Supporting families at the intersection of social care and housing

Introduction

This briefing presents an evidence base for supporting families at the intersection of housing and social care services. It is intended to help professionals across housing departments, children and families services, and adults social care, to work together with families who have overlapping support needs in these areas.

The briefing is part of the Families and Homes Change Project. This project was established in response to growing awareness in research and practitioner communities that while the housing and social care needs of families are often interrelated, efforts to support them can be fragmented across sectors that do not always work closely together, sometimes resulting in conflicting policy and practice.

The Families and Homes Change Project facilitated a development process to formulate responses, solutions and tools to support joint working across these services. Participants included:

> People with lived experience of the issues.

> Practitioners and leaders from children and families services and adults social care.

> Practitioners and leaders from local authority housing departments.

> Academic experts.

The Change Project drew upon research evidence, case studies,[1] and the insights of practitioners and people with lived experience. The briefing consolidates this learning and aims to:

> Increase understanding about the ways in which housing, social care and family wellbeing interconnect.

> Identify points of tension in the system that can work to the detriment of families.

> Identify changes which may be implemented to improve outcomes.

This briefing recommends that new ways of inter-agency collaboration could be introduced to improve connectivity in support provision. Closer alignment between services would better support social care professionals to address families' housing needs and, likewise, better equip housing professionals to support family welfare.

The resource is primarily aimed at strategic leaders within housing and social care services, although it also contains material which will be relevant to practitioners, practice supervisors, and commissioners working in these areas. The briefing sits alongside practice tools aimed at building successful relationships and supporting legal literacy across social care and housing, to help develop opportunities for improved practice in this area.

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1 The case studies discussed in the Families and Home Change Project were based on the experiences of families who had been interviewed for research studies in which the academic partners had been involved.

Understanding the context: The housing crisis and its impact on families

The socio-economic context for the Families and Homes Change Project is a **structural housing crisis** in England which is pushing more families into poor quality accommodation and homelessness and, in turn, generating increased demand for social care services (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018; Cross et al., 2021; Sen et al., 2022b). This gives the imperative to find new ways of inter-agency collaboration between social care and housing services a particular urgency:


(DLUHC, 2023)
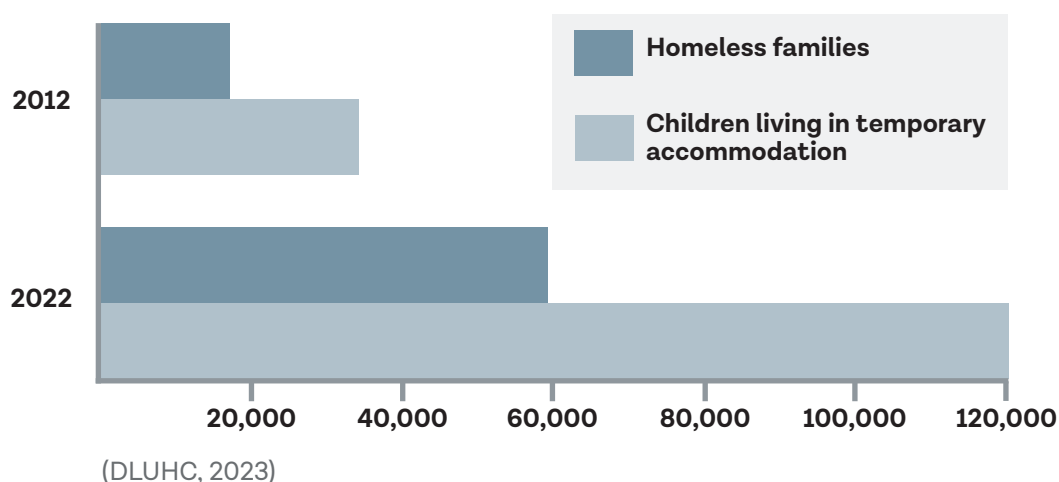
Families housed in bed and breakfast accommodation in England

(Fitzpatrick et al., 2018, Watts et al., 2022)
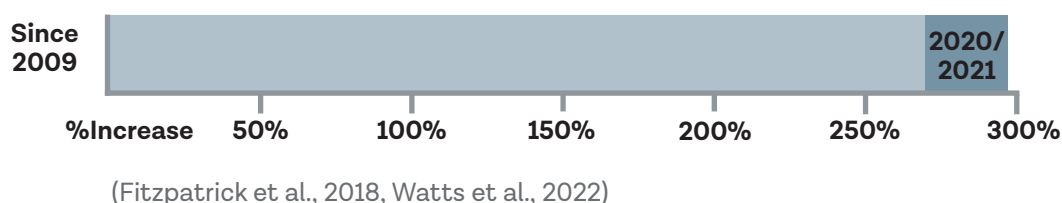
The figures do not include families who fall through the gaps in homelessness statistics, including those that have no recourse to public funds (due to immigration status), those who do not approach local authorities or homelessness services for assistance, those who stay with friends or family, and other less visible temporary housing situations.

