**Families with children living in bed and breakfast accommodation represent one of the most disturbing examples of social exclusion and homelessness. We are committed to ending the misery of B&B for homeless families and improving the standard of temporary accommodation for all in unacceptable conditions. Children have not had enough space to play or study. Families have had to share washing and toilet facilities. It’s been impossible to cook healthy meals. Too many families placed in B&B have been moved away from their relatives, friends, schools and doctors. Living in B&B accommodation is almost impossible for everyone. The effects can be long-lasting. It is simply not acceptable to move all families to avoid it.

It is time for all those local authorities who for many years have talked in their housing investment programme returns and housing strategies about ‘aspiring to reduce the use of expensive and unsatisfactory B&B accommodation’ to start delivering. It is time for local authorities to realise their aims and start realising their aspirations.

In March I was delighted to announce the first reduction of more than 10,000 homeless families with children in B&B hotels in the three months up to December 2002. That meant about 2,000 fewer children spent Christmas last year in B&B compared with the year before. It is now a year since we set out the government’s new approach to tackling homelessness outlined in our report More Than a Roof. The indignity of using B&B for families with children demonstrates why we have introduced the target that by 31 March 2004 no family with children should be placed in B&B hotels, except in an emergency and then for no more than six weeks.

This is just part of the government’s wider activity on homelessness. When the Deputy Prime Minister launched the Communities Plan he reaffirmed the critical part that action to prevent homelessness and the inappropriate use of B&B can play in tackling social exclusion and creating sustainable communities. This promises a step change in housing supply to tackle the shortages that exist in some regions, with increased housing investment and a major programme of affordable housing over the next three years.

Tackling all forms of homelessness should be about people and their individual circumstances, not just about whether they have a roof over their heads. The Homelessness Act 2002 now requires local housing authorities to develop their strategies to tackle homelessness and to provide solutions for people who are or who may become homeless.

Many councils have already met the B&B target a year early, transforming their attitude towards and use of B&B in delivering homelessness solutions. While one of this success is directly linked to funding and other assistance provided by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to councils, it is not possible that many other boroughs have not reduced their reliance on B&B for families or continued to use it at all except for very short periods of time.

There’s less than 46 weeks to go before the government’s deadline on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families expires. Inside Housing will be counting down to 31 March next year by following the progress of councils in meeting the target and focusing on examples of good practice. Here social exclusion minister Barbara Roche explains why the government is so insistent on its policy while we focus on two authorities setting the pace.
That the B&B target is met and sustained and that all homeless households and individuals are placed in temporary accommodation that is suitable.

The government is determined to see a real step forward in the nature and quality of temporary accommodation. That’s why this week we have published a consultation document seeking views on our proposals to strengthen homelessness legislation in England and issue statutory guidance so that:

- placing homeless families with children in B&B hotels for longer than six weeks will not be permitted by law;
- existing minimum standards for all temporary accommodation used by housing authorities to accommodate homeless families and individuals under the homelessness legislation are clear to authorities and homeless people;
- there is clear guidance on additional minimum standards for B&B hotels when used by housing authorities to accommodate homeless families and individuals under the legislation. It is proposed that these standards focus on the key areas of size and occupancy levels of rooms, location of cooking, toilet and bathing facilities, and management standards; and
- there is clear guidance on the arrangements that should be put in place to ensure that all households placed in temporary accommodation by housing authorities under the legislation receive support to ensure that their health, education and social services needs are met.

We will seek views over the next three months. We could all come up with a million and one difficulties, problems or excuses as to why these issues may be challenging, but excuses and problems will not help get more children out of B&B and start to tackle this extreme form of social exclusion.

Barbara Roche MP is minister for social exclusion

The consultation paper is available on the ODPM website at www.homelessness.odpm.gov.uk/bedandbreakfast/pubs/index.htm.

CAMDEN COUNCIL – CREATING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Camden Council set itself the tough target of ending B&B use by homeless families by March this year.

Twelve months ago, the London authority had 103 families housed in B&B. By its deadline, the only two left had accepted permanent offers of housing and were just waiting to move.

Head of housing options Mark Meehan says the massive fall was achieved by a range of approaches, including:

- decision-making delegated to front-line officers – speeding up the system;
- six-monthly housing options interviews to ensure clients know what is available to them;
- ensuring homeless households are not excluded from Home Connections, the council’s choice-based lettings scheme;
- changing a points system that had meant those in temporary accommodation were more likely to be allocated a permanent residence than those who were ‘homeless at home’; and
- more work to prevent homelessness, with a particular focus on 16 and 17-year-olds.

Mr Meehan picks out the changes to the points system as a key element. Previously it had biased those in B&B, creating the perception that if you wanted to be rehoused permanently you had to go into temporary accommodation first. The new system creates a level playing field. Temporary accommodation ‘is not, and shouldn’t be, a fast track to public sector housing’, he says. He has sympathy with those who claim that the real focus should be on the level of housing supply but says these are ways of tackling demand. “Even with changes to the right to buy legislation we’ve seen a significant number of units list through right to buy but theirs no use crying over spilt milk,” he adds. He points to the LANN scheme, of which Camden is a partner, which aims to help people relocate to areas of lower demand. The council is also developing a rent deposit scheme.

But such efforts to tackle B&B use do not come cheap. “Without the government’s help in terms of grant we got from the Bed & Breakfast Unit I don’t think we would have achieved it,” he adds.

“There’s a production line element in homelessness which we have tried to get away from,” says Mr Meehan, stressing the success of the six-monthly reviews in helping people understand that there may be options other than staying in B&B accommodation.

Perhaps we have got better at marketing the services we have available,” he adds.