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# HOUSING AND DISABLED CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF POLICY LEVERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

**Report prepared for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

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# Contents

# Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that 'something needs to be done' about housing and disabled children (Oldman and Beresford, 2000). The ambiguous and confusing policy context, the fact that short-term and long-term solutions are required, and that strategies, or alternatives, need to be found which work in the private and rented sectors make even the job of working out what needs to be done difficult. The purpose of this paper is to identify the levers and opportunities which currently exist which could be used to address the issue of housing and disabled children. It has been prepared as a resource for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as it seeks to identify a two year programme of policy and practice development in this area.

The paper begins with an overview of the research evidence on housing and disabled children. It then reports aspects of current or forthcoming policy with respect to children, disability, independent living and housing which present themselves as opportunities or levers for action and change.

# Overview of the Research Evidence

The outcomes and life chances of disabled children (and their families) are, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by the homes they live in. Disabled children spend a far greater time at home than non-disabled children (for example, Mulderij, 1996) and therefore the suitability and quality of the home environment is of even greater importance 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 (Brotherson, 1995).

Until the late 1990's very little was known about the housing needs of disabled children living in the UK. In 1998 a report was published based on qualitative interviews with 40 parents, 20 health, social care and housing practitioners and a small number of disabled children and young people (Oldman and Beresford, 1998). Participants in this research described how living in poor or unsuitable housing had a negative impact on; i) the disabled child in terms of their physical and cognitive development, opportunities to enjoy everyday childhood activities, physical health, emotional well-being, and quality of life; ii) parents' physical and emotional well-being and iii) siblings' lives and their ability to lead a 'normal' life. Some parents believed that living in poor and unsuitable housing resulted in them needing to use services they would otherwise not require such as respite care or residential school placements.

## Housing and families with a disabled child: the national picture

This qualitative piece of research was followed up by a national survey of over 2500 parents of severely disabled children (Beresford and Oldman, 2002). This survey provides the best available evidence about the housing needs of families with a disabled child living in the UK. Some of the data was compared to data collected by the 1998/99 Survey of English Housing and the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Gordon *et al.*, 2000) in order to compare the housing circumstances of families with a disabled children with families with non-disabled children. The main findings from this survey are summarised below.

**Tenure**

- 54 per cent of families were renting their homes and 43 per cent were home-owners.
- Families with disabled children were more likely to be living in social housing than families with non-disabled children with a similar income.

**Housing condition**

- Four out of ten respondents reported problems with cold, damp or poor repair.
- Families renting housing from their local authority or a private landlord were more likely to report poor housing conditions.
- Families with a disabled child were more likely to be living in poor housing conditions than families with a similar economic profile but with non-disabled children.

**Housing unsuitability**

- There are a number of ways in which housing can be unsuitable for disabled children and their families. Table 1 shows the proportion of families reporting difficulties with each type of housing problem.

**Table 1: Proportion of families reporting difficulties with each housing problem area**

| | |
|---|---|
| Lack of space to play and for family members to have space apart | 55% |
| Kitchen, bathroom and or toilet difficult to use due to size | 42% |
| Only one toilet and/or bathroom | 41% |
| Lack of space for storage of equipment | 38% |
| Unsafe or unpleasant location | 38% |
| Difficulties with access around and in and out of the home | 33% |
| Lack of downstairs toilet and/or bathing facilities | 33% |
| Poor housing condition | 27% |
| Lack of space to use equipment and/or carry out therapies | 21% |
| Inadequate facilities to meet carer needs (eg. lifting, toileting, bathing) | 21% |
| Safety inside the home | 3% |

- Three-quarters of families reported that their homes were unsuitable in at least two different ways. One in four families said their homes were unsuitable in six or more different ways.
- Even when income levels were accounted for, families with a disabled child were more likely to report difficulties with poor housing conditions and housing suitability compared to families with non-disabled, dependent children.
- Unsuitable housing was experienced across *all* families and *all* types of impairment including physical impairment, learning difficulties, socio-emotional behavioural difficulties and life-limiting health conditions.
- Families living in local authority housing or renting from a private landlord were more likely to report problems with their housing and also to report a greater number of problems.