The number of homeless families who are not captured within the official statistics is difficult to quantify and so no recent robust data exist. However, analysis conducted for the Children's Commissioner for England (using the English Housing Survey) estimated that in 2016/17:

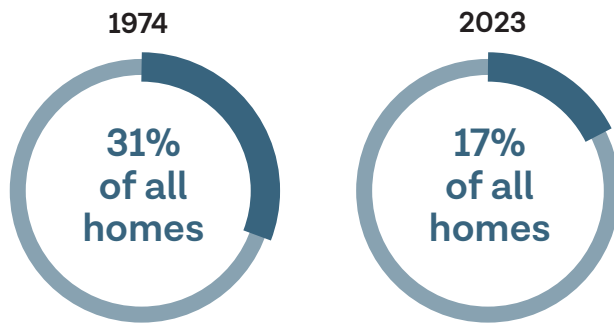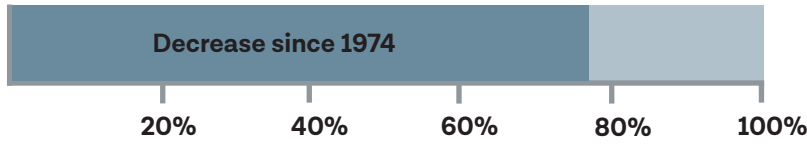**Children experiencing or at risk of homelessness**
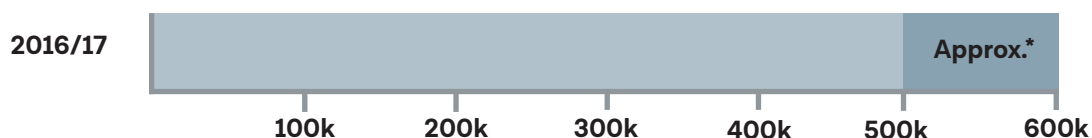
*including 92,000 children living in informal arrangements with friends or family, or 'sofa-surfing'.

Children were living in families that had fallen behind with rent or mortgage payments

2014/16						
	100k	200k	300k	400k	500k	600k
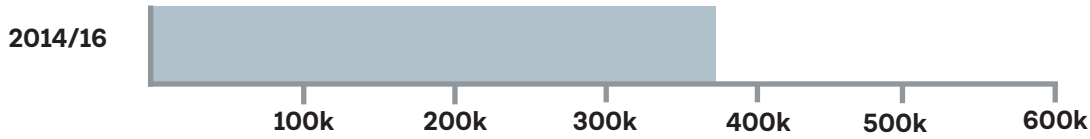
(Children's Commissioner for England, 2019)

Decline of social rented sector

Decrease since 1974

20%	40%	60%	80%	100%

1974

31% of all homes

2023

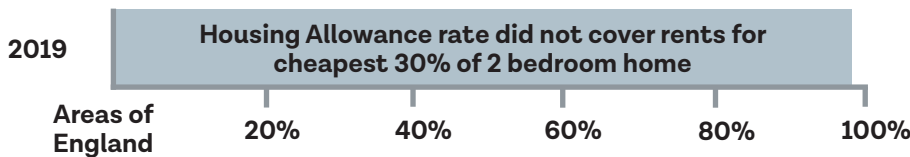**17% of all homes**
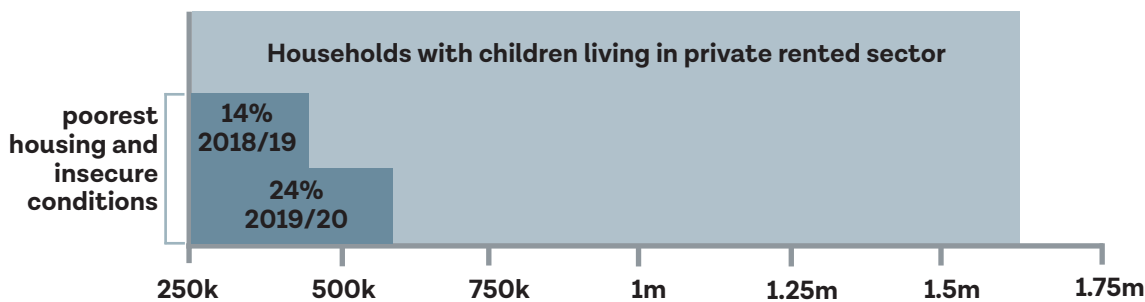
(Wilson and Barton, 2022)

This pushes people into private rented accommodation, which is usually much more expensive. Local housing allowance (LHA)[2] previously matched the lowest third of each area's local rental market prices. However, LHA was frozen in April 2020 - while market rental prices have continued to rise. As a result, more than half of private renters claiming housing benefit now have to personally make up a shortfall to cover their rent (Shelter, 2022a). Earlier analysis by Shelter in 2019 found that:

Analysis by Shelter in 2019

2019	Housing Allowance rate did not cover rents for cheapest 30% of 2 bedroom home				
Areas of England	20%	40%	60%	80%	100%

(Kleynhans & Weekes, 2019)

Increase of poorest housing and insecure conditions

Households with children living in private rented sector

poorest housing and insecure conditions	14% 2018/19							
	24% 2019/20							
	250k	500k	750k	1m	1.25m	1.5m	1.75m

(Watts et al., 2022)

2 The local housing allowance (LHA) rate refers to the rate that a household renting privately is entitled to if they are claiming Universal Credit or housing benefit. Rates are determined locally and are also dependent on the age of the renter and the composition of their household.

Loss of a tenancy in the private rented sector is a leading cause of family homelessness. In 2020/21, around 29% of private renting households were families with children (Wilson et al., 2022) but protection from eviction introduced during the pandemic (*Coronavirus Act 2020)* meant that fewer families were made homeless that year. Following the end of the eviction ban (in October 2021), levels of eviction proceedings have risen significantly, increasing family homelessness (Watts et al., 2022). Between April and June 2022, eviction of households in the private rented sector increased 39% on the previous quarter (Shelter, 2022b).

> Some groups are more at risk of homelessness and other forms of housing need than others. For example:

  - People with protected characteristics are reportedly more likely to live in poor quality or insecure housing (Local Government Association [LGA], 2022).

  - Female single parents make up two-thirds of all homeless families owed a housing relief duty in England (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government [MHCLG], 2020).[3]

  - Disabled children are more likely to experience poor housing conditions and to be in temporary accommodation (Emerson & Hatton, 2007), with recent analysis finding that 41% of families with disabled children have a home that does not meet their child's needs (Contact, 2021).

  - Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic families are more likely to experience housing deprivation, particularly those of Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British background (de Noronha, 2015; Shared Health Foundation, 2021). Households from ethnically minoritised communities are also more likely than all households to live in non-decent homes[4] (DLUHC, 2020).

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3 i.e. Homeless families that local authorities have a duty to accommodate because they meet the criteria set out in the homelessness legislation.
4 Homes that fail to meet the Government's Decent Homes Standard: **www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-decent-home-definition-and-guidance**. Landlords should also take regard of the *Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018*.

What we know about the relationship between housing and family welfare

Although gaps in the evidence remain, studies identify important ways in which housing and family welfare interact. These are summarised below:

Families have overlapping housing and care needs

> Families experiencing homelessness fall at the extreme end of a continuum of poverty-related risk and adversity (Murran & Brady, 2022), with children from the poorest neighbourhoods in England more likely to be referred into social care services (Bywaters et al., 2020).

> Preston-Shoot (2020) points to evidence of growing numbers of people experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness who also experience abuse, exploitation and neglect, health needs, and premature mortality. These people, therefore, have care needs as defined by the *Care Act 2014*. Many of them are recognised by professionals as part of the single homeless population, rather than as families; but these individuals are also members of families and often are parents themselves.

> A review by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) concludes that the two main types of families with housing needs likely to have contact with child and family social workers are:
>   - Families whose homelessness is related to underlying issues such as domestic violence and/or abuse (DVA), relationship breakdown, overcrowding and poor housing conditions.
>   - Families with no recourse to public funds who are homeless (Sen et al., 2022a).

Housing deprivation impacts on family health and wellbeing

> Evidence shows that inadequate housing conditions adversely affect mental health (in particular, anxiety and depression) and physical health (increasing the likelihood of accidents, infections and respiratory conditions) of both adults and children, although children are at a greater risk from poor housing conditions such as mould exposure (Croft et al., 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

> Poor housing impacts negatively on children's cognitive and emotional health and development, sleep, education and (indirectly) family relationships (Murran & Brady, 2022; Cross et al., 2021; Cross, 2020; Kull et al., 2019; Bradley et al., 2018).

> Families who are homeless are regularly placed in temporary accommodation. This is often poor quality, giving rise to the health impacts noted above. Space is also heavily restricted, with family members (of different ages and sexes) often sharing one room without access to appropriate facilities.
>
> This environment presents fewer opportunities for children to play (safely), for families to maintain routines, for healthy parent–child interactions, and for parental self-care. Temporary accommodation can also pose safeguarding risks, including from other tenants (Sen et al., 2022a; Children's Rights Alliance for England [CRAE] et al., 2018).

> Feelings of shame, stigmatisation and emotional exhaustion are prevalent among families who are homeless (Bimpson et al., 2022). The trauma of losing their home, together with uncertainty about future living arrangements, can have a significant impact on parents' psychosocial wellbeing and emotional health (Shelter, 2015).

