

Listen up

The voices of
homeless children



Shelter

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To protect the identity of the children mentioned in this report, models have been used in photographs and some names have been changed. The childrens' work in this report has been reproduced by permission of the authors. No copying or dissemination is allowed.

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'It's too rough and there are quite a few drug addicts around'

Introduction by Shelter's Director

Over one million children in Britain are suffering in bad housing.

Good housing is a basic necessity for children to develop and grow. We know that the impact of bad housing on children is traumatic and long-lasting. Children get sick in damp, overcrowded and dangerous housing. They can't progress at school when they have no space for studying at home or when they are homeless and shunted between temporary homes. Their self-esteem is shattered when they are stigmatised, when their anxiousness leads to withdrawal or abnormal behaviour, or when they are too embarrassed to bring friends home to play.

Yet, as a society, we're failing to demand that this scandal be addressed

because the problem is hidden and the voices of these children are not heard.

At Shelter, we have launched our million children campaign to highlight the suffering caused by bad housing and to demand that action be taken before more futures are ruined. We want to unite the public behind this campaign and develop a campaigning force make the case for change.

This campaign would be meaningless if we failed to talk to children first. Shelter works with over 22,000 families with children every year so we have a wide experience of the problems they face. We are at the forefront of policy and service development for children and young people who are denied a decent home. And we have always believed that it is important to spend time with children who have been homeless to find out how they feel and about their experiences.

This report is based on work with twenty-nine children who were given the opportunity to discuss their experiences, needs and ambitions in their own words. What they have to say should guide us all as we seek to find solutions to the housing crisis.



Adam Sampson
Director, Shelter

If you want to join Shelter's campaign or find out more, please go to www.Shelter.org.uk

Background to the research



The research project

The voice of the child is rarely heard in debates about homelessness. *Listen Up* presents new research by Shelter which brings together the thoughts, views and feelings of 29 children about what it is like to be homeless. All the children or their families were involved with one of three support projects: six children were referred by the Kings Cross Homelessness Project in London; seventeen were from the Bayswater Family Centre, also in London and six were referred by Shelter's Homeless to Home project in Sheffield.

The children were aged between four and sixteen and they were from a wide range of nationalities and ethnicities. All the children from the Sheffield project were described as 'White British'. The majority of those attending the London projects were from families that had come to Britain from abroad and in several cases, English was not their first language. At least 17 of the children at the London projects were from refugee or asylum seeking families.

The research methodology was specifically developed to allow the children a wide range of ways to communicate their experiences and views. The three main methods used were: writing and drawing in activity books, completing a questionnaire and participating in drama exercises. The direct quotes in the report were taken from the drama sessions and activity books.

All of the children were, or had recently been, homeless. Twelve, including all the children from Sheffield, had been rehoused in council or privately rented accommodation. The rest were living in hostels or bed and breakfast hotels. Many families had been forced to move into many different types of temporary accommodation. It was this lack of stability in their housing situation that every child had in common.

Nine months after the initial research was completed, three of the older children were asked to take part in follow-up case study interviews. By then, two had been rehoused and the other was still living in temporary private rented accommodation. Their case studies form section three of this report.

The current homelessness problem

Under the Housing Act 1996, local authorities must provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families to whom they have a legal duty, whilst a settled housing solution is sought. It is not uncommon for families to occupy temporary accommodation for months or even years before such a solution can be found. Local authorities tend to use a range of property as temporary accommodation, including their own stock, private rented accommodation, hostels and bed and breakfast hotels.

At the end of December 2003, there were 95,060 homeless households living

in temporary accommodation provided by local authorities, around half of whom were pregnant women or families with children.¹ People from different black and minority ethnic groups are over-represented among homeless households.²

Living in temporary accommodation can have a damaging effect on the health and well-being of children and their families. The government is taking steps to address this. The target to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast for homeless families with children has been met and from April 2004, new regulations will ban its use for this group for periods of more than six weeks.

The government is also planning to issue statutory guidance to local authorities to ensure that minimum standards are met for all temporary accommodation. These improvements are welcome, but will not address some of the worst features of homelessness, such as insecurity, frequent moves and displacement and their effects on children's schooling and well-being.

They will also not apply to homeless families in all circumstances as most asylum seekers, and some other people



arriving or returning from abroad, are not eligible for assistance under the Housing Act 1996. Families in these situations may be accommodated by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) or by Social Services.

Shelter has produced a report, *Living in Limbo*³, based on a survey of over 400 people living in temporary accommodation, asking them about the impact of homelessness on their lives. *Living in Limbo* complements this research in this report and sets out a number of policy recommendations relating to the support and welfare needs of families living in temporary accommodation.



1. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2003) *Homelessness Statistics September 2003*, London: ODPM
2. *ibid.*
3. Meth, F and Wrigglesworth, R (2003) *More than a number*, London: Shelter
3. Mitchell, F et al (2004) *Living in Limbo*, London: Shelter



Summary of the research findings

Housing conditions

We lived in this hostel. The room was so small and we stayed more than one year and we kept on getting nervous because we were so squashed...

- Poor amenities, overcrowding, lack of privacy, no safe place to play, having to eat out because there is nowhere to prepare food: these are some of the characteristics of living in temporary accommodation highlighted by the children.
- A number of girls in early and later adolescence were very concerned by the lack of privacy. Many were sharing a room with parents as well as older or younger siblings.
- Although most of the children said they had a place to do homework, many felt unable to get their work done because of the lack of space and noise from younger siblings.
- Many children at the London projects had been forced to get rid of pets when they became homeless, increasing their feelings of instability and insecurity.

My cat's gone to Battersea ...when we get a new house we'll get her back. (Girl, 4)

Health and well-being

I eat in the corridor... I don't want to eat in my room... if I put my food on the floor the mouse will come... it will poo on it... it's black. (Boy, 6)

- Pest control was a topic of discussion at all three projects. Five of the children living in temporary accommodation had seen rats in their homes.
- Noise was identified as a problem by a number of children. Several of the children attending the

Bayswater Family Centre spoke of noise going on 24 hours a day.

What would you change to make you feel happier about where you live?
[For it] to be a bit quiet[er] (Girl, 11)



Schools and education

... for four months we didn't go to school, we went to six houses, no, seven houses and six new schools;... I don't like moving, because every time I make new friends and then I have to move again and again and again. (Girl, 10)

- The children saw school as a positive experience and were aware of the importance of doing well at school both in the short term and to their long-term progress in a job or career. However, nearly half said there had been a period of time when they had not been able to attend school. Many of these children had spent periods of months without school places.

- All of the children who took part had attended more than one school in the last two years. Changing schools had caused a major upheaval, particularly for those already experiencing traumas such as homelessness, violence in the home, family breakdown or persecution.
- Several children highlighted a problem with the cost of homework clubs and extra-curricular activities provided by schools or education authorities but which were too expensive for them to attend.