## Potential solutions

Professionals' views on how to better meet the housing needs of disabled children have been sought through a series of consultation events held in five different locations in England and attended by over 110 practitioners working in housing, social care or health services (Beresford and Oldman, 2000).  A number of long-, medium- and short-term strategies or solutions were identified including:

- Making improvements to the condition of existing housing stock.
- Increasing the number of properties (existing and new build) which are suitable to the needs of families with disabled children.
- Improving the supply of suitable properties in the rented sector.
- Changing space and accessibility standards.
- Introducing statutory funding for house moving costs when this is the better option in terms of addressing a family's housing needs.
- With respect to disabled children, revising the notion of multi-agency working to include health, social services, education *and* housing.
- Better identification of housing needs.
- Improving levels of awareness and knowledge about housing issues amongst practitioners who work with disabled children and their families.
- Abolition of the means-test for the Disabled Facilities Grant.
- Increasing levels of funding for Disabled Facilities Grants.
- Joint funding of housing solutions.
- Improving information provision to families.

Many of these potential solutions are revisited in policy review which follows.

# Policy with Regard to Children's Services

The Department for Education and Skills is now the key department in terms of policy related to services for disabled children. They hold the policy lead and responsibility for education and social care provision. In the past, social care services were within the remit of the Department of Health.

It could be argued that in terms of opportunities within children's policy it is a case of missed opportunities. The last few years have seen significant and wide-ranging policy developments (outlined below) and it is highly unlikely that we will see any further developments in the next couple of years. A key feature of all these new children's policies is a lack of prescription in the implementation of policies, the preference being for local solutions, building on existing systems/structures of good practice. In addition, many of these policies are still in the process of being rolled out. It would seem, therefore, that the focus of 'policy opportunities' has to lie in the development and implementation of local policies and practice.

## Overview of developments in children's policy and their implementation

### Every Child Matters and the Children Act (2004)

Every Child Matters is a cross-government programme of change to enable the transformation children's services. The Children Act (2004) provides the legislative framework on which these reforms to children's services are to be achieved.

Every Child Matters takes as its starting point the notion of five universal outcomes for children and young people, namely: to be healthy, to stay safe, to enjoy and achieve, to make a positive contribution and to achieve economic well-being. The work of children's services should be to ensure that children achieve these outcomes.

The Children Act sets out a number of significant reforms including:
- A duty on Local Authorities to make arrangements to promote cooperation between agencies and other organisations (such as voluntary and community groups), and a duty on these partners to cooperate.
- This partnership would be reflected, amongst other things, in:
  - a single Children and Young People's Plan being drawn up by each Local Authority
  - the appointment of a Director of Children's Services
  - the identification of a Lead Member for Children's Services
  - an integrated inspection framework based on the five universal outcomes and the Children's National Service Framework.

| Children's Policy: Key levers and opportunities |
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- The levers with regard to progressing issues related to meeting the housing needs of disabled children within children's services are to be found in the way the recent, and significant, policy changes are implemented and delivered locally.

- From 1 October 2006 the Children's Workforce Development Council took over responsibility from DfES for implementation of aspects of the ECM programme concerned with integrated working namely: information sharing, common assessment framework, and multi-agency. This would appear to be a key organisation with whom to develop links.

## Children's Trusts

Based on these requirements, by 2008, Local Authorities have to have in place ways of working which result in an integrated approach to children's services from planning through to delivery. These are typically being called Children's Trusts. There is no prescriptive model for what a Children's Trust should look like with the view being that it is important to allow local authorities to develop systems that will work in their context and which incorporate existing joint-working structures (such as Sure Start).

In 2003, 35 local authorities became pathfinder Children's Trusts. An evaluation of these pathfinders suggests that, to date, the great majority of partnerships being developed are between social care and health. Education and the criminal justice system are the other organisations likely to be involved in local partnerships. Whilst housing departments may be represented on Children Trust board, the active involvement of housing departments in Children's Trusts in terms of joint working/funding appears to be minimal and restricted to young people leaving care (University of East Anglia, 2005).

