Homeless, Not Hopeless:

How small changes can make a big difference in the quality of education for homeless students

Is homelessness an issue for the children with whom you work?

This publication is for adults who, knowingly or without initially being aware, come into regular contact with homeless children and young people. You might be a youth worker, housing officer, librarian, health services provider, additional support specialist, social worker, Children's Panel member or a school staff member, but no matter which of these roles you hold, there is something you can do to help children and young people burdened by homelessness.

The particular focus here is on what schools can do. Since children and young people spend so much time at school, it is important that all the adults dealing with homelessness have at least a basic understanding of the role and importance of education for these individuals.

This publication is designed to act as a reference guide for those with existing knowledge and experience in the area, and as a primer for those seeking more information. It was developed based on feedback from children, parents and school staff.

Children in Scotland
June 2012

www.childreninscotland.org.uk
www.homelesschildren.org.uk

Welcome and background

You already care about the wellbeing and learning of students, and are aware that some children and young people need more active caring and support than others. They may be the very quiet and seemingly detached pupils; falling behind their classmates; or, students who are disruptive or seem upset.

Dealing with challenging behaviour is probably a frequent element of your job, but understanding why children are behaving in unwelcome ways can, of course, be key to knowing what can be done to help them change their behaviour for the better.

Most schools have students for whom homelessness is either a part of their history, or remains part of their daily lives. According to Shelter Scotland, there are approximately 22,000 children and young people across Scotland who become homeless at some point each year. Too often, and for a variety of reasons, pupils' homelessness remains unknown to school staff. As a result, it is neither taken into account, nor are schools always able to play their part in alleviating the variety of problems that homelessness can cause for their students.

The term 'homeless' is a broad one: young people who have a roof over their head may still be defined as homeless, as they may not have any rights to stay where they currently live or might be in a home that is unsuitable due to severe overcrowding or other reasons.

By identifying and dealing well with pupil homelessness, schools will be able to do their best for all their students, while also fulfilling the expectations of education authorities, professional bodies and the Scottish Government. The following are examples of such laws and policies:

Scotland's **Curriculum for Excellence** places strong emphasis on inclusion and support for learning, both of which are needed by homeless students in day-to-day, practical ways at school.
Visit http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/920/0109029.pdf

Scotland's landmark **Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act** gives all pupils the legal right to receive, and education authorities the statutory duty to provide, extra help when they are not succeeding in school 'for whatever reason'. Homelessness can have a variety of negative impacts upon the behaviour and learning of students that are just as significant as those caused by more familiar physical or learning disabilities.
Visit http://enquire.org.uk/

'Getting It Right For Every Child' (GIRFEC) applies fully to homeless students. It is a Scottish Government framework that provides pathways and resources for precisely the kind of joined-up planning, information sharing and action among schools, local authorities and external organisations that is crucial to the wellbeing and life chances of homeless pupils across Scotland.
Visit http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright

Schools can be a place of stability and nurture at a time when homelessness is making some students' lives chaotic and stressful. A real and lasting positive difference in these children's learning and wellbeing can be made through simple, small changes at school.

Understanding the diversity of Scotland's homeless students …

The term 'homeless children' conjures up many images that do not necessarily match the reality of the 60 children who become homeless in Scotland every day.
Visit http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/teachers

Think of children fleeing domestic abuse and living in a temporary refuge with their mother. Or, of a pupil whose father's redundancy also resulted in the loss of their home, and who is now moving from one short-term, cramped accommodation to another. They may be children who are refugees or asylum seekers, or have become homeless as a consequence of having a parent in prison (there are approximately 16,000 at some point each year across Scotland).

Homelessness is a growing problem. It is also a predictable consequence of the UK's deep recession, high parental unemployment, diminishing benefits, rising debt/bankruptcy and poverty. The children and young people adversely affected must be helped.

There is great diversity among the stories and needs of homelessness children across Scotland. There is neither one 'type' of homeless student, nor any 'one size fits all' solution to their varied problems.

… and the diversity of responses among schools

There appears to be a broad range of reactions to homeless students by staff members and education authorities across Scotland. There are individual schools and education authorities that have risen to this challenge and offer their homeless pupils the kind of personalised, multi-faceted help required.

Yet those schools, particularly in areas of high deprivation, that tend to be more aware of the existence of homeless pupils in their midst, usually also face stiffer competition for scarce resources because of their high proportion of pupils needing some form of extra help.
However, there are still many schools across Scotland that could do more to support the homeless pupils on their roll.

The good news is that changing the outcomes for all concerned does not require complex, long-term 'transformational' change.

All schools can reap the rewards of choosing a positive path. Relatively minor shifts in adult attitudes and actions can deliver major benefits for school staff, affected students, their classmates and educational performance. The keys are to recognise the homeless young people in your midst, and then, to provide the support for learning that is their right within Scottish law and policy.