I got bullied because I was new. I just used to fight back and then I got told off.



Leisure, play and the local environment

There's only this little car park outside our house. It's covered in glass, even though people play football on it. Even our neighbours asked the council if we can make a skate park, because everyone on our road likes skating. (Boy, 12)

- Many of the children, especially the older ones, expressed concerns about the local environment.
- The children described being frustrated at not having any access to safe and good quality leisure facilities. They were very aware that some of the areas that they played in were not safe.

Sometimes we play on the balcony or in the corridor. (Boy, 7)

Relationships and emotional development

Something I do to help my family is... *keep them safe* (Boy, 7)

- Children at all three projects had witnessed and described violent behaviour on the part of adults around them. In many cases this was a reason for their family becoming homeless in the first place.
- Although some parents were receiving forms of emotional support such as counselling, very few children were receiving specific therapeutic services.
- Many of the children said they found forming new friendships and leaving old ones behind to be very hard, particularly when this involved changing schools.
- Some of the children living in hostels occupied almost exclusively by non-British households were anxious and unclear about what was acceptable behaviour within British culture and described feelings of isolation.

Section One The children and their families

The voice of the child

The focus of this research was to ensure that the voices of children are heard in the debate about housing and poverty. Previous research commissioned by Shelter, including *Where's Home?*⁴, recorded the effects of family homelessness from the perspective of parents or professionals working with homeless families, but not from the sole perspective of children.

Children and young people are rarely consulted during research, and their views have been unaccounted for in policy decisions. The terms 'overcrowding', 'anti-social behaviour' and 'poverty' are not part of the language of children, yet they form part of the everyday experiences of the children who took part in this research project.

This research attempted to explore housing and poverty by enabling children to describe, in their own words, their experiences, what they felt needed to be changed and, very importantly, the support they felt they needed from adults to deliver these changes.

It is important to note that all the children who took part in the research were receiving support from a specialist project. Not all children living in temporary accommodation benefit from such services and their experiences may be even more difficult.

Details of the children and families who took part in the research are provided below. Details of the projects that participated can be found in Annex A. Details of the methods used in the research are described in Annex B.

The children

The research focused on 29 children from three different projects. Each of these projects offers a different type of support to

families who are, or have been, homeless. They include play sessions, homework clubs and tenancy support services. The group of children who took part in the research were from very diverse backgrounds and similarly, the experiences that had prompted their families to seek support from the projects were also very diverse. Some children had been using a service for a number of years, others for one or two weeks only.

The table below shows the ethnicity of the research group. Children from the London projects came from the widest range of ethnic backgrounds. All the children from the Sheffield project were recorded as 'White British'.

Chart 1: The children's ethnic background

Ethnic Background	Number
Moroccan	7
White British	6
French	3
Somali	2
Sudanese	2
Pakistani	2
Tamil	2
Ecuadorian	2
Turkish	1
Venezuelan	1
Polish	1

Base: 29 children who took part in the research

A wide age range of children was represented. The youngest was four years old and the eldest was sixteen. Seventeen boys and twelve girls participated in the research.

4. Robinson, B (2002), *Where's Home?*, London: Shelter

that let keep life
I eat 3 months school.
I like to do my maths

9 Peole 1 brother 2 Sister 2
20 19 9

High green
I eat 3 months
to grow

But wife my
family. I
go to the
pictures.
I open my
PTests.

I like him
play foot ball,



to home. I go
Meadow hall
I like to see
motor bike.
I would like
by it on some cars

because I can go any
where. I can't walk
TV.

a house & Toons
I am not aloud in the

Sister's room

I play my pet
I sell.
I play in my TV

I have 2 bikes.

2 blue bike and a small one blue bike
I like playing with my bikes

Their families

The support project workers selected the families who took part in the research. Whilst all the families had experienced homelessness, not all were homeless at the time.

- All six children attending Sheffield Homeless to Home had been rehoused and were living in council housing.
- Of the six children attending the Kings Cross Homelessness Project, two members of one family were living in council housing, while four children from two other families were living in bed and breakfast hotels.
- It is less clear which type of housing the seventeen children attending the Bayswater Family Centre were living in at the time of the research, as the children were asked to give their own definition of their housing situation. All of their families had spent some time in bed and breakfast accommodation and at least ten children were living in that type of housing at the time the research was conducted.

The most common reason for the Sheffield Homeless to Home families' homelessness was either relationship breakdown or eviction. This reflects the most commonly recorded causes of homelessness among households accepted by local authorities, nationally.⁵

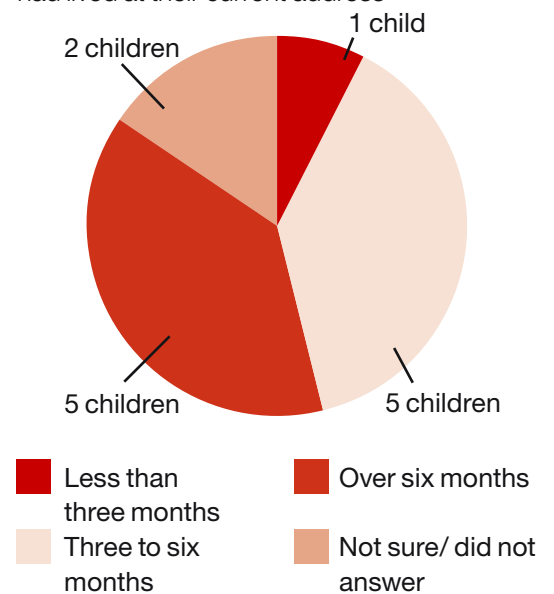
At the two London projects, typical causes of homelessness were the need to escape violence, including abuse to themselves or other family members. In two cases this involved racist abuse. Three children were from families who had become homeless as a result of a political situation in their country of origin.

Most of the children had been forced to move between a variety of different kinds of accommodation. It



was this lack of stability in their housing situations that all the children had in common. They were asked how long they had lived at their current address, as shown in chart 2. Over half the children that replied had lived at their current address for no more than six months.

Chart 2: Length of time the child's family had lived at their current address



Base: 13 children who completed the second stage questionnaire

5. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (2003) *Homelessness Statistics September 2003*, London: ODPM



The children were also asked about the size of their family. Their replies are shown in chart 3. Over three-quarters of the children that replied were living in households that contained five or more people, making space and the size of their available accommodation a particular concern.

‘We lived in this hostel. The room was so small and we stayed more than one year ...we were so squashed...’

Chart 3: The size of the children's families

Size of family	Number of children giving this answer
Four-person family	2
Five-person family	2
Six-person family	7
Ten-person family	1
Not sure/didn't answer	1

Base: 13 children who completed the second stage questionnaire



Section Two The findings

This report explores the impact of homelessness and poor housing on a specific group of children. The 29 children involved described in their own words how homelessness had affected them and their families. In documenting this, the research team were very aware of the potential conflict between the voices of the children and the adult arena in which the findings will be analysed. The report is broken down into themes, which reflect the topics that were used in the research to root the findings in the children's' everyday experiences.