Guidance jointly issued by DCLG, DfES and DH on delivering housing adaptations reiterates the need for joint working. It states that 'each local authority should have agreed policies involving housing, social services, education and health to assess and meet the needs of children with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments in their locality' (DCLG, 2006, p34). Children's Trusts would appear to be the natural forum for the development of such policies.

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**Children's Trusts: key levers and opportunities**

- Opportunities offered by the advent of Children's Trusts include:
    - Information and awareness raising activities with Lead Members;
    - Information and awareness raising activities with Directors of Children's Trusts;
    - Conducting a review of Children and Young People's Plans in terms of the extent to which they are paying attention to housing issues;
    - The active involvement of housing departments in the development of joint local policies on meeting the needs of disabled children.

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## Assessment

The *Common Assessment Framework* is a significant feature of the ECM programme. The Common Assessment Framework is a holistic assessment tool designed for use across all children's services. Its purpose is to help the early identification of need and co-ordinated service provision to, primarily, children requiring short term, targeted intervention(s) delivered by universal (as opposed to specialist) services (DfES, 2006). To date, it appears that the CAF is mainly being used in health and education settings (Brandon *et al.*, 2006). Housing is covered within the framework in the same way as it appears in the Assessment of Need. In the past, inadequate understanding on the part of social care practitioners about the housing needs of disabled children has meant that housing needs have remained unrecognised. Understanding of the housing issues and knowledge of the processes by which housing needs can be addressed is critical to ensuring improvements in the identification (and subsequent response) to housing needs.

For children with long-term, more serious and complex needs, existing assessment structures are still to be used (for example, core assessments under the Assessment Framework or Integrated Children's System (see below); special educational needs (SEN); and/or health needs associated with a clinical diagnosis) though government guidance endorses the use of the CAF alongside specialist assessments to support a holistic approach to assessment.

There is a concern that, whilst the principles of joint/shared assessments, interagency collaboration and service coordination are key principles within the ECM programme, insufficient attention has been paid to ensuring and supporting the implementation of these principles with respect to the coordination of specialist assessments of children with complex needs (Boddy *et al.*, 2006).

The *Integrated Children's System (ICS)* is an assessment framework, practice tool and recording system to be used across the entire intervention/service 'process' from assessment to planning to intervention through to review. The practice and case

record keeping is supported by specially designed software and this is seen as having the potential to facilitate the information sharing between agencies. Piloting of the ICS has recently been completed and the findings from it have yet to be published. Implementation of the system nationally is currently taking place. The process of developing ICS involved the review of existing assessment tools. However, in reality, the assessment remains very grounded in the Assessment Framework of Need.

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**Assessment: key levers and opportunities**

- Awareness raising and training of practitioners using the Common Assessment Framework.

- Inspections to assess quality of assessments and effectiveness in identifying housing need.

- The Integrated Children's System is still in its infancy but represents a move towards 'e-local government'. It offers the potential for information sharing between agencies at an individual level and authority wide levels. There may be mileage in exploring the ways in which housing departments could interface with ICS, both in terms of streamlining the delivery process of a housing solution for an individual family and in terms of strategic planning.

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**Lead professionals and key workers**

The role of Lead Professional has been introduced to coordinate packages of care/intervention for children with short-term, less significant needs. However, the Key Worker role will remain in order to provide the levels of support families with a disabled child often require. Care Coordination Network UK's (CCNUK) standards of a key worker service, endorsed by the DfES and DH, include the need for housing departments to be strategically and operationally involved. To date, however, keyworker services have been slow in establishing these working links with housing departments. This has resulted in keyworkers having poor appreciation and understanding of housing issues, and not being properly equipped to support a family to improve their housing situation.

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**Lead Professionals and Keyworkers: key levers and opportunities**

- Training targeted at Lead Professionals

- In line with, and endorsed by, government policy on multi-agency working, key worker services are continuing to be developed and set up across the UK. There is a need for information awareness and training of frontline practitioners and managers working in these services about housing issues.

