

HELPING FAMILIES LIVING IN POOR HOUSING CONDITIONS

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Poor housing conditions can both exacerbate, and be exacerbated by, the problems faced by families in child-protection processes. This article deals mainly with families in rented homes, but may provide ideas in other cases as well. The term 'housing conditions' is used because the provisions which came into force in 2020 (for England only) regarding fitness for human habitation have taken these cases past the rather technical concept of 'disrepair' alone, although it remains highly relevant.

Children can be placed at further physical risk if not safeguarded from issues such as holes in floors and stairs and if doors to their home are not secure. Those affected by domestic violence may be particularly frightened if they know that external security is compromised by rotten doors. Issues like damp and mould, infestations, lack of hot water and heating and leaks can place a significant emotional and practical strain on families already dealing with complex difficulties. Where rooms in the home end up out of use, overcrowding and pressure on the remaining space can add to tension, create a lack of privacy and limit places to retreat. Losing proper places to sleep can particularly affect well-being. Not being able to bathe or cook safely and comfortably can add to hygiene and nutrition concerns. Issues such as mould can cause or worsen physical health conditions such as lung disease. Where constant cleaning is needed, or children cannot be left unsupervised due to safety concerns, there is a major impact on the time available for essential tasks and rest alike. Families with scarce financial resources will be particularly affected by issues which destroy their belongings, for example, damp and mould ruining clothing and bedding.

Children already distressed by child-protection issues may feel worried or even responsible for poor housing conditions and further distress can be caused by, for example, worry and embarrassment over the state of their home and inability to ask friends over to play, impacting their opportunities for social connection.

For families where there are disabilities, there can be particularly serious effects. Those with mobility issues or who cannot frequently leave the home will find an uncomfortable and unsafe environment particularly challenging. Difficulty accessing garden space due to broken doors or rotten decking can reduce or eliminate potentially healing opportunities for outside play and relaxation. Poor housing conditions have the potential to worsen mental health issues such as anxiety and depression and may also cause them.

Problems with housing conditions may also be more difficult to solve when families are preoccupied with Family Court proceedings, or focusing on addressing issues such as alcohol misuse. Families with fewer resources may be struggling to heat their homes sufficiently to counteract excess cold, damp and mould. The longer these issues continue, the worse the effect becomes. What starts as a leak in a bathroom may develop into a collapsed kitchen ceiling, which is both physically dangerous and impacts an essential facility within the home.

The use of the word 'home' is important to emphasise that the accommodation's primary function is just that, not profit for the landlord. Be alert to the attitude that families should tolerate very poor housing conditions simply because they have a low income. The appalling case of Awaab Ishak, where the landlord baselessly attributed the mould and damp that killed him to ritual bathing, has highlighted the danger that landlords may rely on racist, religious or class stereotypes. Any reference to 'lifestyle' should be treated with some suspicion. Damp cases dismissed as lifestyle frequently turn out to be caused by water ingress from blocked gutters, leaks or faulty windows. Where 'lifestyle' is part of the issue, for example not opening windows to ventilate, it may be necessary to look at concerns about the adequacy and cost of heating and facilities to dry clothes.

Where to start

If you identify a problem with housing conditions, try to take a short inventory of the issues and rooms affected and ask whether the landlord is aware. Sometimes it will be obvious that the landlord is aware, for example where they have started but not finished work (a landlord has a duty to make good the decorations after carrying out repairs).

If the landlord is not aware, encourage the family to report the issue and consider whether your assistance might be needed to do so. This could be relevant, for example, where there is a language barrier or disability, or where the family is really struggling to meet other obligations. Also, contact from a professional may have more impact.

If the landlord is the local authority for which you also work, you may have, or be able to make, contacts through which you can raise your concerns. More generally, your department could try to develop points of contact on both sides to identify priority cases. You could ask for general information, or even a short workshop on processes and key issues that housing management would suggest you try to identify.

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