The themes are:

- Housing conditions
- Health and well-being
- Schools and education
- Leisure and play
- Local environment
- Relationships
- Emotional development

Housing conditions

The purpose of this research was to consider the everyday effects of family homelessness on children. Some of them had been homeless for a short period only, but others had spent as long as three years without a permanent home.

Children who had already been rehoused discussed how things had changed for them, weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of being in a new space.

Lack of amenities

The children highlighted a lack of basic amenities for washing, cooking and playing. In one bed and breakfast hotel, for example, facilities were communal and bathrooms were not located on every floor, making access difficult for families with young children. One eight-year-old boy needed to use the toilet during a group work session; in order to accompany him, his

mother had to also take his three younger siblings down the two flights of stairs. When asked, 'What would you change to make you feel happier about where you live?', one child answered, 'the toilets.'

All the children from Sheffield were in families who had been homeless but had since been rehoused. These children described being happier with the physical conditions in their new homes. One child described being able to 'sit calmly on the sofa and read'. They also identified other benefits, such as being able to keep pets.

I think my house is so cool, it wasn't something that I was going to expect, in my bedroom, it's the size that I wanted. (Girl, 10)

Across all three projects, children described the lack of outside play facilities. Only two families described themselves as having a space outside to play. This was in spite of the fact that eight of the children who took part in the study had been permanently rehoused.



I would like to have a really nice garden, we've only got mud in our garden, we're going to try and go to allotments. (Boy, 12)

Children who answered the question 'Is there a place to play outside?' with a longer answer all mentioned fear of violence rather than an actual lack of amenities. One child who had been rehoused gave the following answer: *No, I don't like to [play outside] because there are gangs of boys.* (Girl, 10)

Children seemed to identify the difference between having a private garden and using outdoor facilities such as parks. Two of the children from London described being able to play in the park, and those from the Bayswater Family Centre talked about using football and tennis facilities in Hyde Park on a regular basis. In group work these children described being afraid of having to move away from the area and losing this facility.

Lack of space

Many of the children had experienced living in overcrowded conditions, in which they would often be washing, eating, sleeping, playing and attempting to study in the same room. It was a common situation among the children who were living in bed and breakfast hotels for the whole family to be lodged in one room - in some cases, for significant periods of time. One boy said that his family had previously lived in a hotel for over three years. All six members of his family were living in one room. One child who had since moved into privately rented accommodation described her experience of living in bed and breakfast accommodation: *We lived in this hostel. The room was so small and we stayed more than one year and we kept on getting nervous because we were so squashed we*

had lots of things and we didn't [have] so much place to put it... (Girl, 9)

Most of the children belonged to a family with more than one child. Although the majority said they had a place to do their homework, many felt unable to actually get their work done because of a general lack of space and because of the noise their younger siblings made while playing within the same space.

As well as finding it difficult to concentrate, children also described feeling anxious about not being able to organise themselves within such a crowded space.

...I want my own room where I can be organised. (Girl, 10)

Lack of privacy

Lack of privacy was a common concern for the children and young people living in bed and breakfast accommodation: *There are [security] cameras everywhere... there's cameras in the lights....* (Girl, 10)

There are not any good hiding places to hide my private stuff. (Girl, 12)

A number of adolescent girls in were very concerned by the lack of privacy. Many were sharing a room with parents as well as older or younger siblings. Children were frustrated and very aware of having a lack of control within their own environment.

Health and well-being

The children showed a high awareness of the effect of their housing on the emotional and physical well-being of their parents, and the effects of poor hygiene on their families' health.

Hygiene

Five of the children discussed having seen rats in their homes. All of these children had been living in temporary accommodation at the time. Pest control was a topic of discussion at all three projects. One boy living in bed and breakfast accommodation in London described his situation to us:

I eat in the corridor... I don't want to eat in my room... if I put my food on the floor the mouse will come... it will poo on it... it's black. (Boy, 6)

Kitchens observed by the research team during workshops were generally clean and had basic equipment. Bathrooms and toilets, however, were not kept clean and some had only shower equipment.

Noise

Children at all the projects discussed problems relating to noise.

'I eat in the corridor... I don't want to eat in my room... if I put my food on the floor the mouse will come'

What would you change to make you feel happier about where you live?

For it to be a bit quiet[er] (Girl 11)

Several of the children from Bayswater Family Centre mentioned noise going on 24 hours of the day. One child, who had stayed in bed and breakfast accommodation for two years, said she had not been able to sleep until they moved from that particular hotel.

Food and nutrition

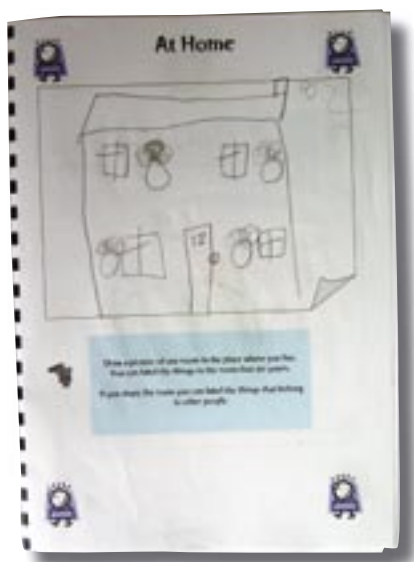
Some of the children displayed behaviour that suggested that food was not always available to them when they were hungry. Two children from one family wrapped all their food in napkins and then went into a corner to pack it into a bag.

Children at all the projects referred to eating a range of takeaway foods. This may be symptomatic of the fact that many hostels contain very basic food preparation areas, if any, and some also have no communal eating areas.

I like KFC chicken legs, kebabs...and I like pork chops (Girl 10)

The research team noticed that many children whose families come from other parts of the world felt pressure to assimilate into British culture. In accommodation where food preparation and eating areas were communal, some families felt an added pressure to conform to what they perceived as 'British or Western culture' rather than preparing food from their country of origin. A number of children whose families had sought asylum in the UK were reluctant to discuss whether their parents cooked food other than what they perceived as 'British food'.

At home we eat smelly food (Boy 7)



Family health

There was some evidence to suggest that poor standards of accommodation were contributing directly to ill health. Three children attending the London projects talked about being cold during the winter, as their parents were worried about heating bills. However, they also had concerns over their lack of control over temperature when the weather was warm: *In the summer they don't shut down the heating and it gets so hot... you can only sleep on one side of the bed.* (Girl, 10)

Children from two separate families suggested that hotel management left the heating on and then charged extra for it.

Although children did not readily refer to health as an issue for themselves, some took a caring role for parents who had either become ill or tired.

