

# Child Poverty and Housing

## Recommendations

The Government has recognised the contribution that tackling bad housing can make to the lives of millions of children in the UK and have taken welcome steps to address this. In July 2007 the Government pledged to deliver 3 million new homes by 2020 and approximately 2 million of these to be delivered by 2016.

The Campaign to End Child Poverty believes that if we are to achieve an adequate home for every child:

- **It is imperative that these building commitments are met**, that the housing built is affordable, and that around a quarter to a third of these new homes are available for social renting. This would help lift hundreds of thousands of children out of homelessness and bad housing and give them a brighter future.

- **The Government must end overcrowding for families with children in the rented sector by 2020.** As a first step it must introduce a modernised statutory definition of overcrowding that reflects today's understanding of children's needs for space and privacy. Current guidelines date back to 1935 and state that it is acceptable for children to sleep in living rooms, hallways and kitchens, that children aged between one and ten count as half a person and that children under one do not count at all.

- **Sufficient investment needs to be made to meet the Decent Homes standard in both the social rented and private sectors.** Families should not have to live in housing that does not meet the current minimum standard. The physical and mental health implications of living in damp, dilapidated and dangerous accommodation are well documented and children are robbed of the joy and natural optimism of childhood.

**There are currently 3.8 million children in the UK living in poverty. Without significant action to end bad housing for children, the government's target to halve child poverty by 2010 and end it by 2020 will not be reached.**

## 3.8 million children are living in poverty in the UK today

Child poverty is not inevitable, and progress has been made, but with one child in every three still experiencing poverty we have an urgent task on our hands.

The Campaign to End Child Poverty is made up of over 80 children's charities, child welfare organisations, social justice groups, faith-groups, trade unions and others concerned about the unacceptably high levels of child poverty in the UK - all working together for our common vision of a poverty-free UK.

## This is a series of briefings on our four key Campaign areas. Others will include:

### Child Poverty,

### Employment and Childcare:

The Government must ensure that work pays, ensure that parents are not trapped in poor quality jobs and make sure that all parents can combine work and family life through the provision of a sufficient supply of high quality, affordable, accessible childcare.

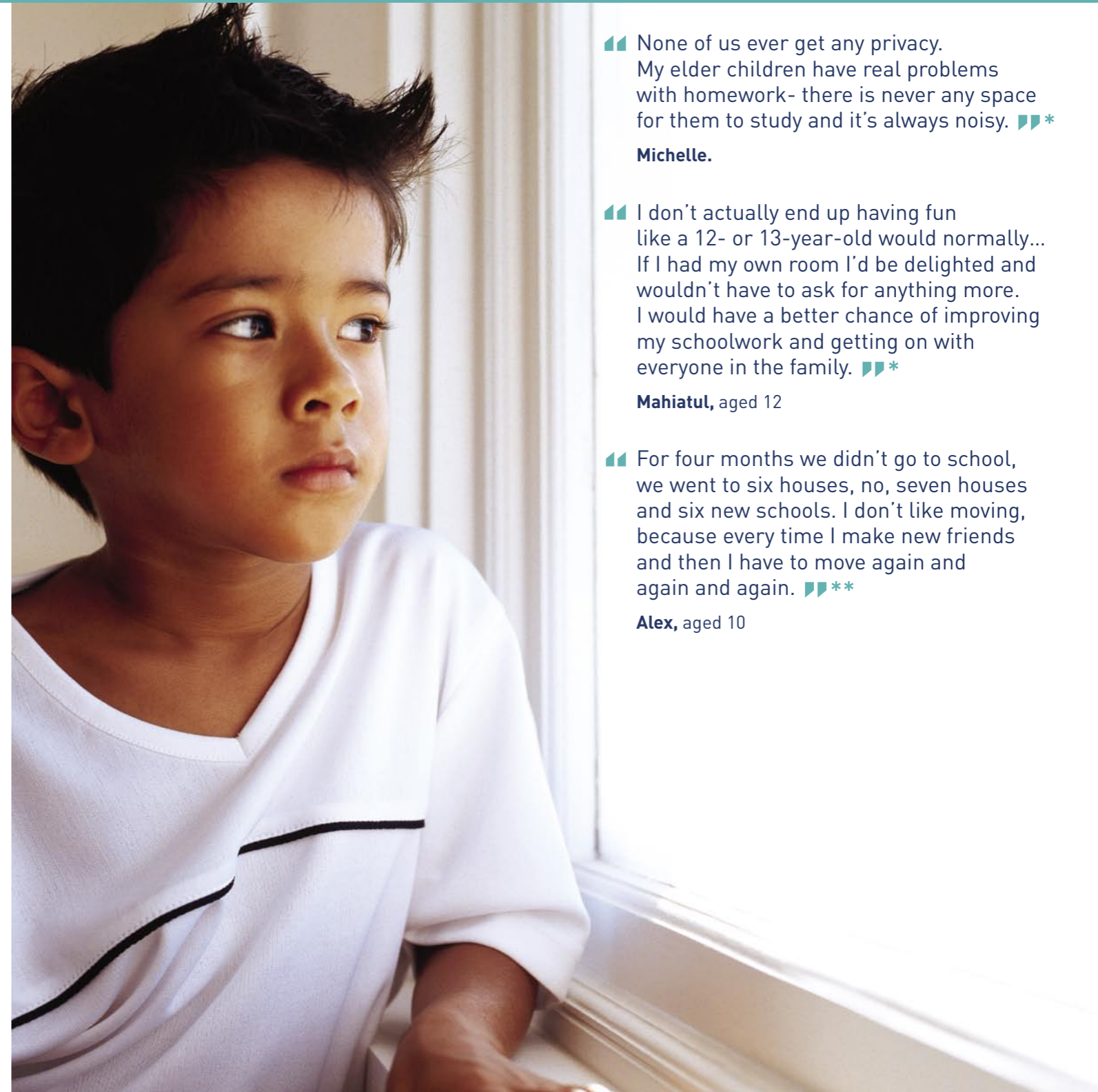
### Child Poverty and Education:

The Government must aim to close the gap between state and private school funding levels and ensure that new spending is geared towards schools in the poorest areas or

with the poorest intake; ensure education works for all children by rolling out personalised learning agendas in schools to guarantee increased support, particularly for those from the poorest backgrounds.

### Child Poverty and Income:

The Government must commit £4billion annual investment on benefits and child tax credits to reach 2010 target of halving child poverty.



- “ None of us ever get any privacy. My elder children have real problems with homework- there is never any space for them to study and it's always noisy. ”\*\*

Michelle.

- “ I don't actually end up having fun like a 12- or 13-year-old would normally... If I had my own room I'd be delighted and wouldn't have to ask for anything more. I would have a better chance of improving my schoolwork and getting on with everyone in the family. ”\*\*

Mahiatul, aged 12

- “ For four months we didn't go to school, we went to six houses, no, seven houses and six new schools. I don't like moving, because every time I make new friends and then I have to move again and again and again. ”\*\*

Alex, aged 10

To learn about child poverty, take action and get involved in the Campaign, go to:

[www.endchildpoverty.org.uk](http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk)

Registered Charity no. 1099008.



A briefing by Shelter for the Campaign to End Child Poverty.

\* All quotations from case studies in The Overcrowding Diaries, published by Shelter, July 2006.

\*\* From Shelter's Million Children Campaign, June 2006.

# Child Poverty and Housing

## Summary

In the UK today 3.8 million children are living in poverty, many of these children are being deprived of a fair start in life by poor housing. This briefing highlights the link between child poverty and housing and recognises that action to end bad housing must be the cornerstone of any serious attempt to tackle poverty.

Poor housing during childhood has huge financial and social costs across many areas including health, education and the economy.

Britain is one of the richest countries in the world, yet in the UK today 1 in 7 children are growing up homeless or in bad housing. The resulting impact on their childhood can be catastrophic and their life chances are severely blighted as their health, education and future opportunities suffer.

A child's healthy growth and development are dependent on many factors including the immediate environment in which they live. Trapped in temporary accommodation, a family can be constantly moved around, deprived of a place to settle and call their home. Living in unfit housing or overcrowded homes, children are exposed to danger and left without

the space they need to enjoy their early years. Over 1 million children experience the misery of bad housing every day, destroying their childhood and seriously endangering their future chances.