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## Joint area reviews

Between 2005 and 2008 each local authority area will undergo a Joint Area Review (JAR) which will assess the contributions of all publicly funded services to improving outcomes for children and young people. A joint framework for the inspection of children's services has been developed by the Healthcare Commission, OFSTED and CSCI. The framework is enables inspectors to assess a local area in terms of ECM outcomes, the role and contribution of services to achieving those outcomes and extent of progress in implementing the children's NSF. There is scope within each JAR for the inspection team to focus on particular aspects of service provision and interagency working.

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**Joint Area Reviews: levers and opportunities**

- Informing the scope and content of Joint Area Reviews.

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## The National Service Framework (NSF) for Children, Young People and Maternity Services

The Children's NSF was issued jointly by the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Skills in 2004 (Department of Health, 2004). It consists of 11 sets of standards for health and social care services to be achieved over a ten year period. The standards form the basis for local joint inspections (see Joint Area Reviews). The five standards are concerned with universal issues (for example, supporting parenting, growing up into adulthood, safeguarding children). A further six standards are concerned with specific groups or services (for example, children who are ill, medicines, maternity). Standard 8 is concerned with disabled children and young people and those with complex health needs. Whilst housing departments themselves do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Children's NSF, it does state the following:

> Local authorities and Primary Care Trusts ensure that: **Commissioning of services for disabled children and their families includes consideration of their housing**, community equipment and wheelchair needs. Local authorities map the housing needs of children and their

families strategically, and plan multi-agency resources and responses accordingly.
(p18)

and

'Local authorities, Primary Care Trusts, NHS Trusts and schools ensure that: …… **assessments include considering needs** around mobility, access to leisure, play and education, seating, eating, **housing**, equipment and other requirements for living.
(p22)

and

Local authorities, Primary Care Trusts and NSH Trusts ensure that: …. There are **arrangements which encourage multi-agency strategic planning of services for disabled children… including the joint commissioning and delivery of services [and] that these arrangements include the involvement of senior managers from all main agencies, adult services and other appropriate representatives e.g. from housing**, leisure and transport services, and key local voluntary organisations.
(p39)

Although the ECM programme and the Children's NSF are both presented as cross-government policies, in reality health trusts and health practitioners are concerned with implementing the Children's NSF, whilst ECM is seen as the preserve of health and social care organisations and practitioners.

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**Children's NSF: key levers and opportunities**
**(over and above those presented by ECM)**

- Information and awareness raising activities among PCT leads.

- Informing the scope and content of Joint Area Reviews.

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# Local Government Reform

## Performance indicators

Since 1999 (Local Government Act, 1999) the performance of local authorities has been measured on an annual basis using Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs). These are a statutory set of 90 indicators covering the different sections/departments of local authorities. Data on these indicators is collected and audited annually by the Audit Commission. Examples of BVPI's include: number of GCSE's achieved; level of waste re-cycling; amount of council tax collected. With the exception of waste management and planning, BVPIs are set locally.

In addition to BVPI's, local authorities are rewarded financially by central government for delivering high quality and/or improving the quality of the services they provide. Local Public Service Agreements (PSAs) were introduced in 2000 and are part of this incentivised approach. LPSAs are contracts between central Government and local authorities that are intended to deliver improvements in key outcomes for local residents. In return for a potential reward grant, Councils agree to deliver more services or improve services more quickly that would otherwise have been the case. The purpose of the PSA is to achieve enhanced performance targets. The Government refers to these more demanding PSA targets as 'stretch' targets. Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) are the body within a local authority which take responsibility PSAs.

The first generation of LPSAs were based on targets identified and developed by the Local Government Association and government and there was little room for focusing on local issues. Subsequent LPSA were flexible and were partly driven by local issues and on what needed to be most improved in a local area.

The Department for Communities and Local Government was expected to publish a white paper earlier this year on local government reforms. This has been delayed due to cabinet reshuffles and the reorganisation of government departments. However, it is clear that at some stage in the future there will reform of local government reform which will include changes in the performance management framework.