Something that I do to help my family is... *wash the pots and Hoover up. And tidy the house when my mum is poley [poorly].* (Girl, 11)

Schools and education

The research found that children who were homeless or living in temporary accommodation were prevented from, or felt unable to, access statutory or other basic services such as schools and youth clubs.

Eleven of the twenty-nine children who took part in the project directly referred to a period of time when they were not able to attend school. These children were often not accessing any other services where they might socialise with peers.

As well as reducing the opportunity for children to socialise with peers, non-attendance at school may also remove important adult support structures. Teachers and youth workers can sometimes provide an alternative or supplementary therapeutic outlet to family support. Very few children who took part in the research were receiving specific therapeutic support services except where they had an identified need, although all three of the projects offered adults counselling or advice services.

Moving schools

All the children who took part in this study had attended more than one school in the last two years. They described the difficulty of moving school, leaving friends and having to adapt to a new domestic situation.

One child described her own experience, which arose when her family became homeless and was housed in various locations by the National Asylum Support Service:

For two years [we were living in Reading], and one year we were just going to the council and home and stuff like that. And for four months we didn't go to school, we went to six houses, no, seven houses and six new schools; One in Slough, one in Grays, two in... three in Reading, two

‘... for four months we didn’t go to school... I have to move again and again and again.’

in London, no, three in London... I don’t like moving, because every time I make new friends and then I have to move again and again and again. I live in Queensway now... This is my best place. (Girl, 10)

For one family at a London project, being rehoused into more temporary accommodation had added to the difficulty of attending school, as the journey to school now took over two hours.

School achievements

For all the children who took part in this research, school generally seemed to be a positive experience and they seemed very aware of the importance of doing well at school both in the short term and to their long-term progress in a job or career.

Do your work because it’s good for you because when you’re grown up you won’t have a job and you won’t learn because schools the bestest place to learn. (Boy, 5)

If you don’t do your work when you’re older you’ll be a dosser. (Girl, 10)

Some of the children also related doing well at school to overcoming other difficulties that they may face: *One time people only wanted to be my friend because I’m a good drawer, I can draw good horses.* (Boy, 12)

Many of the children had clear aspirations relating to work and careers: *I want to be a magazine editor.* (Boy, 12)

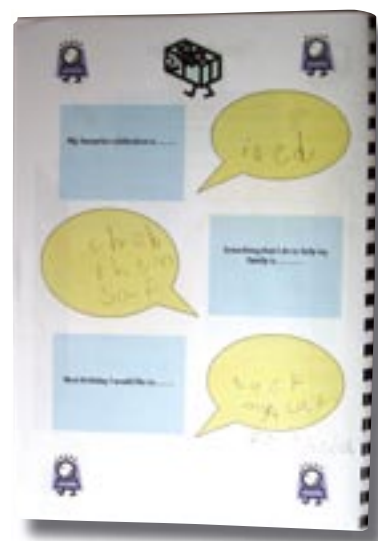
I want to be an author. (Girl, 10)

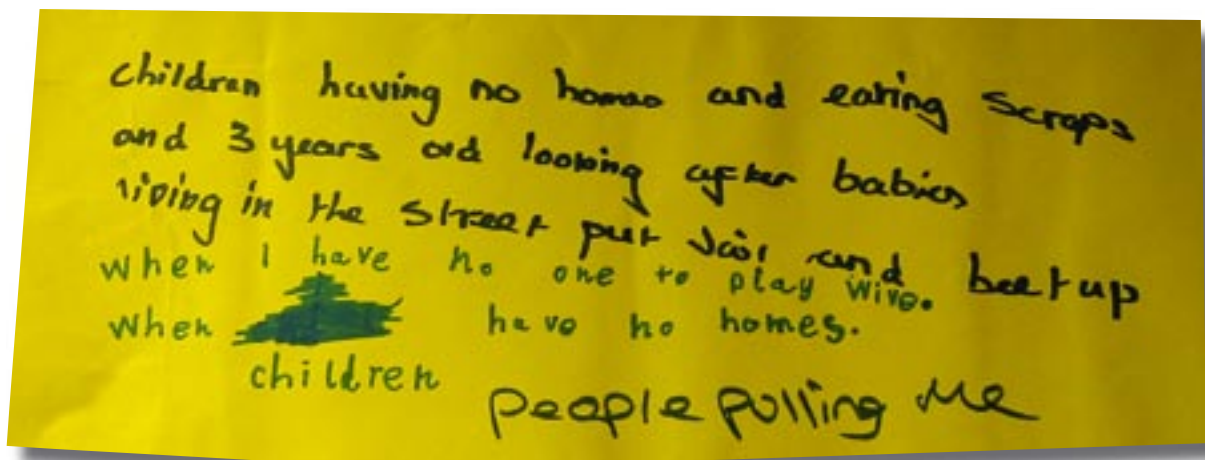
...or I want to be a veterinary surgeon. (Girl, 10)

I want to be in games design. (Boy, 10)

Many of the children involved in the study described their own educational achievements and were keen to learn and progress. All of them were accessing some form of support from adults at the projects that their families were attending and the research team saw this support as important to their education.

Children at the two London projects were able to receive support from adults able to





speak English. The researchers felt that this was very important in cases where the children were the only members of their family who spoke and read English or whose families were unable for other reasons to give the necessary support for children to do homework and to develop language and other skills at home.

Behaviour

Over the period of work with the three groups, all the children displayed behaviour that could have been considered inappropriate within a classroom setting. Most noticeable across the three projects was regressive behaviour. Children were observed talking 'baby talk'. Some of them had been unable to access early intervention initiatives such as Sure Start and Early Years Play and Childcare Services because their families had to move frequently.

Some children also had difficulties sharing items including toys and food. A number of the children were very emotional and cried easily, sometimes for no apparent reason. Some of these observations were made within a play context where regressive behaviour can be seen as a part of role-playing. However, it is unusual

to find these patterns of behaviour right across the age spectrum of the children who worked with the research team.

Violent play and violence in general formed a backdrop for all of the work with the children. Within role-playing exercises all the children were able to portray accurately both the victim and the perpetrator roles within the school and home setting. This is unsurprising as, for many of the children, violence in some form had been a factor that had led to their family becoming homeless.

Many of the children seemed to have been subject to sanctions as part of classroom discipline.

Do your work or you'll miss your playtime. (Boy, 5)

I don't care I've had so many detentions. I'm never at playtime. (Boy, 12)

Homework clubs and extra-curricular activities

Several children highlighted a problem with the cost of homework clubs and extra-curricular activities provided by schools or education authorities but which were too expensive for them to attend.

At school I can do my homework because they give it on Thursday, but... on Thursday they have homework club but I don't go to homework club because it's too expensive... it's more than five pounds... yes, I would [like to go] there is breakfast club, French club and you know Kurdish... [club]. (Girl, 9)

Leisure and play

Although all three of the projects involved in the research organised some leisure activities for families during school holidays, only one provided play and leisure opportunities for children over the age of five on a regular weekly basis. Play workers at one of the projects described older children, who were not attending school regularly, attending a play session intended for under-fives.

