their families’ lower income impacted on their clothing, transport to school, leisure and holidays.
- 25% of the children from families interviewed were not attending school as a direct impact of their homelessness...a further 22% were poor or sporadic attenders due to the cost of travel or distance to their school.

“I don’t go to school on Monday’s ‘cos my mum has to go and get her money”

- The children living in the hostel had often experienced traumatic events. These varied from direct assault from a parent, witnessing of violence in the home, family breakdown and personal losses. These experiences were often normalised by children and talked about in a very matter of fact way.

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

- Workers at the hostel perceived many impacts on the children that were in the main negative. Emotional changes ranged from anger and aggression to withdrawal, anxiety and fear.

- Children, especially older children were acutely aware of their circumstances and experienced embarrassment and stigmatisation.
- The roles of violence in the home and relationship breakdown as key causes of homelessness were confirmed.
- Children in hostels want increased leisure and play opportunities such as a computer to use the Internet, a safe playground and trips out. Children also wanted someone to talk to such as a keyworker or a playworker.

Recommendations

The report concludes...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'.

The key recommendations are:

- The Education Welfare Service needs to be linked to those who support homeless families to maintain children's education when they are in a hostel. A firm protocol needs to be in place to identify, monitor and help children in attending their original school or in changing schools. There is a role for a dedicated worker within Education Welfare to specifically support the children in the city's hostels.
- Social Services need to increase their capacity to work with homeless families. The role of Link Social Worker exists at Richmond Court to liaise between hostel and local social services team. It is recommended that this role be extended to provide support, advice and liaison with Education Welfare and to liaise with other area social services teams when families move from the hostel to a different area. It is further recommended that the link social worker be able to easily refer to therapeutic and family support agencies.
- A children's worker to be employed at the hostel setting (using Women's Aid as a model for this service) to assess and support children and their parents. Their role would include referral to other agencies, advice around childcare, provision of play and leisure at the hostel and information on local resources for children.
- Creation of a virtual team to work with homeless families in hostel and other settings. The idea of a virtual team is to bring together services such as a link social worker, education welfare, children's worker and other agencies to co-ordinate their work. Each team member would retain their existing line management and job title but would be given time to contribute. A clear remit and objectives are envisaged.

The general recommendations of the report are that greater awareness through monitoring of homeless children be introduced, this will help show the effectiveness or otherwise of measures to improve outcomes for this group. Strategic groups need to incorporate measures into Local Preventative Strategies to ensure needs of homeless children addressed. Finally it should be recognised that homeless families may not be able to access existing or conventional services. Reaching this group may require targeted services.

Further Information

A full copy of "We're just like other kids" is available as a .pdf file that may be downloaded from www.carr-gomm.org.uk. If you are without web access a reprint is available from the contact below.

For further information on the Homeless Families Project please contact:

Paul Bollom, Homeless Families Project Manager, 0113 2258900, Carr-Gomm Society, Oaktree House, Oakwood Lane, Leeds LS8 3LG, paul.bollom@carr-gomm.org.uk