

Tackling Homelessness – Consultation Paper

Housing Corporation 2006

Response from Barnardo's

Barnardo's

Barnardo's helps the UK's most vulnerable children have a better start in life, and therefore the chance of a better future. As the UK's leading children's charity, we work directly with over 120,000 children, young people and their families every year. We run 370 vital projects across the UK, including work with families living in temporary accommodation.

Barnardo's vision is that the lives of all children and young people should be free from poverty, abuse and discrimination. Barnardo's purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people transform their lives and fulfil their potential.

Every Barnardo's project is different but each has the same goal: protecting, nurturing and providing opportunities for the most vulnerable children and young people, over the long term, enabling them to transform their lives and fulfil their potential. During 2005-06 Barnardo's ran 80 services in the London, East and South East England providing support to children of all ages within their families and communities. The Families in Temporary Accommodation Project (FiTA) was one of these. Since 1993 approximately 8,500 children from 3,600 families have been supported by the FiTA Project.

Introduction

Before commenting on the specific questions in the consultation paper, we would like to make some general comments about the introduction.

As you identify, the 'Government's homelessness strategy aims to reduce homelessness by offering a wider range of preventative measures and increasing access to settled homes,' with the target being that the numbers living in temporary accommodation are halved by 2010.



The numbers of homelessness acceptances have come down. Acceptances fell below 100,000 for the first year since 1986 and were 93,908 in 2005/2006, 22% lower than the previous year. As a result, the numbers of statutorily homeless households living in temporary accommodation has begun to fall. The numbers for England went over 100,000 for the first time during 2004 and remained at that level until the last quarter of 2005 when they decreased to 98,730, with 63,800 in London. In the first quarter of 2006 these were down again to 96,370, with to 62,740 in London.¹

These reductions are labelled 'preventing homelessness,' but there have been some worrying indications about what might lie behind the apparent improvements and no indication why the numbers of homeless have begun to fall at a time when social house building is at such a low level.

The supply of social housing has decreased significantly, both due to the sale of council accommodation since the 1980s and the reduction in the building of new social housing, which more than halved between 1995 and 2004. The number of social houses completed in the UK by registered social landlords and local authorities has fallen from 41,516 in 1995-96 to 18,577 in 2003-04 before increasing to 22,823 in 2004-05.² By the end of 2004 there were 386,000 less units of social housing in England than there were in 1997.³

Experience from projects in the London Homeless Families' Network, which the FiTA Children's Services Manager chairs, is that some families who previously would have been accepted as homeless are being accommodated in temporary accommodation, but without being accepted as homeless. This is on the basis that a short term let in the private sector is a suitable housing option for families. These arrangements do not meet the test that children and families need decent, secure and affordable homes. The private sector is never secure, only affordable if massively subsidised by public funds, and not always of a decent standard. The result of this is that the numbers of statutory homeless decrease although the numbers of families in temporary accommodation do not. The extent of this cannot be deduced from the official figures. Rather than preventing homelessness, this policy simply reduces the level of homeless acceptances.

The homelessness statistics also do not include significant groups of children and families who do not have a right to be classed as homeless although they live in temporary accommodation. These include: all asylum seekers; many new migrants; anyone who has placed themselves in temporary accommodation, but is not under imminent threat of eviction; anyone who has been declared 'intentionally homeless.'

¹ See DCLG Statistical Release 2006/0023 for all these figures: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1002882&PressNoticeID=2169> and tables found here <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1156302>

² See Table 201 Housebuilding: permanent dwellings started and completed, by tenure, United Kingdom. DCLG: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1156032>

³ See Table 104 Dwelling Stock by tenure, England. DCLG : <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1156006>

The introduction also reports that the ‘target to ensure that no household with children is in bed and breakfast accommodation except in an emergency’ has been met. This target has only been met because the definition of B&B in the legislation only classes accommodation owned and managed in the private sector as B&B. 4,960 households with children are currently in accommodation which would be classed as B&B if it was in the private sector.⁴ Barnardo’s has asked that no families with children should be housed in accommodation which is similar in nature to B&B, but which is currently excluded from the definition of B&B because it is not owned and managed in the private sector. If these conditions, typically with a household in every room and sharing facilities, are not suitable for children, we think it makes little difference who owns and manages the building.

In March 2006 Barnardo’s published ‘Do my kids have to live like this forever?’ (written by the FiTA Children’s Services Manager) which featured in depth interviews with ten families who are living in temporary accommodation and contrasted their lives with the government’s aspirations for children in the White Paper ‘Every Child Matters’ (that that every child should have the outcomes: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being). The report shows the consequences for children. The conditions, transient nature and cost of temporary accommodation can all harm children. Their physical development, social development, emotional well-being, educational attainment and potential contributions to society may all suffer. The report showed that all of the five Every Child Matters outcomes can be compromised by being homeless and living in temporary accommodation. The report makes fourteen recommendations and can be downloaded here:

www.barnardos.org.uk/homelessness_report.pdf

Our responses

We very much welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Our interest is particularly on the effects on children of homelessness and therefore we have targeted our response specifically to this.

Objective 1: Co-operation and partnership

We think that voluntary organisations which provide direct services for homeless children and families should be included in partnerships. It is not clear from the consultation who would represent poorly housed and homeless households.

We would like, as much as possible, to see housing association property which is being used as temporary accommodation converted into secure affordable tenancies.

⁴ See DCLG table: http://www.communities.gov.uk/pub/677/StatisticalReleaseTables2006Q1.xls_id1500677.xls

Q1 We would like the Housing Corporation to take feedback from homeless households both directly and via voluntary organisations which represent their interests on how housing associations are responding to homelessness.