‘There’s only this little car park outside our house. It’s covered in glass...’

Children living outside urban areas whose families did not have access to a car had difficulty accessing leisure facilities. The children who took part in the study described being frustrated at not having any access to safe, good quality leisure facilities: *There’s only this little car park outside of our house it’s covered in glass, even*

though people play football on it, even our neighbours asked the council if we can make a skate park because everyone on our road likes skating. There’s only one car that parks on it... a regular day for us, just sitting inside playing on a game. There’s nothing to do outside, there’s a basketball court but we always get into stuff... he got beaten up at the basketball court... there ain’t any parks or anything. Anything for other people... the only thing that I’ve heard that actually interested me my social worker she’s found out that we can go to basketball. (Boy, 12)

When the council does things it only gets wrecked. (Girl, 10)

But if they make an indoor park then it can’t get wrecked. (Boy, 12)

As well as a lack of space to play within their accommodation, areas in which children played were often extremely unsafe.

Sometimes we play on the balcony or in the corridor. (Boy, 7)

The research team observed that the children involved in the research were surprisingly aware of safety issues. For some, this had resulted in their choosing not to play rather than putting themselves in danger. In other cases, where they chose to play in dangerous situations, it had increased the number of injuries sustained.

Local environment

Concerns about the local environment emerged as a key theme, especially for the older children in the group, and particularly for the children in Sheffield. The children used planning exercises to design better facilities for play within their local environment.

Green spaces

For many of the children, not having a garden meant being without a private outside place to play. Not only that, but they also described the disadvantages of having to play in shared or public spaces. There was strong evidence that the children were acutely aware of both danger and disorder within their local environment.

It's too rough and there are quite a few drug addicts around. (Boy, 13)

The area and how it's kept like with glass all over the floor. (Boy, 10)

People ride motorbikes on pavements. (Girl, 10)

Many of the children at the Sheffield project had experienced eviction or been rehoused in an unfamiliar part of the city. One family had been moved

from a rural to an urban setting. The two children described the contrast between the city and the countryside. For this family adjusting to having no private outside space was very disturbing.

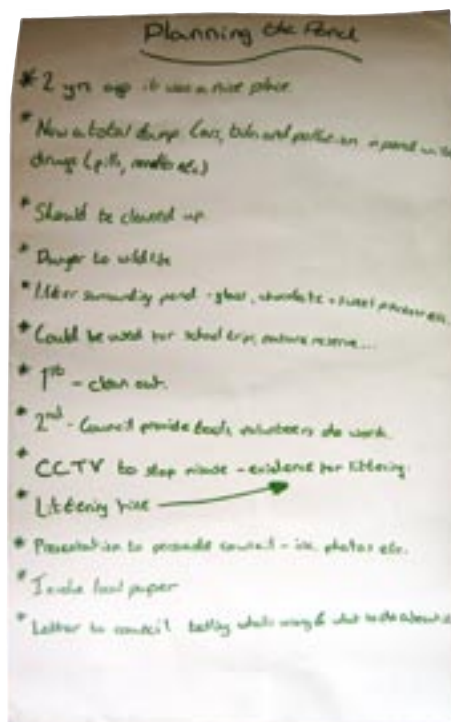
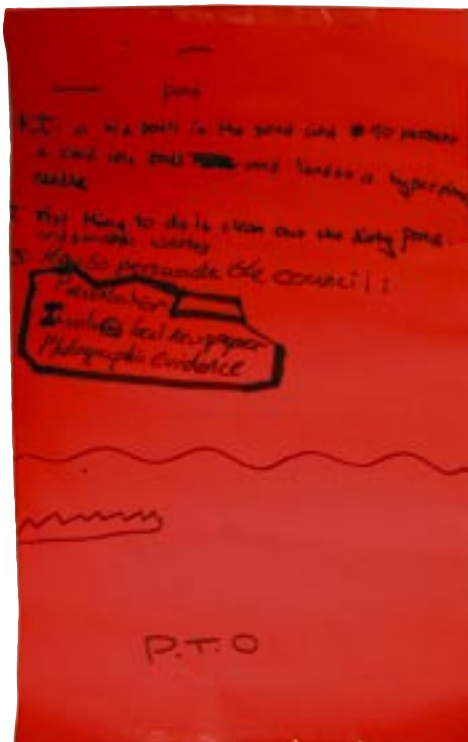
We made a pond, and we put some frogs in it and he [neighbour] said you can't do that. (Boy, 10)

These children engaged very strongly in planning exercises with a goal to try and improve their local environment, drawing up a detailed strategy for improving the condition of a local pond in a letter to their local Member of Parliament.

Violence and anti-social behaviour

The children in Sheffield seemed particularly concerned about their local environment. Two of them had been rehoused to a council-owned house on an estate. This family found the change in environment particularly worrying and felt reluctant to access any local recreational or youth services.

One family had been the victim of very extreme anti-social behaviour within



their home and the surrounding area. They had been rehoused and separated from one sibling who had committed the offence against them but they still had many concerns about the area where they had been rehoused. Many of the same social problems, with groups of young people perpetrating street crime, were still present in this new area.

Three out of the four Sheffield families (six children) described the area they had been rehoused in as 'rough', and discussed being worried about 'drug addicts', both in responses to the questionnaire and during drama sessions.

There's loads of rough families. (Boy, 10)

This was also an issue for one of the London families that had been rehoused. A teenage member of the family had been victimised as a result of race and for being a refugee.

Personal space

For children still living in temporary accommodation, personal space indoors was more important than the wider environment outside. All the children who took part in the research discussed playing computer games and most listed this activity as a 'favourite game' rather than listing outdoor games. This is not unusual for children in this age range but the researchers observed that for the children living in bed and breakfast accommodation, this was their only option rather than their preferred choice.

Personal and material items, particularly pets, seemed invaluable to children in making the transition from one home to another. For many of the children at the London projects, losing pets had been a big sacrifice when being forced to move home. Two children had been promised pets once

they moved into their own homes. For a number of the children living in temporary accommodation, pets had become a marker of future stability and security.

My cat's gone to Battersea, My cat is so good I love her... when we get a new house we'll get her back. (Girl, 4)

At the Bayswater project, the research team observed children using facilities such as the playhouse and indoor play areas, as well as the garden. Children made use of the space with a sense of freedom and all the age groups were very keen to take part in role-playing games.

Relationships

The research picked up on a number of issues around relationships that seemed to be linked to the children's housing situation or homelessness.

Family

By observing the children who took part in this project, the researchers noticed that they were often part of a very close family unit. Without exception, all the children expressed closeness with their parents and a sense of responsibility for their siblings and for the family in general.

