

SPEAKING NOTE

MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND EARLY YEARS

The Role of Housing in Improving Outcomes for Children

24 March 2009

Good morning everyone and thank you Douglas for that introduction. I am very glad to have this opportunity to speak to you about this most important issue.

You will know that this Scottish Government places an extremely high priority on ensuring that we all work together to:

- give children the best start in life;
- to improve outcomes and life chances for all young people – particularly those most vulnerable – and equip them to succeed;
- and to ensure that children and young people can fulfil their potential – becoming successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.

These priorities are reflected in the National Performance Framework and the local Single Outcome Agreements which sit beneath it. I stress the importance of working together - as we have made clear, through *Getting It Right for Every Child* and the development of the Early Years Framework, effective action to assess and meet the needs of children is the responsibility of a wide range of services and is most effective where everyone recognises this and works accordingly.

Working together means taking a shared approach – delivering improved and integrated services and re-designing them where necessary to reduce overlap and bureaucracy. It means recording and sharing information appropriately, allowing for more effective joint decision making.

Housing and homelessness services – whether public or voluntary; broader support services; and landlords all have an important part to play when we focus on children who are at direct risk of homelessness but also more generally in ensuring good outcomes for all children. The importance of decent accommodation is so fundamental to health and wellbeing of both children and adults that I think we sometimes overlook it precisely because it is so obvious.

Good housing underpins quality of life. We cannot expect children to have a good start in life if we fail to recognise this. We want our children to be healthy and active – very unlikely if their housing actually damages their health or if there are no local places to play. We want our children to feel nurtured and above all to be safe – again unlikely if their accommodation is not secure and they are not sure when they will need to move on again – away from friends and school.

We need to respect and include our children and young people – to ensure they are part of the community – not apart from it. We ask our children to be responsible citizens, but we must also play our part in taking their views about housing seriously and responding in particular to those whose housing circumstances are anything but satisfactory.

For these reasons, housing interests must be represented in Community Planning Partnerships and other networks planning and delivering services for children. If we do not consider the crucial role housing has to play, there is a real danger that a lot of the other activity we are taking forward to improve education, skills and health will be undermined.

Of course, children experiencing homelessness, or at risk of homelessness, are particularly vulnerable. That is why there is a legal duty to have regard to the best interests of children in homeless families. Just this week we launched new guidance on meeting this duty. This was originally developed some time ago with a working group consisting of local authority and voluntary sector representatives. It has now been revised and refreshed to reflect the changing context of the new Scottish Government – with a clear focus on outcomes and early intervention.

This guidance is now available online on the Scottish Government's website and has been published in a draft format for the time being so that stakeholders' further comments can be taken into account before it is finalised in a couple of months. The precise web address will be circulated to delegates and I would encourage you to offer feedback.

The guidance aims to illustrate approaches local authorities and partners can take to prevent children becoming homeless or minimise the impact on children if their family does unfortunately become homeless. We know that homelessness can have significant negative impacts for both children and adults so we must act early to counter these where possible.

For instance, research confirms that living in very insecure environments such as hostels and Bed & Breakfast leads to a greater incidence of mental health problems for children. Living in these circumstances also leads to disturbed sleep, poor diet and increased incidence of temper tantrums and aggression. This is very difficult for parents who themselves are coping with the trauma of homelessness as well as being harmful for children.

These disadvantages can have long-lasting effects. We know that early relationships are crucial in setting a child off on a stable course in life and taking the time to invest in these relationships will pay dividends for us as a society.

A crucial area – and one which HMI Douglas Hutchison is going to talk about later in this session – is ensuring that housing and education services work together to minimise as far as possible disruption to schooling which can result from homelessness. We know the effects that disruption to learning can have on future prospects – and we can learn from our peers about how some of those negative impacts can be avoided.

This focus on prevention is an aspect which we particularly emphasised through Getting it Right and the Early Years Framework – and indeed more generally across government. We are firmly of the view that where action can be taken early – to prevent crisis and more than not to save resources in the longer term – then this should be the key focus.

We will shortly launch broader guidance on preventing homelessness across the range of circumstances which may pose a particular risk. The guidance on homeless children reflects that approach, setting out the key risk factors that – when combined with an insecure housing situation – should trigger action to consider the family’s living arrangements more closely. This should lead to an examination of the housing options – and possible action to ensure current accommodation is maintained where appropriate; or alternative accommodation found if required.

The guidance also links closely to the Early Years framework and is obviously consistent with the Getting it Right for Every Child model. As you will be aware, Getting it Right expects anyone working with a child to address their needs and the risks they face in a way which looks at the child as a whole and involves the child and their family in developing and implementing solutions.

The guidance re-states the common values and principles which underpin the Getting it Right approach for all children – but highlights practical illustrations of what this might mean in terms of responding to a child facing homelessness.

For example, in terms of an individual case:

- ‘Keeping children and young people safe’ in this context will involve meeting the requirements set out in the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) Order 2004;
- ‘Building strengths and promoting resilience’ may mean ensuring that rehousing options allow access to existing social and family networks;
- ‘Supporting informed choices’ may involve taking a housing options approach – giving families a realistic view of what is available and when, and taking their priorities into account.

In terms of the systems and processes that need to be in place to ensure the best interests of children facing homelessness are being met:

- ‘Promoting the same values across working relationships’ might mean joint training events across agencies to identify and disseminate information about common triggers of family homelessness – and how to respond to these; and
- ‘Respecting confidentiality and sharing information might involve agreeing an information sharing protocol which ensures schools are aware of any additional needs of a homeless child.

