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Rt Hon Dr Dan Poulter  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health  
Department of Health  
Richmond House  
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18/02/13

Dear Dr Poulter,

The membership of the British Academy of Childhood Disability (which is affiliated to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health), comprises paediatricians, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, professionals working in education, social care and the voluntary sector, as well as parents, all of whom are involved in the support and care of children and adolescents with disabilities.

The members of BACD are extremely concerned about the impact of capping housing benefit, in line with household size, on the families of certain children and adolescents with disabilities. Many families of children with disabilities are dependent on social housing, and in some cases this is because the parents of such children have given up work in order to take on the considerable challenge of caring for their disabled child. Often these families have either moved to housing with additional bedrooms to allow the disabled child to have his or her own bedroom or have had their existing home extended to provide a specially adapted bedroom for their disabled child.

The government's plans assume that any two children aged under 10 or two children under 16 of the same sex, can share a bedroom. However, many children with appreciable disabilities have disturbed nights for various medical reasons including discomfort, restlessness, spasticity, epilepsy and breathing difficulties. Parents (or other carers), may need to regularly check on the disabled child overnight and sometimes intervene to address any medical problems or discomfort. As a result of these medical issues, children with disabilities awaken during the night far more frequently than other children. Also, these physical problems, sometimes compounded by associated learning difficulties, predispose these children and adolescents to challenging or distressed behaviour when settling in their bedrooms in the evening and on awakening during the night.

The difficulties experienced by disabled children overnight are likely to be highly disruptive to any siblings sharing the same bedroom. Not only is this liable to cause frequent sleep disturbance to the sibling, or siblings, but also interferes with their attempts to undertake homework in the bedroom in the evenings or to simply relax in their bedroom. Such difficulties, and particularly the frequently disturbed sleep, are likely to have a cumulative detrimental effect on a sibling's mental, and eventually even physical, health.

Furthermore, disabled children and adolescents often require special adaptations to their bedrooms, and may have considerable amounts of equipment such as wheelchairs and hoists to aid mobility, electronic adaptations to facilitate environmental control and modified bathing and toileting facilities. Given all the equipment, and the need for regular attention from carers, there is usually insufficient space, and far too much disruption, for a disabled child or adolescent to share a bedroom with a sibling. It is for these reasons that BACD is calling for families in social housing to be exempt from the 'bedroom tax' where their child's disability is a factor in the size of property that they have been allocated.

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The 'bedroom tax' will mean that a disabled child who cannot share a bedroom with a sibling, or needs space for an overnight carer or specialist equipment, will require the family either to make up the shortfall of £672 and £1232 per year (significantly higher in London), or to move to a smaller home. In some cases, this will mean leaving behind the bedroom that had been specially built or adapted, often at public expense. For many of the reasons discussed, it will be extremely difficult for siblings to share a bedroom with another sibling who has a significant disability. Families with disabled children are not under occupying, they need the extra room to safeguard family health and well-being. We feel they are being penalised for having a bedroom that they need due to their child's disability and caring needs. Is this really the Government's intention to make such families pay the 'bedroom tax'?

BACD recognises the need for a responsible Government to introduce measures, such as the 'bedroom tax', that are likely to be unpopular with those to whom it applies but which are for the benefit of the country's economic interests. However, with respect to children and adolescents who have appreciable disabilities, BACD considers the 'bedroom tax' to be not only discriminatory but also grossly unfair. The Court of Appeal has agreed that the existing size criteria rules, currently affecting those in the private rented sector, are discriminatory with respect to disabled people (*Burnip/Gorry v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions*). It is with dismay that BACD understands that the Government has appealed to the Supreme Court for this ruling to be overturned. Irrespective of whether, in technical legal terms, the 'bedroom tax' is determined to be discriminatory, BACD is sure that the Government did not intend for this tax to be so clearly inhumane and immoral with respect to severely disabled children and adolescents, and urges the Government to make this group of people exempt from this tax.

Yours sincerely,

John Gibbs, Paediatrician and Honorary Secretary to the British Academy of Childhood Disability

Copy to:

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