I am very proud of... my family for sticking together when things haven't been so great. (Girl, 15)

Something I do to help my family is... I pray for them. (Boy, 7)

Something that I do to help my family is... help them to forget bad things. (Girl, 10)

Something I do to help my family is... say I love them very much. (Girl, 10)



Friendships at school seemed to be hard to develop for some of the children. Sometimes they were unable to provide practical details about themselves such as an address, or telephone number. Making friends in a new school was seen as an uphill struggle as friendship groups had often already been formed.

The children valued friendships very highly. They were very adept at labelling positive qualities in others while violent and aggressive behaviour within friendship groups usually occurred when loyalty was called into question. This was a trend across all three projects.

At the Sheffield project, one very young child described regularly carrying out various caring duties for her younger sibling. One young person from a London project was acting as carer for the whole family group.

In my old school: – [my friends were] trustworthy, they listen to what you say, they support you. (Girl, 12)

Something that I do to help my family is... *help my mum clean up and not give her a hard time.* (Girl, 9)

Many of the children described feeling unsafe at school, and in two families this had extended to serious physical assault by a group of peers.

Something I do to help my family is... *keep them safe.* (Boy, 7)

What would you change to make things better for your family? *More places to play and hang out with friends, a place where we can play without being threatened by older kids.* (Boy, 13)

Children were often present when decisions were taken about financial arrangements and tenancies, and some were also asked to translate documents or conversations.

Something I would change about school to make it better for me... *People not saying secrets about me and play together.* (Girl, 9)

Friendships

All the children who took part in this research had the advantage of developing a friendship group as a result of accessing a support service and in many cases this has extended to parents developing friendships as well. Two children in the study group had moved seven times in the last two years, which meant they have inevitably left many friends behind.

In both of these situations, the children said the violence and bullying were due to their homelessness.

Emotional development

Many of the children who had become homeless had already experienced difficulties such as family breakdown and violence.

Violence and aggression

Relationship breakdowns that subsequently lead to homelessness often involve domestic violence. Many of the children at all three projects had witnessed and described violent behaviour on the part of adults around them. The following text is the transcript of a drama exercise in which the children from the Sheffield project were asked to add thought bubbles on to a scene they had devised:

[his Dad is thinking] *If he doesn't do his work he'll get a belting.*

[his son is thinking] *If he hits me now he's going to hit me again and if I get hit again I don't think its going to be nice it will be worse.*

[his Mum is thinking] *Don't hit him... because we'll have to go to the hospital and they'll be all blood pouring down... it ain't nice to be hit and blood pouring down you because it looks horrible when you see when people see you. (Boy, 5, Girl, 10)*

Ethnicity and language

The children who took part in this research represent eleven different ethnic groups but they discussed many common issues. Some of the children born outside the UK felt there were additional barriers to being able to participate fully within society and enjoy equality of opportunity. The researchers found that among the children from families that had been seeking asylum several had faced long periods away from school and had had difficulties accessing other basic services, directly as a result of their transient housing situations. Many of the children from the Bayswater Family Centre had spent periods of months not attending school.

Two of the children interviewed as part of the case studies in section three referred extensively to the importance of being able to speak English at school. All the children within the research group had a reasonable command of spoken English and they made it clear to the researchers that school was the place where they had learned and developed their English language skills. Although several had missed periods of school previously, all had been attending for several months when the research took place.

Many of the children from the London projects had to deal with cultural as well as language barriers. Many of these, having been isolated through lack of schooling or the nature of their accommodation, were actually very reluctant to identify themselves in any way that would set them apart from their peers. Some of them showed evidence of being anxious and unclear about what was acceptable within British culture. One child described the effects of living in hotel accommodation occupied almost exclusively by other non-British households and the stigmatisation resulting from exclusion from what she considers to be 'English people'. She clearly felt an awareness of being different from the wider 'English' community as a result of her housing situation.

There are lots of Arabs in the hotel... lots of Arabs with children and lots of Chinese. I didn't see much English people but it's full of Chinese and Arab people... I'd like to see some English people because it's their place anyway, that's the only English person I've seen so far is the security, the three security men. (Girl, 10)



Section Three Moving on – Case studies of three children, nine months on*

Three children who took part in the initial research – one from each project - were asked to take part in a further case study interview nine months after the initial study. The interviews were guided by their responses to the initial research and the quotes from other children that are contained within the main body of this report. The children were asked to consider the initial findings of the report and record what changes had taken place for them. A member of the research team, with whom they were all familiar, carried out all three interviews.

Two of the children and their families had been rehoused in council accommodation following periods of homelessness; one was still living in privately-rented temporary accommodation.

The confidence of all three children appeared to have increased in the time since the initial research. Having a safe place to be with friends outside their home was particularly important to them, as was the ability to settle and do well in school.

Although they all discussed being reluctant to take part in counselling, they were all regularly taking part in some peer-led activities. Therapy is not always based on talking and can also include re-engaging in everyday activities that are suitable for a young person according to their age and general developmental needs. All these factors are more likely to be achievable once a family's housing circumstances allow them to settle properly into an area.

The researchers were concerned about the level of responsibility that all the young people had in family decisions and discussions about their housing and other problems. This was particularly so with children such as Alek and Maria who were acting as interpreters for their mothers. Their families were, however, seen to be benefiting from the language

support they gained by attending the support projects and this was alleviating some of the responsibility Alek and Maria had taken on by acting as interpreters.

Case Study One

Christopher – aged 14, Sheffield

Christopher had been rehoused by the council with his mum and younger brother into permanent accommodation in Sheffield for approximately seven months when the research project began. They were originally home owners in another area and had been rehoused twice before because of family breakdown.

The family were accessing a tenancy sustainment programme provided by Shelter's Homeless to Home project on behalf of the local authority. A support worker was visiting the family regularly and both children had been seeing a social worker.

Both children took part in the initial research and both had serious concerns about their new environment.

Physical housing conditions

The family were now living in a council-owned two-bedroom property on the outskirts of Sheffield. The house was part of a fairly large estate, in a semi-rural location.

Concerns about the area where they lived formed a large part of Christopher's response to the initial research. While these concerns and the safety of the area still seemed important, his main priority was now to find spaces to socialise with a group of friends. This had made a significant difference to his ability to feel safe using local facilities: *It's good now. I've got to know a lot of people. I can go and visit my friends. That's made things a lot better... settled.*

* Some of the case study children's names have been changed

I wouldn't really want to move now... It's still quite rough because half of them are just looking for fights but I just ignore them... I can walk around on my own. I walk almost everywhere on my own.

Schools and education

Christopher also identified settling into school as being very important to him:

I am getting good grades for my effort, good levels... I got in straight away. There were some friendly kids there that showed me around when I first started. I don't think he [brother] is getting bullied.

Christopher was concerned to read that one of the other participants in the research had been off school for four months:

I think it is quite bad. It must be quite bad for her... when we moved I was only off school for two weeks... my mum bought revision books; we worked from them while we were away. But after four months she must have been really behind, there would be more pressure when she moved there.