## Local Area Agreements (LAAs)

Local Area Agreements are another example of the devolution of decision-making from central to local government. LAAs were piloted in 2004 and the expectation is that all local authorities will have LAAs by 2007. Local Strategic Partnerships are responsible for developing LAAs. LAAs include a statement of outcomes, plans and

targets as well as a three year action plan by which these will be achieved. As a result LAAs influence local spending priorities. Children and young people are one of the four priority areas covered by LAAs. In some areas, but not all areas, responsibility for the children and young people part of the LAA has been passed on to the Children's Trust.

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**Local Government Policy: key levers and opportunities**

- Unhelpful performance indicators and/or conflicting performance indicators (within and between different local government departments) have been identified as barriers to better meeting the housing needs of disabled children (Beresford and Oldman, 2000). Reform of the performance management framework offers the potential to address these issues. In addition, it provides a chance to increase the profile of housing and disabled children as a new performance framework is developed.

- Policy levers here are centred on informing/feeding into the process of the development of new/revised performance indicators (at a national and local level) to ensure:
  - that children's trust performance indicators include those which will support the identification and provision of services to ensure families with disabled children are living in suitable homes.
  - that there is not conflict between different departments PIs or that PIs are a barrier to good practice or ensuring families needs are met.
  - Housing needs of disabled children are represented in PIs across all relevant local authority departments.

- Local Strategic Partnerships are powerful local bodies with responsibilities for disabled children and young people. As a minority group within a larger population where there will be many competing priorities, there is a risk that the needs of disabled children and young people are not prioritised. Therefore, as with Children's Trusts, information and awareness raising activities are important.

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## Government Data

The lack of population level data on the suitability of housing for families with a disabled child acts has been cited as a barrier to strategic planning and realistic budgeting at an authority level and also means the issue remains hidden or a low priority in terms of government departments' desire to address the issue (Beresford and Oldman, 2000).

## The Survey of English Housing

The Survey of English Housing (SEH) is a household interview survey with a sample of 20,000 responding households each year.  It is a range of basic information on households and their housing.  Results are grossed to give estimates for all households.  The Survey covers England and data are available for standard and Government Office regions.  Data are collected on the type of accommodation, household and personal characteristics, tenure, second homes, moves, repossessions, satisfaction with the accommodation and area, waiting lists for council or housing association housing, owner occupation, social sector tenants, and private renters.  The Survey of English Housing includes three items related to housing and disability and, in the most recent survey (2003/4) additional questions on wheelchair usage were added[1], see Figure 1.

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[1] It is worth noting that findings from the 2003/04 survey show that, compared to other age groups of disabled people, disabled children (0-15 years) are the least likely to be living in suitable housing (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2005).

**Figure 1: Items on the SHE concerned with disability**

HAS441: Can I check, do you (or anyone in this household) have a serious medical condition or disability? *Yes / No*

HAS441W: Who has a serious medical condition or disability?

HAS442: Does this medical condition or disability make it necessary to have specially adapted accommodation? *Yes / No*

HAS443: Is your accommodation suitable for the person who has/have this medical condition or suitability? *Yes / No*

WhChair: Do you (or person named at HAS441) use a wheelchair? *Yes / No*

WhFre: Do you (or person named at HAS441) use a wheelchair
      *(1) All the time, indoors and outdoors*
      *(2) Occasionally indoors*
      *(3) Or outdoors only*

WhInside: How easy or difficult do you (or person named at HAS441) find it to
      manoeuvre a wheelchair around your home?
      *(1) very easy*
      *(2) fairly easy*
      *(3) neither easy nor difficult*
      *(4) fairly difficult*
      *(5) very difficult*

These questions are useful but limited. The wording of the questions appears to suggest an assumption that housing suitability is essentially a question of access, and that adaptations are the only solution to unsuitable housing needs to be addressed. However, the SEH does have the potential for acting as an important information resource. Efforts to improve the scope and quality of the survey, along with the extent to which it is used to inform national policy and local policy and practice would appear to be a useful course of action.

**National data collection: key levers and opportunities**

- Use of current SEH evidence to support arguments for the need for change.

- Seeking to inform the data collected by the Survey of English Housing.

- Working with DCLG and DfES nationally, and Children's Trusts and housing departments locally, to encourage use of the data collected by SEH to inform local policy, strategic planning and budgeting.

