

Desperate to escape:
the experiences of homeless
families in emergency
accommodation

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Introduction

Fifty years since Shelter was first founded, the country is once again in the grip of a housing crisis. With a new family becoming homeless every 10 minutes, we are calling on the public to help support frontline advisers as they grapple with the increasing demand for help from families fighting to stay in their homes.

In 1966, the film *Cathy Come Home* shone a light on the desperate housing problems gripping Britain at the time. When the programme first aired, the extent of the crisis shocked the nation – 3 million people were living in slums or stuck in a brutal private renting market.

The film generated massive public support for Shelter, which was established only a few weeks later. We've been working tirelessly ever since to make life better for those struggling with bad housing and homelessness.

But while, thankfully, the slums have faded into memory, the sad truth is that this country is once again at the mercy of a housing crisis – and a new generation of Cathys have nowhere to call home.

Fifty years on, homelessness is on the rise again. Every day at Shelter our advisers support families across the country who have lost the battle to stay in their homes. We see the heart-breaking toll that bad housing takes on people's health and wellbeing, and the way it breaks up families and communities.

This is the tragic result of decades of failure to tackle the root causes of this crisis and build the genuinely affordable homes we so desperately need. The impact of this failure is felt by people forced to live in unstable, unsuitable and often unsafe private rented homes, to the thousands of families stuck in temporary accommodation, right through to a generation of young families who have lost hope of ever getting on to the property ladder.

Everyone deserves the chance to have a stable home where they can put down roots and build a life for themselves, but today's sky-high housing costs mean this is nothing more than a distant dream for many. And with millions living on a financial knife-edge, it only takes a bump in the road, like an illness or reduction in working hours, to put a family at risk of homelessness.

Last year, councils stepped in to help people who were homeless or on the brink of homelessness more than 200,000 times. Hard-won, basic legal protections, of which we should all be proud, ensure that no child in this country faces the danger of the streets.

But these vital protections are under pressure. Because of the rising cost and shortage of housing, coupled with budget cuts, councils are finding it difficult to find suitable, settled homes for families. Consequently, more and more families are stuck in temporary accommodation, unable to move on.

The devastating results of our housing shortage are now being felt by over 120,000 homeless children in Britain - the equivalent of four children in every school. Homeless children in 'temporary accommodation' live in a variety of places: from flats to mobile homes. But as things get even worse, more and more homeless families are forced to live in one room in 'emergency accommodation', sharing facilities with other families. This type of accommodation ranges from homeless bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), to cheap hotels, to hostels, to large houses filled with a family in each bedroom,

sharing kitchens and bathrooms with strangers¹. Five years ago – 5,731 children were living in this type of shared accommodation. Now there are 12,903 - more than twice as many.

This is deeply worrying, but if our history tells us anything, it's that together we can make a difference. We have a chance to turn things around, by committing to building homes that people on ordinary incomes can afford to rent or buy, and strengthening the welfare safety net to catch those who fall on hard times.

In this report homeless parents tell us what it's like to live in emergency accommodation. We spoke to twenty-five families about their living situation, how it affects their day-to-day life, and the impact it is having on them and their children. We hope that their testimony underlines the urgency of our mission.

While we've focussed on these twenty-five families, Shelter's advisers and support workers know that their living conditions, and the impact they are having on family life, are by no means unusual. In fact, the experiences of the families featured in this report provide a snapshot of the way that thousands of homeless children will have to spend this Christmas.

Shelter will continue to fight for everyone to have a safe, secure and affordable place to call home and will be there to support those who have lost the battle to keep a roof over their heads, for as long as we are needed. But ultimately, we hope we won't still be here in another 50 years.

For the sake of future generations we cannot make this someone else's problem. Together, we all face the consequences when children are forced to grow up without a home. And together, we can fix it.

¹ There are rules in place in order to limit the use of some shared accommodation (bed and breakfasts) as this type of accommodation is not considered suitable for families. Local authorities are required not to place families with children in bed and breakfasts unless it is an emergency and then for not more than six weeks. However, many forms of non-self-contained accommodation are not covered by these restrictions. Attention often focuses on B&Bs because of the specific restrictions. However, we frequently see comparable conditions in other non-self-contained accommodation.

Investigation process

To investigate the experience of homeless children, we analysed Government data and interviewed 25 parents living in emergency accommodation.

Definitions

The law defines homeless B&B accommodation as any accommodation (whether or not breakfast is included) provided under homelessness legislation, which is not self-contained and where bathroom and cooking facilities are shared by more than one household. We have termed this form of temporary accommodation, 'emergency accommodation'.

Statutory regulations and guidance on the use of B&B accommodation are very clear². It is not suitable accommodation for families with children and households that include a pregnant woman unless there is no alternative accommodation available and then only for a maximum of six weeks. Accommodation which is owned or managed by a local housing authority, a registered social landlord or a voluntary organisation is exempt from these legal requirements. The requirements don't apply where this type of accommodation is provided under social services legislation, such as the Children Act 1989. However, the conditions and situation experienced by families living in such accommodation is very similar.

Data collection

The number of children living in temporary accommodation in Great Britain is not published centrally, so we calculated this ourselves based on the latest government statistics about homeless families, homeless children and number of children and families living in B&Bs and hostels in England, Scotland and Wales. We added the total number of children in temporary accommodation in Scotland to the total number of children in temporary accommodation in England. We then estimated the number of children in temporary accommodation in Wales using the number of families in temporary accommodation in Wales. The number of schools in Great Britain is based on government statistics on the number of schools in England, Scotland and Wales³.