> *I started to come into town into B&Bs, carrying three kids around with me...Oh it was horrible, the kids couldn't get to school at all. The kids would have been in these places (hostels) and all. They (hostels) were horrible. We had to be out at 11 o'clock in the morning, walk the streets till 5 or 6 in the evening. It wasn't a nice thing to do with kids.*
> (Viv) Source: Mayock et al., 2015

Homelessness can isolate families from vital support

> Temporary accommodation is rarely located in the same area as a family's former home, which results in geographical displacement from core emotional, practical and community supports that are essential for family wellbeing (Murran & Brady, 2022; Bradley et al., 2018). This is particularly acute when families are placed 'out of area', many miles away from employment, education, family and friends (Wilson & Barton, 2022). There has been a 382% increase in the number of households placed out of area since 2010 (DLUHC & MCHLG, 2023).

Homelessness - and policy and practice responses - can reinforce parents'/carers' separation from their children

> Policies in temporary accommodation can hinder parents/carers from maintaining positive relationships with children. For example, overnight absences from hostels and refuges are sometimes prohibited, making it difficult for parents to visit children living elsewhere; and accommodation rules may restrict visits from children (such as not allowing children in the building; confining them to communal areas; prohibiting older male children from staying in refuges) (Bimpson et al., 2020).

> Lack of housing has been found to undermine non-resident fathers' ability to look after and build relationships with their children (Cundy, 2016; Gupta & Featherstone, 2016). Local Housing Allowance entitlement rules stipulate that most single people under the age of 35 in receipt of benefits are only entitled to housing costs for a room in a shared house. This can make it difficult for non-resident parents (most of whom are fathers) to have their children for visits and overnight stays.

One evidence review identifies three key barriers in this regard:
- Concerns about housemates, including safeguarding issues.
- Concerns about the physical space.
- Landlord rules, for example prohibiting overnight guests.
(Clarke & Muir, 2017).

Children are also often prohibited from visiting and/or staying in temporary accommodation such as hostels, leaving fathers experiencing homelessness with no domestic space in which to spend time with their children (Sanders & Reid, 2018).

> Research into long-term and repeat homelessness among lone women indicates that many are parents who placed children – to protect their wellbeing - with relatives when they were at risk of homelessness (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Bimpson et al., 2020; Reeve, 2018).

> *I live for my kids...They can't visit me here and that's the lowest I've ever been when they told me I was coming here. I have no money to take them somewhere and nowhere to go with them, we just have to walk round in the rain or sit in my friend's car with a bag of chips.*
> Source: Sanders and Raid, 2018

> Homelessness policies can have adverse implications for family reunification. This includes the 'intentional homelessness' clause in the legislation, as well as interpretation of parental status, and policies of restricting access of those with past rent arrears from housing waiting lists (Bimpson et al., 2020). As a consequence, parents (usually women) struggle to access the family housing they require to regain care of their children (Hastings et al., 2021; Bimpson et al., 2020).

> Research carried out in Australia concludes that non-resident homeless fathers can distance themselves from their children because of feelings of 'failed fatherhood', which has implications for children's attachment to, and contact with, fathers (Roche et al., 2018).

There are bi-directional relationships between homelessness, child removal and DVA

> DVA is the leading cause of homelessness among women and children (Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2021). It is also the most common cause of homelessness for young LGBTQ+ people (McCarthy & Parr, 2022).

> There are well-established causal links between DVA and child removal, with research showing that women are commonly held responsible for 'failing' to protect their children from witnessing DVA, resulting in child protection intervention (Featherstone et al., 2016; Hester, 2011; Davies & Krane, 2006). The removal of children from women experiencing DVA then acts as a 'gateway' to homelessness (Wild, 2022).

> Bimpson et al.'s (2020) research with homeless mothers who had experienced DVA found that they had no choice but to remain in an unsafe situation through lack of housing assistance. Furthermore, they rarely received housing assistance until after they were separated from their children, at which point they ceased to be viewed as a 'family' by housing professionals, and so were not supported to access housing suitable for family reunification.

> The Research in Practice *Domestic Abuse and Child Protection Change Project* provides additional research and resources around working with families where there is a perpetrator of DVA.

> *One of the stipulations of maybe getting my children back is that I'd have a three bedroom house, but being here as a single person you only got offered a one bedroom flat - so it leaves me in a position where how am I supposed to do that?*
> (Rosaline)
> Source: Bimpson et al., 2020

> *…You feel like nobody's helping you and it's like it's your fault because you're not keeping your kids safe, but how can you keep your kids safe if you can't even keep yourself safe from a situation like that? That's what my family support workers said to me, when they go to court to take your kids and stuff, they don't really care about the whole situation, it's just so black and white, they see it as you're putting your kids at harm, in danger, so they blame you for it.*
> (Sandra) Source: Bimpson et al., 2022

Limited engagement with housing problems in social care, and inattention to social care issues amongst housing professionals, can result in detrimental outcomes

> There is a complex relationship between poverty (including housing needs), parenting and neglect. However, studies have found that social workers may not recognise the impact of material circumstances – for example, families who are homeless lacking the resources to meet their children's basic material needs (Bywaters et al., 2022; Gupta et al., 2018). In fact, Healy (2020) suggests that professionals can 'misrecognise' families' caring capabilities and support needs, which can have implications for whether they receive supportive, or more intrusive, child protection interventions.

