Housing services: learning from case reviews

What case reviews tell us about the involvement of the housing sector

September 2014

This briefing is based on case reviews published from 2010 onwards. It pulls together and highlights the learning contained in the published reports. This briefing focuses on learning that specifically relates to housing services.

Introduction

Housing services have a unique insight into the lifestyles of their tenants. They receive complaints from neighbours about behaviour and they conduct regular inspections of family homes. Because of this they may well know about a number of issues - including parental substance abuse, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse and neglect - before other agencies.

Key issues

Sole focus on housing

- A focus on maintaining housing standards may lead to an emphasis on tenant control, rather than support. Methods such as increasing the number of inspections, putting tenants on bad behaviour lists, and in the most extreme cases evicting families, don’t address the causes of poor behaviour. Many of the behaviours that make families bad tenants are also child protection concerns; and require a supportive, multi-agency response.

- A focus of on finding homeless clients somewhere to live may lead to child protection concerns being overlooked. In particular, 16-17 year olds are sometimes treated by housing services as adults in need of accommodation as opposed to as children in need. This focus prevents children from accessing the support services they are entitled to.

Housing services concerns overlooked by other agencies

- Despite the wealth of information housing services have, child protection concerns are not always followed up by children’s services.

Unstable and poorly maintained accommodation
• Repeat evictions, disruptive neighbours, and damp, poorly maintained accommodation has a negative impact on both parents’ and children’s mental and physical health. The increased stress also has a knock on effect on parenting capacity.
• Lack of suitable alternative accommodation leads to children and families remaining in, or turning to, risky living arrangements. For example, a parent may decide to stay with an abusive partner in preference to moving their family into unclean or unsafe temporary accommodation.

Housing location
• Where accommodation is can be as important as what it is like. For example, substance abusers who are trying to get “clean” may find it more challenging if they are living in a known drug using area. Sexually exploited children who are homed in the same area as their exploiters are at risk of repeated exploitation. Parents placed away from their family or people from their own culture or faith may feel socially isolated and lack the support networks many families rely on.

Prioritising keeping families together
• Prioritising keeping families together can lead to services overlooking risks associated with the family home. For example, looked after children reunited with their families despite on-going issues.

Learning for improved practice

Remaining child focussed
Many housing issues are warning signs of child protection concerns. Housing services should consider the impact that tenants’ lifestyles and behaviour are having on their children.
• Housing inspections that identify concerns around the cleanliness and condition homes are a possible indication of child neglect.
• Complaints about tenants’ anti-social behaviour could indicate that children are living in an unsafe environment.
• Concerns should be recorded and residents should be referred to suitable support agencies. Concerns relating to the safety of a child should be reported to children’s services.

Providing appropriate accommodation
• Child protection needs should be central to decisions around accommodating families and young people. For example, young people should be placed in specialist, supportive accommodation where they can be best protected from their own and other occupants’ risky behaviours.
Professional challenge
- Referrals should be followed up to confirm what action is being taken. If the referrer is not satisfied with the response, they should have the confidence to challenge the decision.

Housing assessments
- As well as assessing family and housing needs, housing services should assess potential tenants for any child protection concerns.
- Where young people aged 16-17 are living independently of their parents, a child in need assessment is still necessary.

Supporting young people to become good tenants
- Young people and families should be given additional support and advice to prevent them falling into a recurring pattern of rent arrears, anti-social behaviour and eviction.

Helping families navigate the housing system
- The trend in outsourcing housing services to external agencies means tenants often have to deal with multiple agencies when looking for somewhere to live. The application process is complex, and hard to navigate. Young people and families need support and advice to ensure they find suitable accommodation.