

Child support project, Merseyside

Project dates: 2008–2011

Depression and school failure are far more common among homeless children. This project will make sure housing and other services begin to support these very vulnerable children.

Life on the outside

The Merseyside borough of Knowsley is one of the most deprived in the country, with generations out of work. Children here get excluded from social housing, either because they are classed as 'intentionally homeless' or because they face eviction for the family's problem behaviour.

This often tops a mountain of problems for families who are under severe stress, trapping children in a vicious circle of vulnerability and exclusion. Some families break up under the strain and the children are taken into care, leading to a traumatic separation from their parents.

We will work with the housing and social services departments to ensure they thoroughly assess these children's needs, and take them into account in all their housing decisions. We will also link children to the range of services they need to develop happier and healthier lives.



Photo: Ines Ellings

'These children are at the worst end of the scale. Their physical and mental health is often poor and they are often excluded from education and housing registers.'

Shelter area manager

Project summary

- Children in families considered 'intentionally homeless' often find it difficult to access vital services and support.
- Yet this support is essential if they are to overcome emotional and behavioural problems, achieve at school and develop into successful young adults.
- Building on Bristol's Keys to the Future, this project aims to make sure all the support needs of highly excluded children are recognised and met.
- We will help ensure children's needs are assessed and help co-ordinate the positive input from other agencies that can help.

Shelter Keys to the Future



Support and stability

We will:

- focus on highly excluded children
- take a lead role to ensure children receive a co-ordinated package of support
- assess children's housing and other needs and make sure they are taken into account
- build on what we have learnt from Bristol's Keys to the Future project.

Better life chances

We will establish a service dedicated to making sure the needs of excluded and vulnerable children are recognised and met. We want to ensure they get help for the numerous problems they face: depression, which can manifest as bullying or being bullied, stress and developmental problems and a disrupted education that severely impacts on their future life chances.

Focusing on children

Our team will carry out a thorough assessment of the needs of every child in the family, including their schooling, health, and any emotional and behavioural difficulties. We will make this comprehensive picture available to all agencies with a part to play, such as health services, educational welfare and social services. And we will provide a lead role in co-ordinating their input in a child's life.

'She's six years old and she's depressed. She seems to be crying all the time. She's insecure. She can't be classed as normal at school.'

Homeless mother



Photo: Jasper White

Rebuilding children's lives

For children who are already severely traumatised by their circumstances, we will provide direct help. Our child support workers will help them rebuild all the things that have broken down in their lives, supporting them to have fun, relate positively to authority and strengthen relationships with parents.

In this way the project will reduce stress in families and help children break out of a damaging cycle of poverty and underachievement.



Photo: Courtesy of Elevate East Lancashire

'Knowsley has some of the lowest GCSE scores in the country. We believe a key cause of this is poor or insecure housing.'

Project organiser, John Ryan
(Area Manager for Merseyside)

What we hope to achieve over three years...

- vulnerable children enjoying better physical, mental and emotional health
- children less stressed at home and happier at school, improving equality of opportunity
- children's welfare improved within the family and at school
- children encouraged to learn, develop, enjoy and achieve in and outside school
- offending and antisocial behaviour reduced

- homelessness prevented among 'at risk' families
- local authorities take into account the needs of excluded children and provide for them.

...and how

- the needs of 600 children will be assessed
- child support plans developed for 480 of these children
- 120 will receive one-to-one support
- the project will be independently evaluated and we will develop a blueprint for addressing the support needs of excluded children that others can use.

We will support deprived and vulnerable homeless children to thrive at home and school.