> Research in Practice provide further resources on *poverty-aware practice with children and families* and *neglect in the context of poverty and austerity*, to explore these complex issues in more detail.

> Research shows that social workers can feel ill-equipped to support people who are homeless or have housing-related needs (Hood et al., 2020; Simcock & Machin, 2019; Mason et al., 2017).

> Poor housing and homelessness can contribute to children being placed outside the care of their parents/carers. A survey of 38 BASW members in England, for example, found that homelessness and housing need was identified as a notable factor in decisions to take children into care (Sen et al., 2022a; Murran & Brady, 2022). Studies also found that women who experience homelessness sometimes place children informally in kinship care as a protective strategy (Bimpson et al., 2020).

> Housing and social care policies are not always sufficiently aligned, and this can have detrimental consequences for parents. For instance, after children are temporarily placed in care, parents/carers are often considered to no longer have dependent children living with them, and so housing entitlements fall away (Broadhurst & Mason, 2020; 2017. Shelter, 2019). This might mean the allocation of a smaller property, without the space for children to stay or be returned.

> Housing and social care services should form part of a coordinated response where poor housing conditions lead to health and safety issues, which can give rise to safeguarding concerns. However, housing services do not always play an active part in collaborative safeguarding arrangements, such as local safeguarding partnerships (Cross, 2020).

> *I didn't want my kids with me, you know. Because I had nowhere to put them, you know what I mean…like, dragging them in and out of hostels.*
> (Katie, 28)
> Source: Mayock et al., 2015

What needs to change?

The Families and Homes Change Project identified four key opportunities to improve joint working and effective support for families at the intersection of housing and social care.

1. An end to siloed working

There is growing awareness that although the housing and social care needs of families are often interrelated, efforts to support them can be fragmented across sectors that do not always work closely together, potentially resulting in conflicting policy and practice (National Institute for Clinical Excellence [NICE], 2022; Hester, 2011; Bimpson et al., 2020). Families can experience this system as stressful and demeaning (Morris et al., 2018), and their needs can be exacerbated by the very agencies that seek to support them. For example:

- Social care professionals potentially perceiving housing need in terms of neglect, contributing to child protection intervention that might have been mitigated through better collaboration with housing services. Healy (2020) has described this perception as "misrecognising" housing need.

- DVA within a household prompting child removal for the safety of the child, when collaboration between social care and housing services might have resulted in safe alternative housing for parent and child (Bimpson et al., 2020).

- Housing services only becoming involved with a parent/carer after child removal/ separation, and then assessing the parent/carer as single, and so not supporting them to reunite the family (Bimpson et al., 2020).

- Women facing homelessness (and/or DVA) placing children in kinship care, rather than housing and social care working together to provide adequate housing so the family can remain together (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Bimpson et al., 2020; Reeve, 2018).

- Councils struggling to meet statutory requirements to work collaboratively, as legislated for under the *Care Act 2014* and the 'duty to refer' (NICE, 2022).

Marianne Hester's (2011) 'Three Planet Model' is useful for understanding the fragmentation within the support system. Her model describes the way in which professional groups are found to operate on 'separate "planets" each with their own cultures, laws, policies and practices' (p. 850). Hester's model refers to 'domestic abuse', 'child protection' and 'child contact' practice arenas, but the principle is equally applicable to the structural disconnections between the sectors of children and families, adults and housing services.

There is a consensus amongst research and practice communities, echoed by Families and Homes Change Project participants, that services sometimes still pull in opposite directions, despite the introduction of multi-agency forums, such as multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) and safeguarding partnerships. New kinds of working practices and professional identities, grounded in multi-professionalism and cross-boundary relationships, could help to remedy this.

Key message

Effective inter-organisational collaboration between housing and social care services means working across professional boundaries. This needs to be underpinned by professional respect and trust, as well as an understanding of each other's roles, responsibilities and duties.

 Questions for reflection

For practitioners:

> How do you demonstrate that you value the role of other professionals and partner agencies (Thacker et al., 2020)?

> Can you do more to help families navigate their support pathway by liaising and working more closely with other departments?

> How do social workers link in with homelessness teams in your local area? Do you know **who** to contact, consult or liaise with in other departments?

For practice supervisors:

> Within your team, what could you do to embed a culture of understanding, trust and mutual respect of professionals in other sectors?