He was also very aware that changes sometimes make it more difficult for children and young people to adapt to a new school:

We lived in a rough area of Huddersfield and then we moved to Scarborough and I got bullied because I was new. I just used to fight back and then I got told off.

Leisure and play

During the interview, Christopher commented that in his opinion the 'play part was the most important part of the report'. It seemed that for him, the new resources that he was accessing to relax with friends were very important to his overall well-being:

I've found a youth club. It's at a church and I just go along with all my mates. We sometimes go bowling and play darts and stuff. Everyone goes to different schools...

'I'm still helping as well to keep [mum] happy ... I've got to do something.'

Not really anything else I want to do... just stay here and hang out with my friends.

Christopher also felt that some of the material from other children in the research related to his own experiences of moving into a new area:

The fact that you've constantly got to be on the lookout for other kids... like they're always bullying you and stuff and pushing you around.

Relationships

Christopher had experienced traumatic family circumstances and, understandably, he and his brother had been worried about their mum. Christopher felt that his mum's being able to choose to move to the Sheffield area had helped her to be more confident after they had been rehoused:

The family are quite close, about ten minutes' drive away. I think she's happy now we've settled in. My aunties and uncles have been giving her a lot of support. We wouldn't have had as much support [if we'd been moved away from family], they've really helped us move in, rented vans and made us welcome for Christmas and birthdays... it's great.

Christopher also talked about the support that his mum had received from Shelter:

It's been easier with Shelter... I would say it's been difficult... but still easier. Because we've found out that we're not the only ones.

He also talked about the need to support his mother:
I'm still helping as well to keep her happy. I can't just lie around the house all day. So I've got to do something.

Christopher's parents had previously had difficulties with practical arrangements for the boys but the situation had now stabilised:
... We've caught the train a couple of times. I'd never been on the train before looking after my brother. We get to see him [Dad] about once a month.

Case Study Two

Alek – aged 11, Bayswater

Alek was living with her parents and younger brothers in privately rented temporary accommodation paid for by the council. The family had been living in the flat for three years and had previously moved six times both in and outside London. Alek was the eldest member of the family, with one brother aged eight and another who was a toddler. There were two bedrooms, one of which Alek shared with her two brothers. Space was an issue for Alek. She answered that 'nothing' was good about where she lived.

Alek's family had lived in very extreme conditions in Sudan and had left due to political changes. Alek had not spoken much English when she started school, and being able to access language support was of great concern to her. She felt it was very important to be able to develop as a resident of Britain while maintaining her religious and cultural practices.

Alek and her eldest brother were attending a homework club at the Bayswater Family Centre on a twice-weekly basis.

Physical housing conditions

Many of the older children who took part in the study also found it very difficult to organise their studying if sharing a space with other children. When Alek was asked the question, 'What would make things better for your family?', she replied, 'If we had a bigger house.'

It is so small I have to share a room with my brothers. They are watching TV in my room while I am doing my homework. Younger children need more space because they want to explore places. Older children won't worry about staircases – they will want a place to do their homework.

Schools and education

Alek had attended her present school for two years. Before that she had attended five different schools in a two- to three-year period. She had coped with a lot of changes but seemed quite settled. When she took part in the initial research she was reading books on bullying and this topic

'It is much bigger than the other schools I have been to and the children are much friendlier.'

was still important to her. Although she made it clear that she was not currently being bullied, the researchers felt certain that this had previously been a concern for Alek or someone she felt close to:

In year six it is okay – there is a lot more work. It is much bigger than the other schools I have been to and the children are much friendlier. The teachers are more nicer and we have more activities than at the other one. We have lots of parties – lots of holidays.

Living in London in a multi-ethnic community was important to Alek. Much of her response to the interview suggested that while she and her family were taking active steps to integrate successfully into British society, being around other Sudanese families was very important:

I've got two schools I've applied to – still waiting for one of them to send back. Lots of friends are going. It's a girls' school, some of them are from my country and I know them really well. Some but not all [of her friends are Sudanese].

Leisure and play

Alek had become more independent but was still very aware of the needs of the rest of her family in terms of play and leisure. Their flat was on the first floor and there was no garden:

Children need places to play. They are going to get bored in a small area. A big family... you can't fit them into a home with one room. They get too squashed. Children need places to go like parks, shops and shopping centres and stuff like that. We mostly play in the living room because it is big and there is a wide space in the middle of it.

Lack of space indoors made meeting friends outside the home more important. There were local facilities that Alek was able to use:

Sometimes I go out with my friends [plenty of places to go locally] I go to Sudanese school on Saturdays 10-2... I am going to the French club at school, It costs £4 a week.

Emotional development

Helping other people had played a big part in gaining confidence. Alek described one initiative she was part of at school:

I am one of the peer mentors. They have training. It is only year six. I like going to the training.

She felt this could work really well in other schools. Confidence-building and task-based therapy may be very important for children in similar situations. Major changes in her earlier childhood had been difficult for Alek. Although her family's current housing was not adequate for their needs, she seemed to have benefited from some stability that had arisen from being housed in the same place over the last three years:

The council rented the place. We had to keep moving where we were sent to.

Alek was still unhappy about the earlier period in her life and said she tried not to think about it.

Case Study Three

Maria – aged 16, Newham

Maria and her family had been rehoused in a council-owned three-bedroom house in Newham, London, following a period of homelessness. Her family had left South America when Maria was a young child. She did not speak any English when she started at school. Maria's mother and younger siblings were accessing support from Kings Cross Homelessness Project in the form of advice and a toy library service.

Physical housing conditions

There's a new arrival in the house. There's five of us [children] plus my mum and dad. But the house is big so I'm not sure [if they can ask to be rehoused] I'm not sure how many there are meant to be here but the people that gave us the house know how many there are. There are three bedrooms, one reception room. It's okay with the baby, she's no pain, you know, everyone's fine in the house.

Space was less of a problem for Maria's family because the number of bedrooms they had was more adequate, although all the children still shared bedrooms. Privacy was not a problem because the two oldest siblings were able to have a shared space of their own. This is a fundamental difference and one that Maria considered: *Just me and my sister [in the bedroom] – and that's fine. I wouldn't want to share with the younger children because sometimes when you are getting older you need some privacy.*

For Maria's family, being rehoused had been a positive experience, removing a problem with aggressive neighbours and noise. Their new house had a garden and was next to a large playing field.

Schools and education

Maria's school had separated her from other pupils during the exam periods while she was facing a difficult situation at home. She felt that they had 'isolated' her. Although she had been offered an outlet to discuss her problems with teachers and peers she felt that 'by break time it would get around'. She had plans to travel outside her local area to attend a sixth form college: *The journeys are quite a distance, but I would rather meet people where I can have a new start, meet new people and carry on with what I want to do. Fees are ten pounds*

per year. So it's not so expensive. Colleges that are an hour away provide for the travel. But, if I get my 16–17 card it's about £6.50–£6.70p per week. I think that's all right.