Schools cannot solve the larger problem of homelessness in our society, and it would be unreasonable to expect them to do so. Nevertheless, it is reasonable for them to help those students whose behaviour and learning are suffering as a result of poor housing and family instability. Everybody wins when schools play a positive, inclusive, supportive role in the school lives of homeless students.

This document is intended to provide insights, information and practical suggestions that, if made part of the fabric of daily life at school, will reduce the frustrations and relieve the burden for many school staff.

The five areas for change

There are five distinct areas in which schools can support children whose housing problems are impeding their education:

- **Identifying and understanding homeless pupils**
- **Delivering practical help**
- **Providing continuity and security**
- **Creating a supportive, inclusive learning environment**
- **Ensuring liaison with other agencies – and parents**

Each will be discussed in more detail starting on page 7.

What schools should and should not do to help homeless pupils

DO:

1. Find out which students are (or have been) homeless.
This should be done in a discrete way that respects confidentiality.

2. Understand what is true about each of these individual pupils.
Homelessness is not one problem with one solution. Valuable information and insights can be obtained from students themselves, from their parents, other involved professionals and voluntary sector organisations.

3. Turn your understanding into positive actions.
Treat these students with extra patience and compassion. Deal with those concerns that are within your or the school's ability to solve quickly on your own – for example a 'buddy' system, providing missing bits of uniform/kit, or offering homework assistance.

4. Advocate for other assistance from outwith the school.
Make, and follow through on, referrals to other professionals, agencies, services that can offer assistance beyond the school's remit, e.g. mental health assessment and treatment. Encourage local authority colleagues to provide free transportation to and from school whenever school continuity is a possibility.

DO NOT:

1. Equate being homeless with being hopeless.
While the experience of being homeless can negatively impact children's school performance, support and care for these young people can make a long-lasting positive impact.

2. Give the impression that there is nothing schools can do to help
While homelessness is a profoundly disturbing experience for the vast majority of children affected, schools can have a major positive, healing impact. Some well-placed kindness and practical support for learning can go a long way toward enhancing pupils' ability to sustain their connection with their school, improve their behaviour and increase their performance. Everyone benefits from such results.

Identifying and understanding homeless pupils

Many children are homeless, or live in poor housing, but some school staff members remain unaware both of this fact and of how negative an effect it can have on student behaviour and learning.

It is important to recognise homeless students. It is equally important to avoid stereotyping them, as each will have diverse circumstances.

At one end of the spectrum, it is possible that some children already known to be troubled, or having other identified special needs, also have bad housing or homelessness as a factor contributing to, and aggravating, their already complex difficulties. However, at the other end of the spectrum, it is likely that some students who have never previously presented significant concerns within their school lives will begin to do so primarily because of the adverse impacts of losing their home.

There will also be other pupils who are no longer homeless, but who continue to display at school a negative legacy of having once been. While relatively few students remain homeless for more than two consecutive years, the cumulative ill effects of a disrupted education and inadequate support to get back on track can endure far longer than their original cause.

Despite the marked diversity amongst homeless children, there are some characteristics of being homelessness that are common to most of them:

- Re-housing already represents a dislocation to the child's life; being away from friends and family networks, 'losing' staff at school with whom she/he had a good relationship, as well as more concretely being stripped of the comfort and stability of pets, possessions, locality, his/her own space and any sense of privacy

- Re-housing is temporary, which means more changes and instability lie ahead for the child in the foreseeable future

- The temporary accommodations among which the child shifts on an irregular basis are inadequate and insecure

- The child is likely to be faced with practical problems concerning her/his education, from a lack of quiet space for homework, to increasingly difficult transportation requirements to allow them to attend school regularly and on time

- The child will almost certainly be faced with emotional problems; again, for some caused by the adversity of homelessness itself, while for others part of a bigger picture of parental substance misuse, imprisonment or domestic violence

- The child faces an extended period of uncertainty, beyond housing and school.

If there is a widespread understanding of homelessness among the staff of the school, it is more likely that they will respond sympathetically when they come across a child who is homeless. It also means that in addition to being more sensitive to the issue, staff are more likely to identify children who may be experiencing housing problems.

It is important to note that while a headteacher or guidance teacher may know about a particular child's situation, that knowledge may not extend to the people who work with these children day to day, including class teachers, classroom assistants, playground assistants, subject teachers in secondary schools, including PE teachers, school meal staff, and school health staff. While it is inappropriate to broadcast a child's situation to everybody, there are systems available in nearly every school to alert staff when a particular child is under sudden stress.

It is not always obvious when a child has a housing problem and, as there continues to be a stigma attached to homelessness, they will not always tell you. For most school staff members, there are three triggers for becoming concerned about students who may be harmed by homelessness.

The first is **disruptive behaviour**, as some homeless young people act out their anger, fear and insecurity in reaction to their home life by behaving badly at school.

The second is **passivity/depression**, with some homeless students appearing deeply disconnected from the learning environment around them.

