Overcrowding among Primary School Children in the London Borough of Wandsworth - Incidence and Effects

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In a logical world....

PBO
(The Pretty Bl..dy Obvious)

ACP
(An Appropriate Change in Policy)

But not in the world we know - which deals in policy-led evidence not evidence-based policy
London Citizens

- London Citizens (LC) is a powerful grassroots campaign working since 1997 for greater equality and justice with over 100 member organisations [http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk/](http://www.londoncitizens.org.uk/)

- Member organisations include unions, churches of all faiths, schools, community groups, etc.


- It seeks to work with organisations – voluntary and statutory over a wide range of issues – health, housing, street safety, refugees, ethnic minority rights, etc.
The overcrowding issue

• In 2008 SLC became aware of a heavily overcrowded household with children at a primary school in Battersea

• A delegation went to see the Wandsworth Director of Housing to ask if the case was an isolated one

• The answer was unclear – so SLC undertook to research the issue

• I was contracted to design and manage the survey

• The aim was to identify the incidence of overcrowding and to assess its negative effects on children’s learning and general welfare
The London Citizens Housing Commission was formed

Commissioners

Professor Peter Ambrose – Brighton University

Sir Michael Harris – retired Judge

Peter Mortimore OBE – former Director of the London University Institute of Education

Robina Rafferty MBE – co-founder of Housing Justice
The research methodology

• A simple bi-lingual form was designed for self-completion by parents
• Form handed out by school staff and returned to them
• Survey conducted in three primary schools on 8-11 age group
• 125 households responded – these include 528 people of whom 239 were aged under 12 (see Housing our Future, SLC, 2010)
• Two public hearings held by SLC Housing Commission where numerous residents gave evidence of the harmful outcomes of overcrowding
• About 15 home visits carried out by survey team and Commissioners

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The findings...

• Average room density 1.4 pphr – bedroom density 2.0 per bedroom

• Incidence of overcrowding:
  – On Wandsworth’s own reasonable definition of overcrowding (one room counted as ‘living space’ not used for sleeping) = 70% of the households
  – On the nationally adopted Survey of English Housing ‘bedroom’ standard = 18% of the households!!
  – Wandsworth Borough are now falling into line with the preferred Government ‘bedroom’ standard – so only 18% overcrowded!!

Excellent way to ‘define away’ the problem!!
The effects as reported by parents

Evidence was collected in relation to six identified effects:

- ‘affected by lack of space’ 60%
- ‘no desk or table space to work’ 53%
- ‘household noise affecting work’ 59%
- ‘household tensions affecting work’ 65%
- ‘lack of sleep affecting work’ 53%
- ‘friends can’t visit or sleepover’ 65%

- These are serious effects on children’s educational progress, health, social development and general behaviour
- There are also obvious observable effects on parents’ mental and physical health – but these not covered in the survey

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Some comments from the forms, hearings and home visits

- “Overcrowding. . is causing psychological problems. The children have no space to play, to eat properly or to do their homework - and they can't bring their friends home. My oldest boy, who is 12, has to leave home at six in the morning to go to school to do his homework, even in the winter. They open the school especially for him and other children who have to live like this. But we are afraid for him, going out to school so early in the morning and in the dark, especially in winter.”

- “The children always quarrel over space to do homework. . there is fear of catching cold as they have to sleep on the floor.”

- “There are children I teach who are tired all the time and ‘nodding off.’ In the overcrowded households, it’s impossible for the younger ones to have adequate sleep.” (teacher)
The national situation – bad and getting worse

• Shelter report that in 2003 there were 905,000 children living in overcrowded households (London 261,000) – all by the ‘bedroom standard’!

• In 2008 the number was over 1 million (London 330,000)

Shelter say:
“Living in confined conditions has a devastating effect on family life, especially children's safety and general health. Children in overcrowded housing are up to ten times more likely to contract meningitis than children in general.”

The UK Public Health Association say:
“Overcrowding is linked with the transmission of both tuberculosis and meningitis and it also appears linked to sudden infant deaths.”
The research literature says...

• A 2004 French study showed the very strong relationship between poor housing and academic failure as plausibly one of cause and effect

• The UK Housing Health and Safety Rating System of assessing accident risks in the home identifies overcrowding as a major accident risk

• A large-scale longitudinal study in Stockholm in the 1960s found that living in overcrowded conditions was associated with a 52% greater risk of subsequent mental health problems compared to those brought up in uncrowded conditions

• A 2006 Shelter study found that children growing up in bad housing have an up to 25 per cent higher risk of severe ill-health and disability during childhood and early adulthood

• In a large-scale Shelter study in 2005 over 77% of respondents agreed that overcrowding does serious harm to family relationships and leads to tensions and even fighting between children - over 71% judged that the lack of space was damaging to their children’s educational and social development

• A 2008 report from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, based upon the extensive field experience of EHOs, shows the link between overcrowding and sleep deprivation, lack of educational achievement, stress and worry
So what is the Report recommending to Wandsworth Borough?

- A more accurate understanding of the problem on their patch
- A costing of the adverse effects on health, education and family life
- Better incentive programmes to reduce under-occupancy – the ‘hidden homes’ programme
- More provision of safe spaces for homework to be done outside the home
- Advice and funding programmes to ‘design in’ more space to work and store things (contract with IKEA?)

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And to National Government...?

- Initiate a major building programme with emphasis on ‘family size’ accommodation that is affordable according to proper evidence.

- Define ‘affordable’ by statute using the definition in the Zacchaeus 2000 Trust Memorandum to the Prime Minister in 2005.

- Carry out funded research to calculate the ‘exported costs’ of poor and overcrowded housing (not done since 1922 when Christopher Addison, a doctor, was Housing Minister!)

- Write an acceptable definition of overcrowding into the Child Poverty Act – one that provides for one living room not required for sleeping – so that cases can be solved by Court judgements.

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..and what will happen post CSR?

- HB capping seems certain to lead to many households seeking smaller properties – enhancing the overcrowding risk
- Or more adult children will need to move back to their parents’ homes
- There will be more pressure as those unemployed long-term find their HB reducing annually
- The severe cuts in forward spending on social rented housing development will further reduce supply

**Overall effects: MORE overcrowding, not less**
Key websites

- What ‘affordable’ really means [http://www.humanrightstv.com/london-citizens/a-better-housed-london/305](http://www.humanrightstv.com/london-citizens/a-better-housed-london/305)
- Article in Guardian Education online in December 2008 [http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/dec/16/schools-housing](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/dec/16/schools-housing)
- Z2K Memorandum to the Prime Minister on Unaffordable Housing, 2005 [http://www.z2k.org/sites/default/files/Memorandum-to-the-Prime-Minister-on-Unaffordable-Housing.pdf](http://www.z2k.org/sites/default/files/Memorandum-to-the-Prime-Minister-on-Unaffordable-Housing.pdf)
Thanks for listening