Leisure and play

Accessing services from agencies had been very important to Maria's family in managing transitions: *They come and bring him [younger brother] toys [Kings Cross Homelessness Project] and now my little sister. Every outing he is always there he is always asking [worker] when is the trip? But he goes there every Friday. It had made a big difference to [my brother] and to my mum. Because she's the kind of person who... she'll meet new people but not socialise properly with them. [But] she's gone there and she mixes with people.*

Emotional development

Maria acted as an interpreter for her mother and, as a consequence, appeared to be very conscious of the family's financial situation while not being involved in decision-making: *Where there's five of us now and Mum and Dad still have to put... I think... half the rent, I don't know if they're finding it harder. Because I don't really talk about money with my parents, so you know I haven't been involved with them things. But come on now, you've got three younger kids that want everything they see... I don't want to have to worry about things other than my school work, there's enough to worry about now... without other things in my head.*

However, Maria had benefited from having very strong family support: *I just feel that at the moment everyone is coping really well with what we've got, if there's any goals they need to meet, we'll make it together because everyone in our family just sticks together.*



Section Four Conclusion

This research has aimed to illuminate children's experiences of being homeless – how they say it makes them feel, what effect it has on different areas of their lives and what they think would make things better.

The children have described the impact homelessness has on their general well-being, their health and development, their schooling and their ability to make and spend time with friends. The research has shown that a

permanent home in an area with safe places to relax with friends is the key to improving the lives of homeless children.

Shelter's report, *Living in Limbo*⁶, based on a survey of over 400 people living in temporary accommodation, complements the research in this report and sets out a number of policy recommendations relating to the support and welfare needs of families living in temporary accommodation.

6. Mitchell, F, (2004) *Living in Limbo*, London: Shelter

Annex A The projects

All of the children or their families were involved with one of three projects – the Kings Cross Homelessness Project and the Bayswater Family Centre in London, and Shelter’s Homeless to Home project in Sheffield.

The projects were selected by Shelter because they each offer a different type of support to families. All three projects work with families who have varying levels of housing need and are at different stages of their attempts to find and remain in suitable permanent homes.

It was not an objective of this research to compare or evaluate the different projects that took part in this work but it is important to recognise that the role of each of the projects is quite distinct.

All three projects offered some services specifically for children, although how often and how much varied. Children who regularly attended one of these support sessions are likely to be receiving more support overall than the majority of homeless children who do not have access to these kinds of project. The children who took part in the research were clearly seen to be benefiting from the support that they were receiving.

Further details about their work can be obtained from the projects directly:

Kings Cross Homelessness Project

Provides a range of support services. The families who took part in this research were attending play sessions in a bed and breakfast hotel and using a toy library service.

Kings Cross Homelessness Project
Gregory House
48 Mecklenburgh Square
London
WC1N 2NU

Bayswater Family Centre

Provides a range of services to homeless families and families living in bed and breakfast accommodation. The children who took part in the research regularly attend a homework club which, in addition to providing support with homework, also offers play and leisure opportunities for children and their families.

The Bayswater Family Centre
14–18 Newton Road
London
W2 5LT

Sheffield Homeless to Home

A Shelter project that provides help to families as part of a tenancy sustainment programme. Although the project provides targeted emotional and practical support to parents and some services for children, it was not running any regular sessions specifically for children. At the time of the research the project had recently obtained funding to employ a full-time ‘children’s worker’.

Sheffield Homeless to Home
Carver House
2 Carver Street
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S1 4FS

Annex B The research methods

The methodology for the research was developed by the researchers in conjunction with Shelter. They produced a programme of activities whereby the group had as wide a range of opportunities as possible, to communicate their views on a range of topics relating to their individual everyday experiences. The primary objectives of the research were:

- to listen to the experiences of homeless children
- to provide a secure forum for the views of homeless children
- to report findings in a way that reflects the voices of children
- to report findings in a way that they can be used by children, as well as by interested adults, as an effective tool for discussion and campaigning.

Providing a 'secure' forum for children to participate in the research was a key concern for the research team. As described above there were different needs within and between the groups of children that needed to be balanced to enable all of them to take part in workshops and activities.

Working with children

Central to the methodology was the need to give the children who participated in this research an arena to discuss their experiences and views. Keeping family groups together but providing each child or peer group with specific tasks was also important. The research teams worked in pairs so that both male and female researchers were present at all the sessions. All the work was carried out with groups of children although some individual work was done within a group setting.

The research was designed on the basis that the children should give their informed

consent to take part in the study and that they should be able to control how much and what kind of information they disclosed. The researchers endeavoured to take into account the potential distress that the project might cause to the children involved. This was particularly important for children referred by projects where there was not an established source of emotional support.

It was important that the researchers did not make assumptions about the children and the problems they might have encountered. In order to enable children to be open about their experiences and feel comfortable talking about them, the researchers developed a range of methods and techniques using a series of topics based on everyday life.

Activity books

The research centred on activity books that were designed to open up a series of topics. The topics were, 'All about You', 'At Home', 'Out and About', 'At School', and 'Special Days'. Each topic was designed as a simple exercise that invited the child to write or draw a response. Using activity books encouraged children to begin to talk about their own situations, without asking a series of intrusive questions at an early stage. Some children were able to link the activity books to further work or discussion; and for very young children the books provided a context for discussion and further art-based work. Some of the work contained in the activity books is reproduced in this report.

Questionnaire

The research team also produced a questionnaire for completion by the older children. The questionnaires were administered by a facilitator to help small groups of children fill in the questions.

Children were told that they could choose not to answer questions, although most of them completed the work.

The research team felt that it was very important that the questionnaire should be answered after some of the group work and activity books had been completed. Questions were based on the same topics as the activity books and were designed to be rooted in the children's experiences, as well as some general descriptive information about the family group.

The responses to the questionnaires were of a good quality. Children within the groups all faced challenges with literacy whether as a result of English being their second language or as a result of other developmental difficulties.

Drama

The final stage of the research was based on drama exercises derived from Forum Theatre, a method of interactive theatre developed by Augusto Boal. The children responded well to the drama sessions, which produced a high quality of material.

Some of the direct quotes in the report were taken from drama sessions. Some of the children in the groups required individual attention and the drama exercises provided the arena for this kind of interaction. The research team used two main methods of drama and role-playing exercises.

At the London projects, peer interviewing gave children an opportunity to interview one another and record the interview. Interviews were guided by facilitators and based on topics raised throughout the course of the workshops. This method allowed some of the more vocal children to have some control over the research process, for example, they could guide questions and develop arguments if they chose to.

In Sheffield, facilitators introduced the basic techniques of Forum Theatre. Here, the children used the techniques to devise a role-play and story-telling session and to analyse the work themselves by replacing the main character in their story. The group used this workshop to explore some very sensitive issues from home and school.

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