Q 1.5; 1.6; 1.7; 1.8; 1.9; 1.10 We would like to see sector-wide reports on housing association performance, including on outliers, in housing nominations and homeless households and on any refusals. We would like to see these published in the Housing Corporation Assessments. Areas we would like to see included in the reports:

- how many nominations have gone to homeless households
- what were the characteristics of the household (numbers of adults and children, ethnicity, immigration status, any special needs)
- whether or not these were in priority need and if so which category
- what type of accommodation was needed compared with what was allocated
- who made the nominations
- how many nominations were refused and why
- how new tenants were supported
- what were long term outcomes

Q 1.15; 1.16 We do think that there is merit in having a 'homelessness champion' at a senior level in housing associations. We would like to see champions who are in touch with the needs of homeless households. This could be achieved by either, or both, having champions who have close links with relevant voluntary organisations, having champions from relevant voluntary organisations co-opted onto the boards, and/or seconded to the staff.

Objective 2: Sustainable and mixed communities

Q 2.2 Our experience is that Choice Based Lettings often do not meet the needs of homeless families who end up either not being able to work out how to use the systems, or endlessly bidding for properties they never get. This is particularly the case for BME families, especially those who have English as a second language. It would be very helpful to have sector wide reports on this to see if our experience is common. Over 50 families from Barnardo's contributed towards our response to the London Housing Strategy. Dissatisfaction with CBL came up very strongly. You can find our response to this here:

www.barnardos.org.uk/response_to_draft_london_housing_strategy_2005.pdf

Objective 3: Prevention of homelessness

The costs of eviction can be much more than the £3,000 - £10,000 identified in this section (pg 24). Children in evicted families cannot be left in the street and end up as the responsibility of the local authority under their Children Act 1989 duties, if the household is declared 'intentionally homeless.' We appreciate that housing associations go to great lengths to avoid evictions, but think that the involvement of a more neutral agency, such as a voluntary organisation, could prevent some of these situations deteriorating to the point of eviction when housing association and local authority input and support has been resisted by the family.

Q 3.6 We believe that private sector rented accommodation is not suitable for poor households. We meet more and more families who previously might have been living in affordable social housing, but who are now in unaffordable private sector rented accommodation. £300 a week upwards is common in London. The rents have to be paid from or subsidised from public funds as the families can't afford them. Families are often worse off if they work. The leases are insecure. A lot of this accommodation is at the bottom end of the market and is of poor quality. Insecure, unaffordable and possibly poor quality accommodation does not allow families to provide a decent life for their children.

Objective 4: Making better use of existing stock

We support the initiatives to enable housing benefit finance to be used by housing associations to finance borrowing on property acquisitions. This is much better for the community generally than simply increasing the value of the investments private individuals have made in schemes such as 'buy to let.' However, we are concerned that this increases housing demand, not supply, and if it was practised very widely could contribute further to the inexorable rise in housing unaffordability.

Although the government is making substantial investment in new homes, the provision of new social housing has dropped to half what it was in 1997 (see introduction) and there is only a target to increase this to three quarters of the 1997 level (30,000 a year compared with 41,000), and then only by 2008. This is not enough. There is simply no way to deal with the problem of homelessness without increasing the supply of affordable housing, probably to around double the government's target. We would like to see a much bigger than 1% growth in housing association stock.

We are also quite concerned by the increasing use of the term 'settled homes' which is being increasingly used, apparently instead of 'secure housing,' or 'secure tenancies.' We think that children and families need to live in decent, secure and affordable homes. Much accommodation we see labelled as 'settled' is insecure and unaffordable and a substantial proportion is not of a decent standard. We think that some of the reduction in statutory homelessness, which has been achieved despite very low levels of investment in social housing, is due to families who previously

would have been classed as homeless, being instead housed in insecure and unaffordable private sector accommodation without being logged as 'homeless.'

Q 4.4 As well as seeing privately leased stock converted into permanent homes, we would like to see some housing benefit finance used to increase supply.

Objective 5: The Corporation's investment role

Q 5.1 We think that there should be more attention paid to the pressures in London. 65% of England's statutorily homeless households are in the capital, compared with 58% in 1997. Resources should be used proportionally according to need.

Q 5.5; 5.7 We strongly support schemes which facilitate cross-boundary working. This is particularly relevant in London where some boroughs have exceptionally difficult housing circumstances. Families feeding into our response to the London Housing Strategy (see above) were very willing to move into new areas if they could find secure AND affordable accommodation by doing this.

Objective 6: Promoting best practice

We understand that you are particularly interested in housing association practice, but we would like to see the contribution voluntary organisations such as Barnardo's make receive more acknowledgement. Currently, our services for homeless families are 100% financed from voluntary fundraising. We think that the statutory sector could share some of the costs with us. We believe that we can play a unique and complementary role alongside housing associations and local authorities in best meeting the needs of homeless families and would like there to be more awareness of this.

These are the specific outcomes we seek to achieve in our work with homeless children and families:

The first outcome – for children

'By the end of a session of services, children will have developed socially and emotionally according to their age and ability and will demonstrate increased confidence.'

The second outcome – for parents

‘Within a month of starting to use services and receiving welfare rights advice, parents will feel confident enough to take definite steps to improve difficult life situations for their families.’

The third outcome – for parents and children

‘By the end of a session of services, parents will be able to provide better experiences for their children, securing enhanced opportunities for self development and family life.’

The fourth outcome – for children and parents

‘All children and parents using services will have opportunities to influence public opinion and social policy.’

Contact

If you would like more information on this response or to discuss it further, please contact:

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