> Are ways of working embedded to support cross-boundary collaboration? For example, attending the other sectors' meetings, partnership working in social care and housing assessments, personal housing plans, (LGA & ADASS, 2022).

For strategic leads:

> Could departments be brought together to produce integrated housing and social care strategies (LGA, 2022)?

> How well are multi-agency forums working? Are the right people around the table, and is their contribution clear?

For commissioners:

> Consider commissioning models that deliver consolidated services. For example, tenancy sustainment services which directly address families' cross-departmental support needs and goals.

> Is there scope to require collaboration between housing and social care sectors when commissioning services?

Actions to support improved inter-agency working

For practitioners:

> Take time to identify the relevant professionals, departments and services that may also be involved in supporting families and initiate proactive collaboration with colleagues in other teams.

> Seek and utilise the expertise of colleagues in other departments – and be ready to share your own specialist knowledge.

> Offer joint meetings with families, to reduce duplication of time and work, clarify roles and responsibilities, and agree actions in partnership with families.

For practice supervisors:

> Provide training for frontline staff from different sectors to better understand each others' roles and responsibilities, to foster a culture of mutual respect (Preston-Shoot, 2020).

> Build relationships with your counterparts in other departments and consider joint team meetings, peer support and/or reflective learning opportunities for your teams.

For strategic leads:

> Consider how best to engage social care and housing in multi-agency forums in order to facilitate effective risk assessment, information sharing and support planning. This should include greater involvement of housing services in safeguarding partnerships (LGA, 2022; Cross, 2020).

> Ensure that joint working at a strategic level is replicated across frontline teams. For example, through joint training and/or co-location (LGA, 2022).

For commissioners:

> Utilise commissioning processes that help services collaborate to meet strategic aims around intersecting needs (NICE, 2022).

2. Hearing the voice of the family

A key component to holistic and integrated responses is a person-centred approach to assessing and understanding families' circumstances. A person-centred approach is embedded in the legal framework that accompanies the *Care Act 2014* - putting the person at the heart of the assessment process to understand their needs, desired outcomes and wellbeing (Preston-Shoot, 2020).

Good practice guidance states that human stories should be at the centre of homelessness support and social care. Also, that it is important to take into account the impact of trauma and consider the person's past experiences, as well as their current situation (NICE, 2022; Preston-Shoot, 2020). This represents an ethical imperative too (Morris et al., 2018). It is about recognising that those who are closest to the lived experience of an issue (here, the intersection between housing and social care) are trustworthy conveyers of knowledge (Lee et al., 2019).

Professionals can learn from parents and carers in their efforts to provide the most helpful support by embedding professional curiosity, defined in a way that chimes with understandings of person-centred practice, to 'develop relationships, gain a holistic understanding of someone's situation and help clients and service users see things from a range of perspectives' (Phillips et al., 2022: 13). Establishing a greater understanding of families' situations is at the heart of 'professional curiosity' (or enquiring deeper), a methodology that is permeating social care practice (Thacker et al., 2020).

The ostensibly straightforward task of listening to families and conveying an understanding of their experience is, in practice, more complicated. Families often report feeling that their voices are not heard by social workers or housing professionals (Morris et al., 2018; Little, 2021). Families can feel misunderstood, blamed, and mistrusted, rather than helped (Bywaters et al., 2022). As Robinson et al. (2021) conclude from their study about the service response to disabled families experiencing violence, the 'right of people to have a say in their own lives is well established…but much promise and potential is yet to be realised' (p. 329).

Key message

Good practice involves hearing the voice of lived experience, identifying what is important to the individual, sharing reflections about possibilities and demonstrating professional curiosity about history - about the 'there and then' and the 'here and now' of their human story (Preston-Shoot, 2020).

The Families and Homes Change Project includes a podcast sharing insights from a parent with lived experience of family homelessness, domestic abuse and social care involvement.

Questions for reflection

For practitioners:

> How do you demonstrate courtesy, respect and empathy when working with families (Morris et al., 2018)?

> How do you incorporate families' expertise on their lives alongside the case notes and views you garner from professionals?

For practice supervisors:

> What tools can you use to ensure that the views and experiences of families are used to inform assessments and decision-making? How can supervision be used as an opportunity for frontline workers to engage in critical reflection to support ethical practice (Morris et al., 2018)?

For strategic leads:

> What can you do in your role as a strategic lead to help embed a culture of professional curiosity within your department (Thacker et al., 2020)?

For commissioners:

> How can you ensure that experts by experience are meaningfully engaged in the design, delivery and review of services?

Actions to support hearing the voice of the family

For practitioners:

> Work in authentic partnership with families to understand what life is like for them (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020).

> Seek to understand the historical context of families' situations, including past trauma and experience of services (NICE, 2022).