Of course, following on from the Concordat, the guidance is not about national government dictating in great detail how local authorities and agencies should meet their legal duties. The purpose is to open up thinking about how the Getting it Right principles can be given life in this context; what the legal duty encompasses and could mean in practice; and to encourage joint working and sharing of good practice to ensure the best possible outcomes for homeless children.

As I have already mentioned, children and their families should be directly involved in developing and implementing solutions which address their needs. Putting the child at the centre of decisions means that it is important to establish their views and take these into account where possible.

I am very pleased that the guidance that has been produced has been informed by a piece of research undertaken by Shelter. The researcher worked with a group of children with experience of homelessness and reflected their views of their environment and the things which should be taken into account in improving housing for children.

The key messages from these children are clear – and entirely reasonable! Their priorities are:

- Living in a safe neighbourhood, near to friends, their school and the activities they enjoy;
- Being near family and peer support networks;
- Having housing of a decent size and standard;
- Having security within permanent accommodation and having to move less;
- Being listened to by adults who are making decisions about their lives.

These are not the most ambitious of aspirations – and ones which I think it would be entirely appropriate for us to strive to meet. In fact they are standards by which we would want to address all homelessness faced by anyone of any age. This is already recognised in the Code of Guidance on Homelessness.

However there are particular aspects which I would highlight – and which the new guidance emphasises – in relation to children.

Firstly, the question of being responsive to children's views – as distinct from those of their parents; and sometimes in circumstances where siblings may take different positions can be tricky. However it is vital that all children do feel included and listened to.

Linked to this, it is important to consider that a child's perspective and concerns may differ from those of an adult. The Shelter research shows that children have worries about what will happen with their toys and their pets if they have to move house, for example. It is important not to trivialise these concerns but to appreciate their significance to the child and the impact this could have on their resilience in coping with the situation.

The third point I would highlight is that children's mobility – in terms of their ability to access facilities or to keep in touch with friends and family – is relatively limited compared to an adult's. As they are often reliant on an adult for transport – and may have limited capacity to use public transport – it is even more important for them that the facilities they use and the networks which support them are close at hand.

Finally, there are obviously particular facilities and networks that children need to access. The most obvious are childcare and schools but we should not underestimate the importance of access to play areas; facilities which enable pursuit of an interest, hobby or sport; and proximity to supportive relatives and friends.

As I have already stressed – it is only by working jointly that national and local government can come together with local agencies to ensure these issues are addressed. No one agency alone can address the whole problem. As the Getting it Right model emphasises, it is necessary to co-ordinate resources to assess needs and meet them.

Research carried out with parents and children as part of the early years framework development process also highlighted the importance of the mindset and approach of staff they are dealing with.

For example when I visited Norway to consider their approach to children's services I was struck by the decision taken early on in the process that the first thing to do was to gain an emotional and philosophical commitment from all concerned to the overall aim. I believe that is so important – although of course things still take some time to fall into place around that.

The new guidance offers examples of the types of questions practitioners should be asking themselves when working with children facing homelessness; and the linked services that may need to be involved. I hope this will be a useful guide – but it is by no means exhaustive and local partners will wish to consider their own protocols and training methods, drawing on the assessment models developed under the Getting it Right model.

We have published a Guide that describes this emerging practice model. It also helps practitioners to look at the child's needs as a whole and identify where additional support can contribute to improving outcomes. It is wholly child centred and is most definitely not the preserve of any one particular service. It can operate in a single agency setting to plan for children's needs - supporting inter-agency or multi-agency activity. A web reference is included in the children's guidance.

Of course, service delivery is only one element of the overall response to children and families in need. Through the Early Years Framework we also aim to build the capacity of families to parent their children well and thereby give them the best start in life. There is also strand of the framework dealing with the issue of building supportive and welcoming communities – which is obviously particularly relevant here when we consider some of the unfortunate attitudes which still prevail in relation to homelessness and homeless families.

Even more broadly, we are committed to doing all we can within the powers available to us to help achieve the UK Government's child poverty targets – to halve child poverty by 2010 and to eradicate it by 2020. However we have to recognise that the limited nature of devolved powers restricts our ability to take short-term action, which can only be achieved through significant investment in the reserved areas of tax and welfare benefits. We are therefore focussing on the longer term levers such as education, health, employment, skills – and housing of course.

I hope that the guidance which is now available for comment will make a real contribution to moving this agenda forward. The long-term impact of acting in the best interests of homeless children can be substantial. The short-term impact of putting the child at the centre of decision making and working in partnership with families and children can also be marked. We can improve outcomes for children and families – even those facing the most difficult challenges.

The guidance contains a number of practice examples which allow practitioners to see what others are doing to address these issues. I would very much welcome your input in identifying and sharing other examples in the next 2 months as we finalise the guidance. I have already mentioned the Shelter research which has informed the guidance.

I would also like to thank Jessie Crawford, from Shelter's Children's Service in Scotland for her input into the guidance and for co-ordinating the good practice examples. We are hoping to work with the Children's Service to hold two workshops over the next 2 months – in order to inform the final guidance but also to spread the word and kick-start thinking about how it can be used by practitioners on the ground. We will of course keep you informed about those events.

I would like to finish by thanking you once again for the opportunity to talk to you today about this very important issue – and by reiterating the crucial role that housing can have in ensuring all our children do have the best start in life. Working together we can address the most difficult challenges – and ensure better outcomes for even the most vulnerable families.

Thank you.