# Disability Policy

## The Life Chances report

In January 2005 the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit published a report 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (Strategy Unit, 2005).  This report described the disadvantage, exclusion and discrimination which disabled people experience and sets out a strategy by which, over the course of the next 20 years, the life chances of disabled people would be improved.  It identified four key areas: helping disabled people achieve independent living, improving support for families with young disabled children, facilitating smooth transitions into adulthood and improving support and incentives for getting and staying in employment.  Its vision was:

> By 2025, disabled people in Britain should have full opportunities and choices to improve their quality of life and will be respected and included as equal members of society.
> (p7)

The report specifically refers to the housing needs of disabled children, citing evidence on the extent of unmet housing need.  However, the focus of its recommendation for change was solely in terms of reform of the Disabled Facilities Grant and, particularly, the need to change existing eligibility criteria.

This new strategy for disabled people is cross-Government with different government departments being charged to oversee the execution or implementation of the various recommendations.

## The Office of Disability Issues

A key outcome of the Strategy Unit report was the formation of the Office of Disability Issues (ODI).  This is a cross-government institution whose role is to support and monitor the work of government departments as they seek to implement the Life Chances report's recommendations, and to co-ordinate disability policy across government.  The ODI is headed up by a Minister for Disabled People (currently Anne McGuire).

In July 2006 the ODI produced its first annual report (ODI, 2006).  Its response to housing issues is very disappointing and suggests a fundamental lack of understanding of the different ways housing can be unsuitable for families with a disabled child and the fact that adaptations is the 'best' solution.  This flies in the face of existing evidence and suggests there is important work to be done in educating relevant staff on this issue.

**Disability policy: key levers and opportunities**

- The ODI is a lever in itself – its role is to ensure government departments are playing their role in ensuring the strategy and commitments laid out in the Life Chances report are achieved.

- Developing a relationship with ODI – both in terms of its programme of work on supporting families and its work on independent living – would appear to be a priority and could act as an additional channel/route to working directly with specific government departments.   Policy areas the ODI has identified as being important in terms of addressing housing need include:
  – Inclusion of the Lifetime Homes Standard in the (voluntary) Code for Sustainable Buildings;
  – The review of the Disabled Facilities Grant;
  – Strengthening the Code of Guidance on the Access to Dwellings;
  – Individual budgets (see below).

- There are other ways in which housing issues can begin to be addressed and a task for the JRF project could be to inform ODI of other possible areas of activity or action.

## Individual budgets

Individual budgets is a cross-government initiative led by the Department of Health and also involving the Office for Disability Issues, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

In essence an individual budget is an amount of money (actual cash or a notional sum) pooled from different agencies which is used by an individual to organise their own social care and support services.  An individual budget can include lump sums as well as cash (real or notional) for regular payments (for example, a lump sum for some equipment and funds to pay for carers).  Funding for individual budgets can come from the following income streams: council provided social care services, Independent Living Fund, Supporting People, Disabled Facilities Grant, Integrated Community Equipment Services and Access to Work.

Individual Budgets are in their infancy and are currently being piloted in 13 local authorities.  The findings from the evaluation of those pilots will inform the national rolling out process.  Piloting began in April 2006 and will run for two years.

At the moment individual budgets are restricted to adult and older people's services. However, the DfES are exploring the potential of piloting individual budgets for

families with disabled children.  They have commissioned the Council for Disabled Children (CDC) to conduct that pre-pilot work and are expecting CDC to report back at the end of October 2006.  This report will include recommendations on whether or not individual budget pilots for disabled children would be a good idea and what they might look like.

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**Individual budgets: key levers and opportunities**

- If the DfES decides to go ahead with piloting Individual Budgets it would be important to find ways to be involved in the process of developing the pilots.