## Key Statistics:

- Children who live in poverty are almost twice as likely to be in bad housing.<sup>4</sup>
- A Shelter survey found that homeless children had missed an average of 55 school days as a result of disruption caused by moves into and between temporary accommodation.<sup>5</sup>
- Children living in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children. Children in overcrowded or unfit accommodation are a third more likely to suffer respiratory problems such as chest problems, breathing difficulties, asthma and bronchitis than other children.<sup>6</sup>
- Children living in bad housing are nearly twice as likely as other children to leave school without any GCSEs.<sup>7</sup>

## The Impact of Bad Housing

### On Physical Health

Children living in bad housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children. A child living in overcrowded or unfit conditions is more liable to develop respiratory problems such as asthma or bronchitis, or contract a life threatening disease such as tuberculosis or meningitis.<sup>1</sup> They are also more susceptible to experiencing disturbed sleep, poor diet, bedwetting and soiling.

*'My oldest child is having constant headaches and is dizzy a lot of the time. His room is very small and gets stuffy quickly, so he leaves the window open, and then the cold gets to him and he gets ill...'*

Aleya

### On Mental Health

Homeless children are three to four times more likely to have mental health problems than other children. Issues such as anxiety and depression have been linked to overcrowded and unfit housing, and more than three-quarters of respondents to Shelter's survey of teachers reported that in their experience children living in bad housing are more unhappy or depressed than other children.<sup>2</sup> Children living in bad housing are also more susceptible to developing behavioural problems, such as hyperactivity and aggression.

*'I feel like a referee between my two children. I'm scared that brother and sister will end up hating each other and that the bond that they had will be severed forever.'*

Melanie

### On Education

Bad housing affects children's ability to learn at school and study at home and consequently have lower levels of academic achievement that cannot be explained by differences in their level of ability. Homeless children are two to three times more likely to be absent from school than other children due to the disruption caused by moving into and between temporary accommodation. Children living in overcrowded homes miss school more frequently due to medical reasons than other children. Even when they are attending school, children who live in bad housing can have their achievements compromised by delayed cognitive development or by behavioural problems linked to their home lives.

### On Future Opportunities

The lower educational attainment and health problems associated with bad housing in childhood impact on opportunities in adulthood. If an individual is homeless or experiences bad housing as a child then they are more likely to be unemployed or working in a low-paid job and have fewer chances to enjoy leisure and recreation in future life.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore behavioural problems associated to bad housing can manifest themselves in later offending behaviour, with one study showing that nearly 50% of young offenders had experienced homelessness.

### Case study 1

When the local authority first gave Hagar a one-bedroom flat she was pregnant with her first child and told she would be moved in a few months when a bigger place became available. Nine years on she is still living in the tiny flat, with her daughters Shekira, 8, and Jessica, 2. They all have to sleep in the same bed, and Hagar is also pregnant with twins.

*'A couple of months ago Shekira was ill, and because we all sleep together we all became ill...There is no room to play and no room where Shekira*

*can do her homework. It is very stressful. The children are screaming all the time...they fight. Sleeping at night is terrible, and as a parent I have no privacy.'*

Hagar is finding the situation increasingly detrimental to the health, education and emotional well being of her children.

Despite the family's desperate situation, the local authority will not transfer them to a larger house until Hagar has given birth to the twins.

### Case study 2

Sandra and her three sons live in an overcrowded ground floor flat that has a severe damp and mould problem. An environmental health inspector has declared it unfit for human habitation on two separate occasions.

*'It's the smell that's almost the worst thing. It's so bad when you come into the flat.'*

The damp and mould is having a severe impact on the children's health, which is affecting their education as they are so frequently off school. Their mental health is also suffering; Ben, 8, is being teased at school because his clothes smell of damp.

*'It's not right...to be told that you smell. [Ben] was teased for it. He's seeing a child psychologist now because he has low self esteem.'*

The condition of the house also makes it difficult for him to have friends round to play, which is impacting on his social development.

The other day Ben's brother Adam, 5, refused to come home after school as he hates his home so much.

*'He just lay on the floor in the playground until 4pm. I couldn't lift him up. He just didn't want to go home. With kids it comes out in different ways...they change. If they were happy it would be better for their development. All kids want is to feel normal.'*

<sup>1</sup> Shelter, *Against the Odds* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Shelter, *Temporary Accommodation Survey* (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Shelter, *Chance of a Lifetime* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Natsen research for Shelter (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Shelter, *Temporary Accommodation Survey* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Shelter, *Against the Odds* (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Shelter, *Against the Odds* (2006).