The third trigger is **direct knowledge of troubling circumstances in a pupil's life**, such as appearing before a Children's Panel, evidence of maltreatment or news of family violence that pierced the usual veil of privacy, whether that direct knowledge comes from the student, a parent, a colleague within the school or an external professional.

Faced with any of these three common triggers, the crucial next step for school staff is actively identifying what lies behind them and, in doing so, remembering to seek out information about whether homelessness is, or has been, part of the explanation.

The **key questions** to ask are:

1. Is homelessness part of the equation for this student?

2. If so, then what are the specific homelessness-related problems of that child that connect to the school's roles and responsibilities? For example, is the repeated failure to complete homework assignments due to the student's lack of access to a computer needed outwith school?

3. What's next; what aspects of the homelessness-based learning and behavioural problems of this particular pupil are within the school's powers to solve, and which require referral or liaison with others external to the school?

4. Which adult/s within the school is best placed to take positive action once these questions have been answered?

> **Awareness of the problem of student homelessness on the part of school staff can lead to identifying children with housing problems earlier, and to working with them more effectively.**

Delivering practical help

Homeless children have usually had their housing disrupted as a consequence of issues in their parents' lives, The young people didn't cause this problem, but they must endure and deal with its ill-effects. The practical problems pupils face tend to revolve around the reality that the child or young person is living in transient, unstable accommodations; faces daily transport problems (especially when housing changes take them in and out of the school's catchment area); lacks the space and/or quiet in which to do homework; may have lost school-related possessions, clothing and equipment, and not have adequate resources to replace these); and, be burdened by cumulative, significant gaps in their learning as a result of irregular attendance and/or readjusting to new schools/classrooms/staff.

Travel and timekeeping

Transport is usually the first practical issue cited when discussing homelessness, but it is also a problem over which schools have limited control. School staff members do, however, have some control over the consequences.
When children move home they often move away from their school's catchment area, as the housing department or homelessness unit within the local authority may not have temporary accommodation in that area. They may need to move some distance for safety reasons, often a considerable distance. If they want to continue in their original school, it may entail a lengthy journey and the local authority may, or may not, cover the costs. Yet, maintaining continuity of schooling is important especially when so much of the rest of that student's life is unstable, if not chaotic.

The provision of transport is the local authority's responsibility, but the consequences of long journeys are visited upon the school. Lateness and bad timekeeping are both a symptom, and a consequence, of housing disruption.

Schools can support homeless students by appreciating their travel situation and not adopting a punitive attitude to lateness. Schools are also well placed to play an advocacy role on behalf of their students with the local authority, if they are having difficulty getting free transport. Advocacy is also needed in terms of the general policy of providing transport for children who are dealing with circumstances beyond their, or their family's, control.

Homework

Homeless children frequently have problems completing their homework on time. They may not have the space and quiet to do homework on a regular basis; temporary accommodation and shelters often have limited private or quiet space available to pupils.

> *"If you've got a brother and sister running about and you've not got anywhere to go, then you can't do your homework because you can't concentrate. Everyone's making a noise."* (Student, aged 15)

> *"[It's hard] when your little brother and sister are talking."* (Pupil, aged 7)

> *"I'll shut my door and then they [my siblings] come bursting in. It's quite hard now because now that I'm quite old I don't really want [my younger sister] in my room. So my dad's not got a room, he sleeps on the couch, because I don't want to share a room… I feel quite bad."* (S3 student, aged 14)

They may not have the necessary equipment, including a computer at their current address, and lack effective access to complete an online assignment.

As with transport, late and missing homework may be both a symptom and a consequence of homelessness and bad housing. And, again, understanding and flexibility on the part of school staff can help alleviate the problem.

> *"Homework can be a big issue. We try to keep on top of that, but if we know there are extenuating circumstances and it's not actually the child's fault that they're not able to do something, obviously we can offer support. But teachers need to be aware of when it's a can't and when it's a won't."* (primary school Headteacher)

Some schools in Scotland already offer practical solutions to completing homework. Often, this is accomplished through establishing and maintaining a homework club. Another method is to create an after school study area so that children can complete their homework before going home, in a safe and warm environment, and with help available, if needed. That may include additional access to computers and the Internet.

Some schools have begun to use Glow, the Scottish Government-supported national intranet for Scotland's school communities (http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/usingglowandict/glow/index.asp) to support all children with their schoolwork, including homework, in imaginative ways. Of course, homeless children do not always have effective and regular access to a computer or to an internet connection.

> *"We have many children who will go home and log into Glow, and they will do their homework online. We have some of our schools where they will do that as a matter of course. We have some of our teachers stay online until about 6:00, and children can contact them through GLOW and ask them questions. They will get tutorial support. Not every teacher, but some chose to do that."* (Quality Improvement Officer)

The public library is a resource that homeless children can use if they are close enough and many schools do work closely with the local library.