For practice supervisors:

> Provide training to all staff to challenge stereotypes, unconscious bias and pre-judgements to ensure a culturally competent workforce, so that services are effective for all families, regardless of their backgrounds (LGA, 2022; Preston-Shoot, 2020).

For strategic leads:

> Establish positive routes for families to inform service design, delivery and commissioning that do not rest on dissatisfaction and complaints (Morris et al., 2018).

> Harness the expertise of families who have experience of the child welfare system and/or homelessness to develop and evaluate services (Morris et al., 2018).

For commissioners:

> Consider commissioning criteria which require services to engage meaningfully and authentically with families who draw upon those services.

> Create accessible opportunities for families to shape commissioning, utilising the insights drawn from their lived experiences.

3. Improving prevention and early intervention

Better collaboration, understanding and knowledge exchange between housing and social care can help to prevent homelessness, repeat homelessness and social care intervention.

The research evidence foregrounds the ways in which family needs are sometimes generated or exacerbated when their social care support needs and/or early signs of housing problems (for example, falling behind with rent, breach of tenancy) are not picked up by services. This prompts the question of why appropriate help and support is often not forthcoming earlier in a family's journey.

NICE (2022) suggest that every encounter with a person experiencing homelessness could be an opportunity for engagement with care and support. This entails embedding professional curiosity, whereby agencies ask, listen and hear the voice of the family (see above) and legal literacy (see below) so practitioners act in accordance with their duties and powers to prevent homelessness and identify safeguarding concerns. The Research in Practice strategic briefing *Professional curiosity in safeguarding adults* suggests ways in which to support an organisational culture in which professional curiosity can thrive.

The *Care Act 2014*, for instance, outlines the role of local authorities (including housing) in preventing, reducing or delaying the need for care and support (SCIE, 2021). The *Homelessness Reduction Act 2017* places an obligation on local authorities to assess the circumstances causing applicants' homelessness and their housing and support needs.

In their direct work with families, social care practitioners are well-placed to recognise the earliest risk factors of homelessness. This is also embedded in legislation, including agencies' respective legal duties under the *Homelessness Reduction Act 2017* (see below) – although an evaluation of the Act found that referral numbers were low for adults and children's social care (MHCLG, 2020). Once families experiencing homelessness are (re)housed, they often require ongoing support from housing and/or social care services to recover from homelessness and prevent repeat homelessness in the future.

Key message

Early intervention can help to prevent an emerging problem from becoming a crisis for a family requiring more serious intervention. Close collaboration between housing and social care can greatly improve outcomes for families through the preventive and early intervention work that naturally flows.

Actions to support prevention:

For practitioners:

> Considering which of a family's housing/social care needs require support now, which could be reduced, which delayed and what can be prevented (SCIE, 2021).

Working in a multi-disciplinary way, drawing in colleagues from homelessness and housing services in social care assessments for families with high level housing needs (NICE, 2022).

For practice supervisors:

> Ensuring that frontline social care staff who come into contact with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness are aware of the opportunities for prevention and the importance of providing the right information at the right time (SCIE, 2021) and are able to fulfil their duties under the *Homelessness Reduction Act 2017* (NICE, 2022).

For strategic leads:

> Gathering feedback and enabling people to participate in service reviews or evaluations can encourage a culture of professional curiosity (Thacker et al., 2020) and enhance organisational learning about the support process, by hearing the perspectives of people who use services.

For commissioners:

> Developing commissioning strategies that create sufficient person-centred services to help prevent, delay or reduce the need for more formal care services (SCIE, 2021).

4. Translating policy into practice: Promoting legal literacy

Legislation and policy frameworks can contribute to siloed working across housing and social care sectors. Limited understanding of the legal and policy frameworks of other professional groups can lead to unrealistic expectations of what other departments can do, with consequences for families. Research also points to variable application and interpretation of policies and duties **within** practice areas, for example in relation to assessing 'intentional homelessness' and 'priority need' on the basis of family status (Bimpson et al., 2020).

Ensuring that the system is working in alignment requires housing and social care professionals to be both knowledgeable about legislation and government guidance, *and* able to interpret and apply that understanding in complex situations. This is referred to as legal literacy (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2022; 2016). However, research has highlighted that the different sectors do not always have sufficient understanding of the powers and duties available to them at the interface of social care and housing (Preston-Shoot, 2020). These duties and powers include, but are not restricted to:

> The *Homelessness Reduction Act 2017* placed a new duty (to refer) on specified public agencies (including social care) to refer people to a housing authority if they are homeless or at risk of homelessness within 56 days.

> Where homelessness or housing need is a major contributory factor to family difficulties, a parent or older child may ask for that child to be accommodated under section 20 of the *Children Act 1989* (Sen et al., 2022a).

> The *Children Act 1989* (section 17) requires children's services to work closely with housing services to try to ensure that adequate housing is available for families who are homeless, at imminent risk of homelessness or living in unsuitable accommodation.

