

Consultation response



Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland Consultation ends 25 January 2008

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Government discussion paper, *Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland*. The availability, affordability, accessibility and quality of Scotland's public and private housing stock have an immediate relevance to the lives, health and future prospects of Scotland's children.

Children in Scotland would like to bring several issues related to children and housing policy to the Government's attention and **recommends that the Scottish Government:**

- 1. Consults in a systematic manner with children and young people on its current and future proposals for Scotland's housing policy**
- 2. Gives priority funding for housing stock to households that have children in residence (at least part-time) including LIFT support**
- 3. Prioritises families with children – especially those families with children affected by domestic violence -- within the Government proposals to tackle homelessness by 2012.**
- 4. Shows preference to families with school-aged children for government-supported housing in those areas immediately surrounding primary and secondary schools**
- 5. Recognises, and offers incentives for, the development of green space and recreational areas suitable for children and young people**
- 6. Monitors and regulates of the quality of all housing stock (let or sold) to families with children, with particular reference to environmental health hazards or fuel inefficiencies.**

The discussion document, *Firm Foundations*, details various ways in which the government could boost housing stock and the affordability of that stock for particular groups of society. In the document, the Government acknowledges that 'Homes for Life' need to be more sensitive to the needs of an aging population. We agree, but think that the Scottish Government also should recognise that housing policy needs to be equally sensitive to the needs of households that include children and young people.

Housing policy has the potential to negatively or positively impact the lives and life prospects of Scotland's children. Although rarely considered a 'children's

issue', housing plays an integral role in the well-being (or lack thereof) of the next generation of Scotland's citizens.

A few simple examples underscore this point. Growing up in dilapidated housing increases the likelihood of both chronic and acute illness among children (e.g., asthma). Similarly, poor children (who, tend to live in the least desirable housing) are three times more likely to die from unintentional injuries than their wealthy counterparts. Illness and injury, in turn, have an adverse impact on the educational performance for children. Children who spend time being homeless or inadequately housed are (predictably) more likely to suffer from mental health problems and to require additional support for learning for extended periods of time. By contrast, children who are growing up in safe, comfortable, healthy housing with easy access to safe, appropriate play and recreation areas are far more likely to achieve good outcomes -- that is, to have the 'Firm Foundation' sought by the Scottish Government.

Adequate housing for all children and young people is also is a one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), especially in Articles 24 and 27. For instance, Article 27 includes the following passage: *States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development . . . and shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.* The UNCRC has been ratified by the UK¹. Further, the SNP pledged its support for, and commitment to, the UNCRC in its election manifesto 2007.

The UNCRC also applies to the process by which housing policy decisions are made. Treating children and young people as *legitimate, valuable stakeholders* in governmental decision-making is essential to recognising and meeting their needs. They are best able to identify the issues important to them, as well as relevant to the development and design of Scotland's housing stock. Involving children and young people in decision-making processes significantly affecting is also a requirement of Article 12 of the UNCRC

Therefore, Children in Scotland recommends that the Scottish Government consults in a systematic , meaningful manner with children and young people on its current and future proposals for Scotland's housing policy.

Involving children in all aspects of housing policy (for example, building requirements for housing stock) will ultimately ensure that the end result better meets the needs of the whole community. Children in Scotland's

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by the United Kingdom in 1989

publications, '*Making Space: award winning designs for young children*²' and *Access All Areas*³ show the benefits and potential in involving children and young people in design and architecture.

Such involvement is particularly true when considering the great importance of planning and building recreational areas for young people and maintaining safe and child-appropriate play areas and green spaces. Many of the children and families that will benefit from Scotland's government-assisted housing are likely to be children from vulnerable/troubled families, one-parent families and/or low-income families. Free, local, accessible and age-appropriate green space and recreational areas will be particularly important, given that the ability of these families to afford to travel to and pay for recreational and leisure facilities will be limited.

Again, under the UNCRC, **the Scottish Government should recognise, and offer incentives for, the development of green spaces and recreational areas suitable for both children and young people.** Requirements attached to the provision of subsidies should include a commitment to facilitating a high quality of life and well-being as well as best fiscal value.

Location of housing properties is also a major concern for families with children. The biggest hurdle for these families is the daily commute to and from school. Transport for both the parent and child is an added financial and time burden that further damages the quality of life for low-income families. **Children in Scotland believes that (new or old) housing in the immediate vicinity of schools should be prioritised for families with children.** The distance from any housing project to a school should be an important factor in its design and its planning approval.

In relation to the quality of current housing stock; **Children in Scotland believes that the government should inspect and regulate private landlords to ensure that a) homes where children reside are free from environmental health hazards such as lead exposure (e.g., from paint or water); that the home has central heating; and, c) that where possible, the central heating systems are fuel efficient.** [Please see the attached briefing on the level and impact of fuel poverty on children and young people in Scotland]

Finally, the discussion paper asks a number of questions about prioritising spending on housing and prioritising recipients of housing support and subsidies. **Children in Scotland believes that three categories of families with children deserve priority attention and support: 1) children with complex, chronic and severe medical conditions and/or serious physical disabilities; 2) children affected by domestic violence,**

homelessness or other major challenges to their well-being; and, 3) children living in persistent poverty households.

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To comment upon this consultation response or for further information, please contact Paula Evans on 0131 222 2435 or at pevans@childreninscotland.org.uk

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 450 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It is a partner of the Participation Partnership Group for children and young people's mental health. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; the National Early Years Forum, and the Rural Advisory Group. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire; the national advice service for additional support for learning.