

# CHiP practitioner article

## Changing homelessness for children

**Written by Bryan Gregg, Children's Education Worker,  
Shelter Families Project Edinburgh,  
for Changing Homelessness in Practice**

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# Shelter

## Making change

Changing Homelessness in Practice is an intriguing concept for those of us who work with Shelter's Families Projects, where change is something we live with each and every day.

Our client group faces change on a daily basis – change in housing, change in benefits, change in schools and change in routine. Much of our work is helping them to manage this change and make some sense of what can often seem like chaos.

As Children's Education Worker, my role is to **minimise the impact of homelessness on children's education** – a wide ranging remit which calls for the wearing of a variety of hats.

Coming into the post from being a primary school teacher, I felt I had a fair grasp on the notion of the need for flexibility and adaptability to change. In schools, despite the strict timetabling requirements and carefully planned curricula, one must always, nonetheless, 'expect the unexpected.' Having said that, as a class teacher *you* are ultimately in control (most days!) and *you* decide what happens when.

## Making education a priority

When dealing with homeless families, one is never fully prepared for the reality of their situation. Education is usually – understandably – some way down their list of priorities. My role often requires me to act as the middle man, balancing the needs, wants and, ultimately, *rights* of the child or young person against the duties and responsibilities of the school, education department or the Children's Reporter.

In its recommendation (32) the Scottish Executive's Homelessness Task Force 'Helping Homeless People' report says:

*'Local authorities, through their homelessness strategies, should provide the direction and create the framework within which all agencies join up to bring together a range of accessible options that open up genuine opportunities for homeless people.'*

It is in this area of 'joining up' services that I often find myself – aiming at all times to consider the needs, wants and rights of the child and to keep the focus on them.

A recent (2.10.03) Parliamentary Cross Party Group on Children and Young People (<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/crossparty/cpg-child.htm>) criticised the Draft Bill on Additional Support for Learning for removing some of this focus – we aim to maintain it.

## Changing schools

Task Force Recommendation 38 suggests that:

*'Homeless people should, wherever possible, be located in a community in which they feel comfortable and are likely to be fully integrated into community life. Wherever possible they should have the opportunity to live near friends and family and their workplace/school or higher/further education institution.'*

Sadly this is not the case in practice yet. Indeed a large amount of my time, and that of our Child Support Workers, can be spent trying to secure transport to school for our families so that the children can remain in what is often the one, settled environment they have. Although there appears to be no body of research looking into the educational impact of frequent changes of school, common sense tells us that multiple moves are bound to have an emotional impact on the family as a whole and anecdotal evidence suggests that there can often be links to behavioural and educational issues for the children in school.

*'The stability and support of regular attendance at school can offer a useful counterbalance to the disruption and insecurity that arises from becoming homeless and the ensuing uncertainties of living in often inadequate temporary accommodation.'*

'Homeless Children', Vostanis and Cumella (Eds.), 1999, ISBN: 185302595X.

*'While it should be noted that many children might expect to change schools through moving house...it is worthy of mention that the children reported [in this chapter], in losing their home as a result of a family crisis, have done so suddenly which adds greatly to the upheaval of moving home.'*

'Homelessness and Children's Education,' Scottish Homes, 1998.

*'It's the changing of school – that's another reason for me moaning about them moving me all over the place because he is seven, so he has been at – how many? – three schools. And if they move me somewhere else, they will have to go to another one, which is disruptive for them.'*

'Poor Housing, Homelessness and Children in School', Shelter, 1998.

Sadly, local authorities rarely have a *duty* to provide transport (although they do have the *power*) and this is something I would hope to lobby to address.

Where it becomes necessary for our families children to have to move school, I will endeavour to help with their placing request and liaise with both the old and new schools to assist a smooth transition. Much of this work relates to informing the school about the child's situation in order that they will gain some understanding of any potential issues which may affect the child.

There is, ironically, much work to be done here to educate schools and teachers to raise awareness of the nature of homelessness and its many potential impacts on education (where, for example, does a child in Bed and Breakfast accommodation do his or her homework?).

## Children and homelessness

This resettlement (and the associated impact on education) clearly has a huge impact on the children.

*'I'm thirteen and I've stayed in ten houses, about six or seven bed and breakfasts, about five temporary houses. That's twenty-one times all together that I've moved. Changing school was hard because I had to leave my pals and teachers that I liked.'*

Jemma (supported by South Lanarkshire Families Project)

*'Leaving my friends is hard because I find it difficult to say goodbye. Making new friends is hard because when you've made them you don't know when you're going to have to move again. Changing schools is hard because you won't know anyone else there.'*

Greg (supported by South Lanarkshire Families Project)

Task Force Recommendation 55 takes some account of these issues:

*'The strength of a homeless person's social networks should be an integral part of the assessment of their needs and of the support offered to them in temporary accommodation and during permanent resettlement. All projects serving homeless people should pursue strategies to promote and support opportunities for positive social interaction.'*

What this does not do, unfortunately, is place any duty on the statutory sector to address the issues raised by the children (above) but it does at least recognise some of the factors affecting educational performance and emotional well being of children of homeless families.

## Working towards a solution

There are no simple solutions and it is all too easy to be seduced by the rhetoric of 'joined up' working and polished recommendations which are not then followed up with action. What is clear, however, is that only by actively involving the views of the service users (ultimately children and young people) will they engage in any programme put in place for them, be that a referral to the council's Outreach Teaching Service, a befriending scheme or a reduced timetable in the learning support base.

The theory behind the Draft Additional Support for Learning Bill makes it clear that definitions of who needs extra help are widening. In some ways this makes my job a bit easier as it should not be so hard to convince schools that the children we work with need 'extra' or 'special' help. We shall have to wait and see if it changes things, in practice.

## Further information

If you would like to contact Bryan to find out more about his work, please email [chip@shelter.org.uk](mailto:chip@shelter.org.uk) in the first instance.