> *"The local library is very good. We often have kids there after school, and they can go down and access whatever it is they need. A lot of the projects that we do in school, the librarians are aware of them, so they have been able to help and support kids when they go down."* (primary school Headteacher)

However, homeless children may sometimes even have difficulty accessing library services if they are in temporary accommodation and don't know where to find a nearby library. Transport issues after school can also undermine a pupil's ability to benefit from such offerings and opportunities. Thus, some homeless children will need bespoke, flexible solutions that enable them to keep up with their homework.

Charities working with children may also be active in your area, and sometimes their services include the provision of homework help. To be effective, this requires a degree of communication and coordination between the school and the charity.

> **Schools can support homeless students by understanding and positively addressing their homework challenges, rather than simply reacting negatively to late, incomplete or missing homework.**
>
> **Schools can also help their homeless students gain effective access to homework resources outwith the school – primarily through local libraries and relevant charities.**

School uniforms and materials

School uniforms and other required school materials can be expensive. When a student's homelessness means attending a new school, even temporarily, they are normally expected to acquire the appropriate school uniform. If they transfer among schools several times – and there are examples of children moving up to 12 times – then this can become a significant financial burden. One 18 year-old student said that the financial pressures of school were one of the reasons why she had decided to leave:

> *"I wasn't getting any money and the only person working was my Gran. But then she stopped working. Before I left school, I didn't even have a pencil to my name. I said to the school 'sorry I'm not in school uniform, but I've grown out of my uniform'. Even just a school tie was £12 and you had to wear a tie … that was another reason why I left school, because I couldn't afford it. It's not a private school. It's meant to be free!"*

There are two ways in which schools can help. One is for schools to be more tolerant of children not wearing the school uniform. However, this 'solution' can also cause problems with their peers and

reinforce their sense of separateness and being stigmatised. Nonetheless, the way a teacher addresses a child without expected materials, such as a school tie, ought not be punitive or accusatory. The first step should be for the school to explore the reasons behind the lack of uniform or similar non-compliance with school norms before reacting negatively to the child.

Alternatively, schools can assist homeless pupils by helping them to secure what they need to blend in and feel included at low or no cost. Such a modest expense should not be the trigger for a young person's disengagement with school and a subsequent lack of educational attainment. Some schools have funds available to help in this situation, or may have spare ties and other items of uniform, for example in long-term lost property. In some authorities, the education department or the unit dealing with homelessness may have resources to help. In other communities, local charities have funds that can be used to cover most or all of the cost of uniforms, school materials, PE kit or class trips.

Technology access and usage

Homeless students need to have at least the same level of access to, and support in using, technology as other, more advantaged pupils. Technology can be a great help in connecting disconnected students, and must not become yet another significant impediment to them being fully included within the school's learning environment.

For example, Glow is being implemented across Scotland. In many education authorities, all pupils now have their own Glow account. This is a rich resource, but for homeless students to explore the potential of Glow and take advantage of it, they must have regular and effective access to a computer and the internet.

Not having access to a computer and the internet at home, which is the reality for most homeless students, is a major obstacle to learning today. While they may be available at the library or at school, that is not the end of the story. For instance, computers at the local library are usually heavily used; it may be required to book a session to use one, and students have to compete for their use with everybody else.

In school, too, there is often a queue to use computers after school or at lunchtime. Homeless students often need some support in gaining priority access to public computers whether at school, in the library or in the community, at youth clubs or community centres. School staff are probably best placed to help these pupils achieve priority in gaining computer access.

In addition to supporting learning, technology also has the capacity to help with another thorny issue for homeless students suffering from interrupted learning. Students who have frequent changes of school are hampered not only from gaps in their learning, but also from some schools not addressing these gaps quickly because of unavailable student records from the previous school. It is clear that even if a school knows which school a new student was attending previously, their records sometimes do not follow them swiftly enough.

Computer based systems also help with the issue of physical materials, like paper-based learning assignments, going missing; a widely reported phenomenon for children who are moving a lot. The new generation of online facilities allows for materials to be saved online, and to be accessed from any other computer: the student does not even need to have a disc or memory stick on which to save their schoolwork.

Schools can support their homeless students by understanding and positively addressing their physical property needs, rather than simply reacting negatively to the absence of a school uniform or other expected materials, supplies and fees.

Schools can also help their homeless students secure these resources by having extra materials on hand, providing the funds needed and/or connecting the student with a community source of assistance.

Providing continuity and security

Schools have the potential to provide the one thing that is lacking in the life of so many homeless students – certainty and security. At its best, a school provides an environment that is safe, warm, clean, secure, predictable, friendly and reliable. In other words, it can provide many of the elements that are missing in the life of a child whose housing has been disrupted and for whom life often feels chaotic. Since children spend much of their time in school, this is a significant opportunity for schools to embrace.

> *"What we find is that sometimes for these children, the school is the only stable, safe environment that they have. So it becomes very, very important for them."* (Quality Improvement Officer)

School can be the one place in their life where they belong and know that things will not change adversely from day to day. However, this huge advantage is lost when shifting from residence to residence also means shifting from school to school.

