

Graeme Brown, 30.3.10: Children's conference

It's a year since Shelter's last children's conference.

A year ago, in Glasgow, the children's minister, Adam Ingram launched draft guidance on taking into account the best interests of homeless children.

A year ago, the minister said that the final guidance would be published in a couple of months.

But it was just last week when the Housing and Communities Minister finally told Parliament that the guidance will be published in June **this** year, a year later than it should have been.

Does that matter? Maybe not. After all, it is not often you see a march down Princes Street with protesters chanting "What do we want? More guidance! When do we want it? Now!"

In other words guidance does not change the world. With or without guidance, organisations still have a legal duty to meet the best interests of children in homeless families.

But on another level it does matter. The best interests of children guidance that was consulted on last year was not earth-shattering; it was mostly common sense advice that built upon current good practice. If it sits stuck in the government machine for **so** long, what does it say about Scotland's commitment to homeless and badly-housed children? What do we say to families like Claire's?

Claire and her 3 children, aged 11, 3 and 2, became homeless when she broke up with her partner. Their current temporary accommodation is a furnished flat on the third floor which is on the opposite side of town from where they used to live.

The eldest is staying with a relative so that he can get to school easily and be near friends and family but means he misses his mother and siblings.

Claire has mobility issues making it even harder for her to tackle the three flights of stairs with the two youngest to access local shops and services and make the journey across town to nursery school.

The middle child is also being assessed for a learning disability which again involves travelling across town since they moved. Living away from their family and social networks means less help is at hand to care for the children putting an additional strain on Claire which impacts on her mental health and means she has less energy to focus on the children.

The family is still waiting for an offer of a permanent home that is suitable.

The message that we are in danger of sending out to Claire is “Disinterest” rather than “best interests”.

And there are a lot of families like Claire’s. Shelter’s latest “Facts” report, published this week shows that last year there were 22,000 children in families which applied and were accepted as homeless. Almost half of those children were under 5 years old.

And these same families who are homeless are also the ones who are living in the most deprived areas and struggling to stay above the poverty line.

So faced with those harsh realities we need re-forge our commitment to homeless families.

And not just homeless families with young children. Today, in the time I have, I am only able to look at the plight of children under the age of 16. But we mustn't forget that group of very young adults, 16, 17 and 18 year olds, whose need for support and assistance are often just as great as those under 16 and who are **always** in the frontline to take the hit in times of recession. Think back to the last economic downturn in the late 1980s and the huge upsurge in young people experiencing homelessness then. I fear that we may be about to see history repeat itself.

So we must also redouble our efforts to help young homeless people.

But, turning back to families like Claire's.

We need to reflect on whether it is ever right for children to be the innocent victims of eviction. And not only is it right? Does it work?

Shelter has estimated that 1,700 children were evicted last year; that's almost 5 children every single day. And that's just from councils and housing associations. We don't know how many were evicted from privately rented homes; or how many were in homes repossessed by lenders.

And what happened to all those children who were evicted? Did they and their families simply dust themselves down and get back onto the housing ladder, unencumbered by debt and free of the problems that led to them being evicted in the first place.

No, of course not! The reality is that they were forced to apply as homeless; stuck in temporary accommodation for weeks, months, years even; at enormous costs to taxpayers as well as the families themselves.

Their reliance on already over-burdened social work teams increased. In some cases the crisis of homelessness amplified problems of relationship breakdown, domestic abuse and other familiar strains.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Stirling Council for shining a light on this little corner of Dickensian practice. As part of its groundbreaking “no evictions for rent arrears” policy, the Council has conducted a best value audit of the evictions that *did* take place before the policy was introduced. There were 23 evictions, of which 11 were families with children. The average level of rent arrears leading to eviction was £1400, although in one case it was as little as £350. The average cost of each eviction was over £5,000 and continues to grow as people remain stuck in temporary accommodation. The costs, of course, will be very much higher where the family has children.

So what this shows is that simply evicting families with children makes no economic sense, far less social sense.

So, first, we need to reassess whether evicting a family with children is ever the right course of action.

Second, we need to get on top of the temporary accommodation problem. For the first time ever, Scotland now has over 10,000 households in temporary accommodation, awaiting a permanent home. It is costing Scotland at least £70 million a year to provide this temporary accommodation. 2 in every 5 of these households are families with children. Between them these families have 6,000 children.

Now, I don't want to be simplistic about this. Part of the reason that temporary accommodation use has risen so much is because we are now providing a service to those who in earlier years were simply getting nothing at all. I'd far rather that people were in decent quality temporary accommodation than in no accommodation at all.

