

**TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD**

**6 October 2008**

**Report of the Director of Health and Housing**

**Part 1- Public**

**Matters for Information**

**1 DISABLED CHILDREN AND HOUSING**

**Summary**

**The Every Disabled Child Matters campaign, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have launched a drive to highlight the housing needs of families with disabled children. They have identified priority actions that they aim to lobby Government Ministers, key regional and local decision-makers and social housing providers to take action on.**

**1.1 Background**

1.1.1 The Every Disabled Child Matters campaign (EDCM) is a campaign to get rights and justice for disabled children.

1.1.2 The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has researched the housing circumstances of disabled children and their families using published Government statistics, surveys and research studies. This research has been used to support this current EDCM campaign.

**1.2 Housing and Disabled Children**

1.2.1 The needs of disabled children vary enormously, from children with mild learning or physical disabilities through to children with more profound learning disabilities, behaviour problems and complex health needs.

1.2.2 The JRF consider evidence is certainly sufficient to sustain the following propositions:

- disabled children are less likely than other groups of disabled people to be living in suitable housing;
- disabled children are less well housed than other families with children, even those who are living on similar incomes;
- suitable housing is hugely important to disabled children and their families; and

- few agencies recognise, let alone address, the significance of this issue.

The most recent CLG report on housing in England show that amongst 'persons with a serious medical condition or disability' only one group emerged as more likely to live in unsuitable accommodation than to live in suitable: those 'aged 15 or less'. Less than half (48 per cent) of the families with disabled children covered by the survey were living in suitable accommodation.

### **1.3 Impact of poor housing on families with disabled children**

- 1.3.1 Disabled children spend more time at home than non-disabled children, which means that their home environment is even more important to this group of children. There is evidence to suggest, however, that disabled children's homes are the most restrictive environments in which they spend time. Living in unsuitable housing restricts children's play or leisure experiences, primarily because it restricts their ability to move about the house independently and/or safely. Unsuitable housing also impinges on their ability to develop self-care skills, such as cooking, and also means they need (unnecessarily) their parents to help them with bathing and using the toilet.
- 1.3.2 Parents of disabled children are also clear that suitable housing is an essential prerequisite of their family's ability to live an ordinary life. In terms of the impact on physical health, parents report back injuries; injuries sustained when falling on the stairs whilst carrying their child and interrupted sleep caused by having to share a bedroom with the disabled child. Qualitative research with parents also reveals the psychological strain of living in unsuitable housing. In particular, overcrowded living space and the lack of space for different family members to have time out from each other can be a significant source of stress, especially where the child has learning disabilities and/or behavioural problems. This stress can be compounded by the need to address the problems with unsuitable housing.
- 1.3.3 In interviews with parents, they raise the issue of where a sibling shares a bedroom with the disabled child, the sibling often experiences disturbed sleep. Also where a disabled child has behavioural problems, siblings have a lack of private space for 'time out' and to store valued or fragile possessions.

### **1.4 Access to information by families**

- 1.4.1 There is evidence that unless the local housing authority is funding or part-funding an adaptation through the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), then families do not or cannot access advice and information about addressing their housing needs. However, only a minority of families receive a DFG and therefore have access to expert advice.
- 1.4.2 Parents and practitioners report significant difficulties with the adaptations delivery process. These include: delays in the application and assessment process, assessments not taking account of the changing (developmental) needs of the

child, and assessments not accounting for child-specific needs (for example, play), or the needs of other family members. Parents also report disagreements, usually driven by funding constraints, between them and professionals about the best solution. A third of families who reported receiving an occupational therapy assessment of their housing needs, report that nothing had changed or happened as a result of the assessment. There are a number of reasons for this, including:

- families not being awarded a Disabled Facilities Grant to carry out an adaptation; or
- families being unable to afford their assessed contribution towards the cost of the adaptation; or
- the local authority or housing association being unable to provide more suitable accommodation; or
- long delays in the assessment and delivery process.

1.4.3 Successfully negotiating the housing adaptations process can lead to a range of benefits for disabled children and their families. Improvements or changes experienced by children include increased independence, more confidence and greater self-reliance. Parents identify adaptations in terms of easing the process of caring for their child as either a reduction in the physical demands or emotional strain.

## **1.5 Campaign Conclusions and Recommendations**

1.5.1 The campaign highlights a number of actions needed by both central and local government and partner agencies which would significantly increase the number of families with disabled children living in unsuitable housing. These are:

- government (regional and local) and inspection bodies to ensure that disabled children are a priority group within housing and planning strategies;
- local government to view housing as integral to any multi-agency service to families with disabled children;
- government (central, regional and local) and social housing providers to recognise that families with disabled children generally require more space than other families; and
- government (central and local) and social housing providers to improve housing adaptations processes to ensure more families with disabled children live in suitable housing.

## **1.6 Implications for Tonbridge & Malling**

- 1.6.1 The issue of housing and disabled children needs to be considered when the Housing Strategy is revised.
- 1.6.2 EDCM suggest that all disabled children should have a separate bedroom from other children in the household, and that lettings policies should reflect this suggestion.
- 1.6.3 The paediatric Occupational Therapy (OT) Service has been split from the main OT Service and placed under the Childrens Services within Kent County Council (KCC). There have been staffing issues and officers are aware that there is a waiting list in Tonbridge & Malling for an assessment of a child by an OT. It is my intention to ensure that we meet with the relevant officers from KCC to review the way that children's DFG cases are handled to ensure that all sides are progressing them as quickly as possible and the difficulties mentioned above are minimised in our area. I shall report further on the outcome.

Background papers:

Nil

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