Each time children change schools, it means they have to find their feet again educationally, as well as socially. Learning the culture and expectations of the new staff members and school can be difficult for some homeless students, and doing so while simultaneously sorting out their place academically is not easy.

Usually, this is less of a problem when shifting schools within the same education authority. However, it is fairly common for homelessness to move pupils into new authority areas or even to a different part of the country. In such cases, the problems may be considerable, especially for secondary school students who have started studying within a different examination regime or where course offerings between their old and new schools do not match up well.

Such transitions can be challenging for most students, no matter what their background or circumstances. However, the difficulties are heightened for many homeless students. This is the case because: they may have had several previous transitions that have left a cumulative negative impact on their learning, attitudes and behaviour; they are less likely to have adequate support and assistance from their parents/carers; and, they tend to be more emotionally and socially fragile given the larger upsets and concerns with which they are routinely faced.

This is a complex problem for which there are not quick and simple solutions. School staff are best placed to devise individual ways of handling the situation, if they know what has happened and is happening in the new students' lives and quickly assess how to help these children and young people succeed.

As far as possible, the goal should be to promote continuity for homeless pupils, particularly given how often such stability is missing in their home lives. In practice, this means that schools should help homeless students remain where they are currently enrolled whenever possible, even if their next temporary housing accommodation lies outwith the school's normal catchment area. As noted earlier, this may mean assisting these pupils to find reasonable transport to/from their existing school from their next residence.

This positive action by the school is beneficial in two ways. First, it increases the chances of children making educational progress by avoiding disruption. And second, it sends a strong, and hopefully welcome message to these students that they are cared about and wanted by their current school. In turn, students deriving these benefits can feel motivated to reciprocate with better behaviour.

Sometimes this is not possible, for example when the child has moved too far away to make continuing at the current school a feasible option. In this case, the school can best help by ensuring that the student has a copy of samples of their schoolwork, as well as an information sheet they can provide to their receiving school about who to contact for detailed information at the school they last attended.

The key positive action by the new school is to get in touch right away with the sending school to understand what offering a degree of continuity might mean for that particular homeless child. While it certainly means understanding the student's progress in a variety of subjects, as well as what additional support for learning services and support has been in place, creating continuity might mean something as simple as swift inclusion of the student in a same type of club, sport or special activity that was meaningful to that pupil at his/her former school.

There are age differences that are also worth remembering. In general, younger primary pupils need as much social/emotional continuity as possible, whereas older, secondary students may need a greater degree of academic and activity continuity. Special care should be taken with students approaching the end of their statutory school leaving age, as this is often a time when discontinuity at school can have the unintended, but damaging, consequence of ending formal education without any positive next step in place or transitional learning/earning plan underway.

Schools can provide both continuity and positive reinforcement by making a significant effort to retain their homeless students in the midst of all the other changes with which these children and young people must contend beyond the school gate.

Schools can make newly arrived homeless students feel not only genuinely welcome, but also well understood by the receiving school swiftly making the effort to contact the sending school to establish what 'continuity' would mean to that specific child at this time of transition.

Creating a supportive, inclusive learning environment

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence places a high priority on both inclusion and support for learning. Schools will be inspected and staff members assessed on how well they are performing in relation to both of these priority criteria. Therefore, successfully identifying and meeting the needs of homeless students will reflect well on you.

Homeless children need to be understood and assisted within the context of their individual situations. While they are a diverse population, the great majority will feel stressed and upset. Both the problems that caused them to become homeless in the first place and the unpleasant realities of being homeless in Scotland today often weigh heavily on their young shoulders.

Schools cannot solve these external problems, but they can be welcoming, understanding and supportive environments that serve as a much-needed oasis in the lives of these children and young people. At a minimum, schools must ensure that they do not end up exacerbating the problems of these

students by treating them unsympathetically or allowing them to fall further behind in their schoolwork or become marginalised within the school community.

In principle, few school staff would disagree. In practice, it is not uncommon for homeless students to continue on a downward spiral within their schools academically, socially and behaviourally.

Stress, anger and other negative emotions can undermine any student's ability to focus, learn and perform well academically. It can also lead to either isolated incidents of significant misbehaviour or an ongoing pattern of low-level negative behaviour in school. Scottish Government statistics reveal that these behavioural problems are the two leading reasons for school exclusion across the nation. Some, although certainly not all, homeless pupils 'act out' their inner turmoil in ways that schools find inappropriate, unacceptable or challenging.

It is not surprising that although the overall number of school exclusions has declined markedly across Scotland in recent years, it continues to rise among pupils with additional support needs. While there are not national statistics about homeless children's school experiences, it seems reasonable to think that homeless children and young people are part of both the additional support needs population and the increasing number of school exclusions. In keeping with Scottish Government policy, exclusions are an 'extremely serious decision' that should only be taken as a 'last resort'.

On an individual level, the fact of a new student's difficult behaviour, or a sudden negative change in an established pupil's attitudes, words and actions, should alert school staff that there is something going wrong in the child's life that merits assessment and positive action.