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# Housing Policy

## Disabled Facilities Grant

As part of an interdepartmental government review of the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), an independent review of the DFG was carried out and published in 2005 (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005a).  The review concludes with a series of recommendations – immediate and long-term – for reforming the Disabled Facilities Grant.  This is a thorough and carefully crafted review and should be used as a resource by the JRF project group.  One of the recommendations in the report was that means testing for adaptations for children should be abolished and, at the beginning of 2006, ODPM made an announcement to that effect.  This is to be welcomed.  However, the benefit of this to families will limited for four key reasons:

- First, the DFG is a grant for home-owners, yet the majority of families with a disabled child rent their homes.
- Second, there remains a significant lack of funding available to local authorities to award DFGs.  Housing and social service professionals report resources for adaptations are grossly inadequate and that the service they provide is 'the minimum essential' (Oldman and Beresford, 1998).
- Third, the DFG has a ceiling of (£25,000) and this is insufficient for some adaptations, particularly in certain parts of the country.
- Finally, not all inadequacies or difficulties with housing can be resolved by adapting a property, or some properties cannot accommodate the adaptation required.  In many cases, moving is the better (or only) option.

Furthermore, it is not clear whether other recommendations contained in that report are going to be taken forward - a report of the review has yet to emerge.  This is something that needs to be tracked and the implementation of other recommendations, if any, monitored.

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**Disabled facilities grant: key levers and opportunities**

- Pressing for an assessing the impact of abolishing the means test in terms of the extent to which is has reduced levels of housing need among families with a disabled child would be very useful.

- Engaging DCLG in a dialogue about extending the DFG to include covering costs of moving house where this is a better solution than adapting the current home.

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## Sustainable Communities: Homes for All

In 2005 Sustainable Communities: Homes for All was published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005b).  This laid down a five year strategy to address the key issues of housing affordability, housing availability, quality of rented sector housing, and the quality of housing services.

Disabled people are identified in the strategy of one of the groups of people who may need housing support.  Disabled children or families with a disabled child are not specifically mentioned, however.  The key elements of the strategy with regard to disability are:
- To (continue to) increase the funding allocated to Disabled Facilities Grants.
- To provide support to ensure disabled people can make home improvements and adaptations through, for example, the use of Home Improvement Agencies.
- Encouraging regional and local housing strategies to take account of the needs of an ageing population.
- Reviewing the minimum standards set out in the building regulations for the accessibility of new homes.

The commitment is, by 2010, to raise the minimum standards of new builds and to ensure that more and more older and disabled people remain living independently at home.

### The Code for Sustainable Homes

In late 2005, ODPM launched a consultation on proposals to introduce a Code for Sustainable Homes (ODPM, 2005c).  Its primary focus was to address issues of environmental impact, the inclusion of Lifetime Home Standard[2] was also put forward as an option.  The new Code was published in March 2006 with the view that it would undergo a series of revisions. New builds are scored against criteria set out by the Code.  In June 2006 it was announced that the Lifetime Homes Standard will be incorporated into the Code for Sustainable Homes (Lords Hansard, 2006).  At the moment the Code is voluntary with the exception of housing funded by Housing Corporation and English Partnerships.  DCLG is monitoring the extent of voluntary take-up of the standards as this clearly is this key to ensure the future housing stock (public and private) is built to this Standard.

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[2] Lifetime Home Standard was developed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1991.  It consists of 16 design features to ensure that new builds will meet the needs of most households across the life course.

## Choice-based lettings

Another strand of reform contained within *Sustainable Communities: Homes for All* was choice-based letting systems.  This new system will provide people on the housing register with information about available properties and allow them to register an interest in an individual property.  These properties will include properties owned by the local authority, housing associations may also include private landlords.  Each local authority will develop a universal system (across all housing providers involved) to establish priority levels or bands.  A property will be let to the person or family in the highest priority band who registered an interest.  Alongside, the DCLG also want councils to improve the quality of information they provide, including information about other housing services including adaptations services, and to offer one-stop shops or advice centres.  All local authorities will have to have a choice-based lettings scheme for their properties by 2010, and, ideally, for this to include private rented sector.

**Choice-based Lettings: key levers and opportunities**

- The reforms associated with choice-based lettings, particularly the requirement to improve the quality of and access to information, and the notion of one-stop shops, offers a clear opportunity for local authorities to improve the information made available to families about housing options and housing adaptations. However, because families with a disabled child are a minority group there is a danger that addressing the information needs of these families may be overlooked.