But, of course, the big reason for the explosion in temporary accommodation use is the lack of permanent accommodation.

With fewer social homes now than at any time since 1959 – when Alex Salmond hadn't yet started primary school – there are simply not enough lets to meet the demand for housing. The result is a logjam in temporary accommodation.

So the answer to temporary accommodation is more permanent accommodation.

But even if the minister today announced that he had found an extra £600 million that no-one had spotted and was able to embark on a programme of new homes that is close to what is needed – even if that were the case, it wouldn't get rid of temporary accommodation overnight.

But what we **can** do is make the temporary accommodation that we need to use of better and more consistent quality. And we can do this by setting minimum standards for temporary accommodation.

It's an idea that was first mooted by the Chartered Institute of Housing two years ago and one which has the backing of 97% of housing professionals. Over the last year Shelter has developed the proposal still further and in the last month Shelter's Children's Policy Officer, Jessie Crawford, has been consulting families with children on what their views are. We are currently working with the CIH on a joint event in June and very much hope that the Scottish Government will re-affirm its appetite for taking this idea forward.

So we need to get better at evictions and at temporary accommodation.

The third area in which we need to get better is on supporting struggling families. Prevention of homelessness is the buzz word these days. If we are to reach the internationally acclaimed commitment to house all homeless people by 2012, it will be as much about how we **prevent** homelessness as about how we **rehouse** homeless people.

And it makes sense too. Far better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to park an ambulance at the foot of it.

So everyone agrees that prevention of homelessness is central. And no-one disputes that providing tenancy support when it is needed of the type that is needed is absolutely critical to prevention of homelessness.

I see this all the time in the work of Shelter's own families projects. But I also know that a number of progressive social landlords are developing their own quite sophisticated tenancy sustainment strategies.

So why do we still hear so many stories of people slipping through the net? It's quite simple I think. Over the last ten years, the housing support sector has grown up in response to a funding initiative – first transitional housing benefit, then Supporting People. While that fund was expanding and then protected it was easier to find ways to pay for new and innovative ways of helping families to stay in their homes. The ending of ring-fencing for Supporting People in 2007 has exposed the weaknesses of that funding- led approach and the absence of any legal framework.

While we have a strong and well-tested (if not flawless) series of rights to **accommodation** we have nothing remotely comparable for **support**.

We have a right to a house but no right to the kind of help that can turn a house into a home.

I am not one of those people who believes that the genie can go back in the bottle. There is no way of going back to the days of ring-fencing. We need to look at other ways of enhancing support.

So, Shelter is arguing that the current Housing Bill is a perfect opportunity to strengthen the way that support is provided to homeless or potentially homeless people and so end the cycle of repeat homelessness that bedevils practice.

We have published proposals which require, firstly, all homeless households to be given a support assessment and secondly that services are provided which meet needs identified in that assessment. We have had backing from a diverse range of organisations – including Scottish Churches Housing Action, One Parent Families Scotland and a number of housing leaders and I am confident that MSPs will recognise the case we are making when we go to parliamentary committee next month.

And it's not as if we are breaking new ground here. What I am suggesting is no more than what is now in place for private landlords who are housing homeless people as a result of secondary legislation introduced last month. What's good enough for homeless people in private lets is good enough for all homeless people.

And what of the cost? Well, not all homeless people need support of course. The available data suggests that only around a third need support and for many of them it might be quite simple and short term help during transition into stable accommodation.

The money that used to be called Supporting People is still there – mostly – and the cost of providing support to this third of homeless people would be well within what was formerly identified as spend on homelessness services.

Besides, what I am proposing is simply building on what is already good practice. In other words, many of the services will already be in place. We are not starting from scratch.

Cost is always an issue, especially in the current climate. But the cost of this measure is not a barrier. And there's a cost to not doing anything.

So I have given three examples – in evictions, temporary accommodation and support – where we can show practically that we DO have the best interests of homeless children at heart.

I started off by lamenting the delay in the Scottish Government publishing a short guidance note. But what I was really lamenting is, that 44 years after Cathy Come Home, we are still treating homeless children as second class citizens. In the real world Cathy's kids would be in their fifties now.

If they are lucky they'd have bought a house of their own before house prices took them out of sight. They might even have retired. Or they might have kids of their own, grandchildren even, playing out the same struggle of temporary accommodation, overcrowding, moving from one place to the next, missed schools, poor health: the whole package.

Are we getting it right for every child? Not yet. Not by a long way.

But we could do.

Thank you.