> *"What we've identified is that children will often present through their behaviour, that they are going through a period of distress. Now, schools could just think: "Well, this is a child who is often going through periods of distress" and they will try to put in additional support; some more emotional support. They will try to be a bit more understanding. They will try to take the pressure off the child in relation to work, engagement and so on."* (Quality Improvement Officer)

However, this is not just a question of acting in a more supportive, less censorious manner. It should be remembered that Scotland's landmark Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act fully applies to children who are homeless and having problems "for whatever reason" succeeding in school. If homeless students need extra help and support at school to get back on track, then they are legally entitled to it, and education authorities have a statutory duty to provide it.

Further information and advice about the ASL Act and its implications are available free to parents, practitioners and pupils from Enquire (the independent, Scottish Government funded service operated by Children in Scotland) at enquire.org.uk or through its Helpline on 0845 123 2303. There also is a specific link to the results of Enquire consultations with some C&YP assisted by Shelter Scotland: (http://enquire.org.uk/pcp/pdf/families_learning_partners/shelter.pdf)

> *"In the case of one homeless girl, also a young carer, the school did not seem concerned about her problems. She was living in temporary accommodation and didn't make it in time to one of her Higher exams, and wanted to know whether she could sit the exam now. Although she had spoken to the school, they did not seem interested."* (Voluntary sector staff member)

Schools can meet their obligations under Curriculum for Excellence, 'Getting it right' and the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act by providing an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all of their homeless students. Everyone benefits when this positive ethos is effectively implemented.

Schools can also increase the likelihood of appropriate, positive behaviour and better classroom performance among homeless students by seeking to understand the reasons behind poor behaviour, instead of automatically punishing it. Knowing why a homeless pupil is behaving badly is the crucial first step in the school knowing how to respond in a manner likely to be successful from everyone's perspective.

Ensuring liaison with other agencies – and parents

A traditional view of teaching is that it is separate and distinct from social work and health services, neither of which fall within the remit of classroom staff. However, given the range and complexity of children's needs, school staff increasingly work together with other professionals outwith the education system. Indeed, since being able to work co-operatively with other agencies helps the child, many school staff are growing more accustomed to being part of a 'team' around pupils. Improving children's wellbeing, as well as solving specific problems, can yield immediate and major benefits for both teachers and classmates, too. Just as the problems of homeless students have their origins beyond the school, so too, the solutions usually also require external interventions and resources. The 'Getting it

right' model is becoming better understood and taken on board in more school communities each year. Communicating effectively and regularly with external sources of support and assistance spreads the responsibility, and lightens the load on school staff, while making it more likely that the children and young people in need of extra help receive it. Schools are increasingly finding allies in other local authority units, health boards and relevant voluntary sector groups – such as Shelter Scotland – operating in their communities. These allies allow schools to stay focused on their unique contributions to improving the learning and behaviour of homeless pupils.

> *"A quick phone call either to or from social work can give me a piece of information that I didn't necessarily have. It might be something really small that they wouldn't have picked up before necessarily to tell me previously. But now, the information is being shared much better."* (primary school Headteacher)

This involvement leads to greater familiarity between the staff of different agencies and the school, a greater ease about just picking up the phone to consult over individual cases, and greater knowledge about who else is available for help and support.

The reality is that teachers are not expected to engage in social work. Neither are they expected to know everybody they could, and should, talk to about a wide variety of issues that might arise in relation to their homeless students. But they should increasingly know how be at ease in calling on another colleague in the area who can either help, or who can suggest who else to consult.

> *"I think the child assessment framework has made a difference in recent years. The recording and reporting format that we use has made a big difference. We're now not immediately going to child protection meetings, but we have 'child in need' meetings for certain families, and that means earlier intervention. That means I don't have to wait until there's an absolute crisis until I do something about it. It means that there's much better communication."* (primary school Headteacher)

 To the fullest possible extent, liaison and effective communication should also occur with the mothers/fathers/carers of homeless pupils. While some parents will welcome such communication and interact happily with school staff members, others will be more hesitant about their relationships with the school.

> *"A lot of families still hark back to their own school days. I think still there are families who had a hellish time at school themselves and don't want to get involved. And, that's a real thing for us, to try and involve them as well. Hard."* (primary school Headteacher)

As in most relationships, the key is mutual respect and regular two-way communication between parents and schools. Even if beset with significant problems of their own, about which they may feel awkward or upset, the parents of homeless students remain not only a powerful influence on educational performance, but also a source of valuable information, insights and advice for school staff members about what's true, what's needed and what works in relation to the child they know best.