> The 'Southwark Judgement' of 2009 found that social care services usually have the main responsibility for housing and support for somebody under 18 years old and homeless under the *Children Act 1989* (rather than housing departments having the main responsibility under the *Housing Act 1996).*

> When families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are homeless or at risk of homelessness, or the parents/carers cannot afford to meet basic living needs, local authorities have duties to help them under section 17 of the *Children Act 1989*.

> In safeguarding adults, it is important to understand and balance definitions of 'vulnerability' as used in a housing context with that used in social care context, which may mean something different (Preston-Shoot, 2020). The *Housing Act 1996* defines certain conditions which might make a person 'vulnerable' but the *Care Act 2014* uses the phrase 'an adult at risk', specifically to avoid labelling people as inherently vulnerable.

Key message

Enabling professionals to work together, within closely aligned legal and policy frameworks, can maximise the opportunity for successful outcomes across housing and social care. Awareness of how discharging duties can impact upon other services can enable proactive measures to be put in place early.

The Families and Homes Change Project Practice Tool: Supporting legal literacy across social care and housing provides opportunities to explore these issues further.

Actions to support legal literacy

For practitioners:

> Maintaining up-to-date knowledge about the application of key legislation, powers and duties, and provided with opportunities to test that knowledge (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2016; Thacker et al., 2020).

> Developing detailed understanding of the powers and duties to work effectively with the *Care Act 2014,* the *Children Act 1989* and the *Housing Act 1996,* and feel equipped to make creative use of statutory powers (Sen et al., 2022a).

For practice supervisors:

> Ensuring training and support around legal literacy are provided so that key housing and social care legislation is understood by frontline staff. Research in Practice provide a *legal literacy supervision work plan*, which can help to foreground legal literacy in supervision sessions, team discussions and learning events.

For strategic leads:

> Maintaining their own legal literacy and promoting the importance of legal literacy across their departments (Braye & Preston Shoot, 2016). Research in Practice has published a series of *organisational tools* to support senior leaders in creating a legally literate organisational environments.

For commissioners:

> Establishing standards for legal literacy in service commissioning and design.

Conclusion

This briefing has drawn together insights from housing, health, social care research, and the Families and Homes Change Project. It reveals a disconnect between the experiences of families, where housing and social care needs are inherently linked, and the operation of policy and practice, where fragmentation and inconsistency can occur.

However, there remains limited research that explicitly explores the relationships, connections, disconnections and joint working between housing and social care. This has prompted academics to make the case for an urgent research agenda on this subject (Cross et al., 2021; Bimpson et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2022b), alongside charities and practitioners calling for better integration of agencies involved with families who experience housing and social care needs (NICE, 2022; Hilditch, 2019). Gaps in evidence and understanding identified through this review of evidence include:

> The equalities implications of a lack of service integration, which are not well researched or documented, despite evidence that certain populations (including ethnically minoritised groups, LGBTQ+ people, disabled people, those with no recourse to public funds) are at greater risk of, for example, homelessness, poor housing conditions, unmet needs, lack of participation, being hidden from services, or child protection intervention (LGA, 2022; Shared Health Foundation, 2021; Robinson et al., 2021). There is a risk that unmet needs arising from fragmented service responses will compound the inequalities these families already face.

> The housing situations of families in contact with social care, particularly in terms of statistical data. The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021) has identified parents' housing circumstances as a distinct gap in knowledge.

> There is less evidence about the relationship between housing and **adult** social care in the context of families, than about housing and children's social care. Evidence on overlapping housing and adults' care needs/contact tends to focus on individuals, rather than families, even though these individuals are part of families and often non-resident parents or parents separated from their children.

> The role and implications for non-residential fathers of disjointed responses to families' social care and housing needs.

Although there are gaps in our knowledge, the evidence points to the multiple ways that families' housing and social care needs interact. Many families are already disadvantaged by their socio-economic location, structural inequalities, and traumatic histories, so it is essential that they receive holistic, family-centered support.

The evidence demonstrates how the service landscape for families can be difficult to navigate and hampered by points of tension where the policy and practice frameworks of the different sectors pull in different directions. Understanding these challenges provides opportunities for housing and social care to work together to respond effectively to households at the intersection of housing and social care.

It is important, therefore, that managers and strategic leads reflect on the ways in which working practices and organisational structures within their local authorities can have detrimental consequences for families, and identify opportunities for better collaboration and improved service delivery.

What has been clear from engagement with housing and social care professionals as part of the Change Project process is a strong desire to confront the problem, along with commitment and energy to make the changes necessary to address it. This briefing is a starting point in these efforts, setting out some key learning points and urgent priorities for change that can help guide efforts to improve the support journeys, experiences and outcomes for some of the most marginalised families.

Further reading and useful sources

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