- Choice-based lettings also provides opportunities for local authorities to develop local registers of adapted properties or properties suitable for families with a disabled child. This will require those involved in developing and maintaining the registers to have proper understanding of the diverse factors which affect housing suitability for families with a disabled chid. In addition, the right sort of information needs to be made available to families to help them decide whether or not a property might be suitable for their needs.

- New systems of allocating applicants to priority bands will also be introduced with choice-based letting. Again, in terms of families with a disabled child, this needs to be informed by a full and thorough understanding of the diverse situations and needs of families with a disabled child.

- Specifically, the revision of allocation policies presents an opportunity to require local authorities to provide a separate bedroom for disabled child, regardless of siblings' age(s) and sex.

- In conclusion, the reforms associated with the implementation of choice-based lettings systems need to be made on the basis of a sound understanding of the particular needs of families with a disabled child. This could be an area of activity for the JRF programme of work.

**Decent homes standards**

We know from research that many families with a disabled child live in poor housing conditions. In *Sustainable Communities: Homes for All* a commitment is made that, by 2010, all social housing will be in 'decent condition' (as defined by government standards). In addition, there is a commitment to ensure that, by 2010, 70 per cent vulnerable households who own their homes or rent privately are living in a decent home. (Vulnerable households are defined as including those in receipt of at least one of the principal means tested or disability related benefits). The Survey of English Housing will be used to monitor the success of this strategy.

**Decent Homes Standards: key levers and opportunities**

- The Decent Homes Standards cover important aspects of housing suitability for families with a disabled child, such as safety, warmth, location of rooms and, to some extent, space. However, the standards are not informed by the specific needs of disabled children and their families. The development of an additional set of 'disabled child' specific standards would ensure that decent homes really are decent for families with a disabled child.

- DCLG need to be required to specifically analyse the success of the Decent Homes initiative with respect to families with a disabled child.

- While not currently stipulated, there is a good case to make in arguing that any refurbishment and renovation of properties should adhere to the Lifetime Homes Standard. Some aspects of the Standard require changes to housing design and may not be appropriate. However, some aspects, such as the positioning of switches and sockets are clearly feasible.

- The various changes in housing policy, and initiatives such as Individual Budgets, suggests a greater involvement Home Improvement Agencies. Typically, these agencies have little experience of providing services to families with disabled children as their main clients tend to be older people. Requesting that DCLG issue specific guidance to HIAs on this group might be a useful approach.

## Long-term/strategic activities

English Partnerships is the national regeneration agency for England. One of its core responsibilities is to ensure the implementation of the government's Sustainable Communities Plan. It has initiated a programme of work on setting and promote best practice and urban design and construction standards. Within this programme is a set of work on inclusive design and EP is currently undertaking Inclusive Design Pilot Projects. It is not clear, however, if this is restricted to public buildings and spaces. However, it would seem that English Partnerships does have a role to play in changing housing design.

**Longer-term Change: key levers and opportunities**

- English Partnerships is, potentially, an important agency with regard to achieving long-term change in house design.  The group might consider it is worthwhile to develop some sort of relationship with this agency.

- In terms of new build, DCLG currently emphasise the importance of ensuring new homes will meet the needs of 'an aging population'.  The challenge for DCLG is to ensure that local, regional and national new build strategies also account for the needs of other groups who are likely to find themselves living in housing which is unsuitable.

# Conclusion

The levers and opportunities identified in this report are concerned with influencing the content of or using current policy to ensure the housing needs of disabled children are better met. Influencing the development and/or revision of national policy is a quite defined task and it clear where/to whom the focus of activity needs to be directed. When we look at influencing the interpretation and implementation of national policy locally the boundaries between policy and practice can become blurred, the solutions diverse and can involve working with a wide range of individuals or professional groups from lead members through to front line practitioners. This is evidenced in the very mixed bag of suggested levers and opportunities described. The suggestions made are, I am sure, not comprehensive but, together, they do tackle in various ways the key barriers to improving the housing situations of families with a disabled child outlined at the beginning of this report.

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