> *"A group of teachers supported one another hugely and the school became a social centre for mums to drop in. They had a coffee room for parents. They provided breakfasts and lunches, and after school refuge and activities and things. So, the school became much broader in terms of its aims and what it sought to provide. The impact of the individual practitioners within that was profound."* (Quality Improvement Officer)

Other allies and partners exist in many Scottish communities. One that merits special mention is the public library. Libraries are one of the richest resources in the community in terms of their availability and accessibility. They can be an invaluable resource for homeless students. For example, many homeless students lack computers and internet access, as well as resource materials and books, at home and libraries can fill this gap well. However, this potential resource often needs encouragement and assistance from school staff to become a real resource for homeless students. Schools can make pupils aware of the location and availability of libraries and help librarians sort out any administrative barriers to providing access and support.

Schools don't have to 'go it alone' in understanding and helping their homeless pupils. By communicating and cooperating with relevant public and voluntary sector colleagues, schools themselves, as well as the students, can find welcome assistance. Being part of a team around the child allows all the key agencies and adults to play their parts well in promoting the learning and wellbeing of homeless students.

Schools have the opportunity to develop and maintain equally good relationships with the parents/carers of their homeless students. This is well worth the effort on the school's part, as parents can be crucial allies and partners in giving these children and young people a real chance to succeed in school.

It is essential that knowledge of homeless students exists within the school, so the school staff, supplemented by key partners, can take appropriate action to provide support for learning for their homeless children and young people. Homeless pupils are far from hopeless ones, and schools are in a prime position to make the crucial small changes that will make a big difference for the better in their learning and life chances. Those small steps are ones well worth taking.

Appendix 1

✔ Homeless Pupils – Checklist for Scotland's Schools

There are several questions that school staff and other professionals could, and should, ask themselves about the homeless students in their midst. For some, this will merely serve as a review of what they already know and do. For others, it will create a useful opportunity to explore vital matters that have perhaps been overlooked or left unexplored.

Staff awareness

Are your staff members aware that some of your pupils may be adversely affected by homelessness (past or present)?

Do they understand how homelessness can impact upon, a child's attitudes, behaviour and performance?

Are they aware that homelessness is a very diverse problem that manifests itself in a wide variety of ways, rather than being one problem with one presentation?

Have you had, or plan to have, any staff development around this issue?

Communication and co-ordination within the school

What is your process(es) for ensuring that the diverse situations of affected children and young people are assessed, understood and shared among relevant staff members?
Do you have a named person within the school who can act as a focal point for coordinating efforts within the school to meet homeless children's needs?

Identifying homeless children

Do you and other staff know the signs and symptoms of homelessness? Do you have a referral procedure in place if staff suspect a child is affected?

Co-ordination with agencies and staff outwith the school

Are there clear communication processes between your school and appropriate local authority staff regarding homeless children, or children with complex needs that might include past or present homelessness?   What voluntary sector organisations do, or could, your school work with that are concerned with homelessness?

Additional support for learning

Is it well understood that the ASL Act grants legal rights to pupils and parents, and places statutory duties upon schools and education authorities, to receive additional support for learning 'for whatever reason' (including homelessness) if they are having problems at school?

Are parents, staff and students aware of free, independent ASL advice and information available from Enquire's national helpline (0845 123 2303) and website (enquire.org.uk)?

Do staff understand that homeless children that need extra help to succeed may also have the same range of other, co-occurring ASL needs as any other student?   Is there a process in place to determine, and deal with, the reasons behind learning difficulties or negative behaviour, rather than just plans to manage these concerns?

Confidentiality

Do you have a confidentiality and information sharing policy and, if so, how would it apply to homeless students and their parents?

Do staff understand why homeless children may want their circumstances kept private?

Do staff understand that this concern about privacy/stigma/bullying does not negate the need to communicate appropriately with colleagues about children with homelessness problems?

Supporting homeless children

Do you have a buddy system or some other method to ensure that children new to the school, at any point in the school year, or who you know to be homeless, have an automatic support network amongst their peers?

Are your colleagues clear about the ways in which 'Getting it right' and Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence could and should be used to assist homeless children and young people? Are you alert to the fact that homeless children are frequently a target for bullying, and do you have an effective strategy in place to reduce or stop such bullying?

Are you alert to the fact that small things, like the cost of a school tie, a protractor, or money for a school trip, may represent major obstacles to children who have recently lost their home, and is there a system or plan to diminish or eliminate these obstacles?

Are there, or will there be, before or after school opportunities for the support of homeless students within your school?

Transport

Are staff alert to the fact that homeless children may have erratic timekeeping and should not be treated unsympathetically or punished because of it?

Do you advocate on behalf of your pupils with the local authority, or other local funders, to ensure they have free transport from/to temporary or new housing?

School placements

Are you flexible in allowing homeless children who are new to your catchment area to enrol in the school?

Are you committed to maintaining continuity for homeless students at your school whenever feasible, even though their temporary housing is outside the normal catchment area?

Technology and Glow

When your staff use online or other computer-based assignments outside the school, including for homework, have they checked that all students have access to a computer and the Internet; and does your school make special arrangements to provide or leverage access for homeless students who need such support?

Do you have computer facilities at school that homeless children can use before or after school or during breaks? Do you have any method of allocating them some priority in gaining access and assistance?

Do you liaise with your local library to ensure that homeless students have unhindered access to computer facilities there?

Has Glow been adopted in your school?

Do all children in your school have their own Glow accounts? Have staff had a chance to develop methods of using Glow to work with hard to reach students, including homeless students?

Communication and consultation with homeless families

Do you have alternative methods of communicating and consulting with families who have unstable housing, who may have frequent changes of address or who are hesitant about communication with the school?

Do you encourage staff from voluntary organisations to act as advocates for homeless families?

Is there information for homeless families on the school web site and in other formats? Is provision made for students and/or parents having literacy issues or for whom communicating in English is a barrier?

Do you make sure that homeless families can attend school meetings and provide necessary support, if these are a problem for them?

Transitions from school

Does your school ensure that transition plans are created and implemented in a timely manner for every homeless student who will be leaving, whether to go to another school, to college or to another positive post-school placement?

If older difficult students resurface wanting copies of records for further education courses, are you able to quickly facilitate their needs?

Frequent movers

When students 'disappear' during the term, do you ensure that they are tracked or referred on?

Do you ensure that their records are passed on quickly to their new school?

Are there ways in which your school makes it easier for student records to be received when they arrive and to be accessible when they leave?

Appendix 2

Background information

This publication is one product of a small grant made by Shelter Scotland to Children in Scotland. There is also a website on the education of homeless children and young people across Scotland: http://www.homelesschildren.org.uk/

There was neither time nor resources to collect sufficient data to make definitive statements about how all of Scotland's 2,700+ schools and 32 local authority education departments are responding to homeless children in their populations. The differences in approach to, and the extent of implementation of, the overall issue of homelessness, educational provision, 'Getting it right', Curriculum for Excellence and the Additional Support for Learning Act in each local authority also make it impossible to make statements that will apply to every situation or authority.

Local authorities are all organised differently in their housing work and their work with children. This may increase the chances of locally appropriate practice, but it makes it very difficult to make broad generalisations about what is or is not happening across Scotland. It also decreases the value of identifying 'models', as these grew out of specific contexts and local arrangements that may not be replicable.

Accordingly, throughout this document, more definitive statements about general principles of what constitutes good practice have been made instead of holding up specific examples as the method that should be adopted or adapted elsewhere. While Scotland is a small nation, it continues to be one with distinct and crucial differences among local authorities. To cite an obvious instance, transportation policies and practices involving homeless children in the Highlands versus those in Glasgow will not be easily transferable.

Further, it became apparent that many of the models and examples of good practice of preventing or overcoming harm to the learning of homeless students were idiosyncratic and relationship-based. In other words, they were not the result of well-established practices and ironclad policies within schools or local authorities. Accordingly, they could continue and be strong whilst the particular individuals remained in place, but there was no assurance that they would continue in the face of personnel changes or budget cuts.

However, the modest research undertaken in preparing this document was encouraging about the reality that some local authorities are moving beyond the 'postcode lottery' support of homeless children and young people. One example of good practice becoming embedded policy illustrates the power of this direction of travel.

> *"The policy for school placements, as always, has implications for the transport procedure. In this local authority, children are not expected to move school on account of housing changes caused by homelessness."* (Local authority staff member)

And, as was noted by a local educator:

> *"If they're already attending a school and they moved outwith the catchment area of that school due to a homelessness issue, we wouldn't ask them to then leave the school. If they've got a place, we would never ask them to then vacate that place. We would never ask a child to leave a school once they had a place under any circumstances. It has never happened, never will."*

> *"Within our transport policy, where a pupil is in 4th, 5th or 6th year of secondary school and they move house, we would give them a bus ticket to maintain their place at their current school anyway. And, some of them would have fallen into that category and they would have got a ticket regardless of their circumstances. At that stage in their education, we wouldn't expect them to move schools in the middle of exams."*

Homeless adults are among the most powerless people in our nation, and homeless pupils are even more so. It seems reasonable to expect ever-improving understanding and action from school staff members and education authority officials. The professionals and other adults in this story have, at least collectively, the power to create a happier ending for these already vulnerable and adversely impacted children and young people.

Just as there is not only one kind of homeless student, so too, there is not one answer to the question of how homeless children can best be supported in their education. There are a variety of answers and diverse means by which that happy ending can be achieved across Scotland. Schools and local authorities throughout the country are staffed by intelligent, educated and experienced people, who are well placed to develop the answers. However, they must have the mechanisms within which to find and implement solutions.

For further information, please contact:

NOTE: Throughout this document, the term "homeless" is used as an abbreviated term to denote "homeless or in bad housing". The word "parents" is used in the plural for simplicity even though many homeless children and young people live with just one parent or carer. Please note that the information and examples in this document are all based upon real situations as recounted by homeless children and their parents, by teachers and school administrators, and by local authority officials. All quotations are anonymised to protect confidentiality.

ChildreninScotland
every child - every childhood

on behalf of

Shelter
Scotland