We conducted 25 in-depth interviews with homeless families in England during 2016. We collected standardised information across all the families using close ended questions. We also gathered qualitative information about experiences and feelings through open ended discussion. Interviews were conducted in person in the accommodation. This gave further insight into the living conditions experienced by families.

Analysis

² The [Homelessness \(Suitability of Accommodation\) \(England\) Order 2003](#) and DCLG (2006) [Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities](#)

³ Government statistics on homelessness are from England ([Department for Communities and Local Government](#)), Scotland ([The Scottish Government](#)) and Wales ([Stats Wales](#)). Government statistics on the number of schools in Great Britain are from [England](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#)

Qualitative interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. We agreed a set of themes as a framework for analysis. These were based on themes identified in a fieldwork debrief meeting and the themes identified in the interview topic guide. We went through a final process of reviewing findings from different stages against each other and understand the trends from the evidence as a whole.

About our sample

We found families through our services, through approaching hostels and through engaging with homeless families to meet further families who met the criteria (this is known as snowball recruitment). Seventeen families were in London and eight were out of London. Half had been in their accommodation for longer than six months. Our sample is not necessarily representative of all families in emergency accommodation. However, it gives us a sense of the types of situations facing families in this type of accommodation and the impact of these situations. Names have been removed for anonymity. All of the words are the participants'.

'It was the worse day of my life. Not only because then I was homeless, but because of what happened next. I went to the council and they offered me [a place]. And they asked me to wait a few hours for the agent. So I went there at 5pm and the agent gave me the keys and told me to go to the place. He said, you'll be fine, it's on the third floor. I don't have any space to park my car. Go by yourself.

So I took [son], I took my luggage, my bags and opened it up. I went through the staircase and there was no light at all. So I lit up my phone and then I just saw carpets, all burned from cigarettes. Empty cans of beers. There was drunk people at the front of the building. [Son] was terrified.

Then I went to the third floor to the door of the room that the council offered me, the door was without any locks. I could open it without the key. There was no lock, there was just a hole. So I opened up the door to the room if you could call it that, for me it looked like a squat. Mice. There was no light in there. It was January, it was dark already outside so I couldn't see nothing. My son was terrified he was like "Mummy let's go, come back home". What should I say to him? We didn't have any home, at that date. "Please mummy I'm scared", that's what he said.'

Homeless children in emergency accommodation

Thankfully we have a safety net in place which means that homeless children rarely experience the most visible manifestation of homelessness – having to sleep rough⁴. But because they are out of sight, most people have no idea of their appalling living conditions.

Our investigation reveals that, while children in emergency accommodation might have a roof over their heads, they are clearly without a home. They do not have the space to live their lives – to play, study, or relax. Nor a place of stability and safety where they can grow and develop with a feeling of security.

Every one of the twenty-five families we interviewed were living in just one room. Accommodation varied. One family was sharing a two bedroom terraced house with three other families. Others shared a building with fifty other families. Others were living in hostels designed for single homeless people and adapted to accommodate families:

'We ended up at hospital [and] the doctor wouldn't discharge us because his staff couldn't find the address that I've given them on the computer. In the end he said to me "Oh my staff has found the address but it's coming up as a single male hostel". He said "That can't be right." And I thought – yep that sounds like it.'

Some of the households lived and shared facilities with people with chaotic and sometimes criminal behaviour:

'Young care leavers. There's also people who are alcohol dependent. The day I moved in here a person below me, got raided by the police. They were selling drugs from the room downstairs. I would have thought that the council should sort of divide families from drug users.'

Half the families we spoke to had been living in this type of accommodation for over six months.

Space for children to thrive

All of the families lived in a room with fewer bed spaces than people. Eighteen of the parents had to share beds with their children. The room had to accommodate the family and their beds as well as their possessions from their previous home:

'It's so cramped, it's so humid. We're basically all on top of each other. I can't buy butter because it melts. I can't get milk because it curdles during the day. I have nothing. I've tried to put cold water in the sink but, because it's like 32 degrees in here, it curdles straight away.'

This left limited space for storing clothes or other essentials. It left limited room to eat, play or carry out normal tasks:

⁴ Of the families in our investigation, three had to spend a night in a car or on the floors of friends after becoming homeless and being unable to secure some accommodation straight away.

'If he's trying to put on his shoes, I can't put on my shoes. He goes to the toilet and I have breakfast. Then he has breakfast and I wait outside. Unless we're sleeping, there isn't room for two people to be in there at once.'

Families highlighted how unsuitable it was to live this way compared to accepted standards:

'You know they say a brother and a sister can't share [a bed] past 11 [years], but [daughter] shares with three boys and their mum.'

Some families were living in even more extreme overcrowding. In one case a family of two parents, two primary-school-age children, two teenagers and a baby were sharing a space 12 x 7 feet with two double beds and just enough space for the door to open. The beds were used for sleeping, but also to store possessions. On dry nights, the 18 year old son had started sleeping rough on a nearby flat roof to give the other family members more space.

Safe living conditions

Not only were the rooms small, but more than three-fifths of families said that their room was in poor condition. Examples of disrepair included dirty or broken mattresses and beds as well as serious hazards like sparking electrical sockets, mould, and windows that wouldn't close. This made it even harder to spend time in, relax or sleep in the room. It also made them fear for their children's safety. One woman was currently living in a basement room with no windows, one double bed and not enough room for her and her fifteen year old son to stand up at the same time. There was only a limited phone signal which meant that she didn't like to leave her child alone in the room. She described having to cope when one night the room was flooded from the room above:

'I woke up and put my foot down and thought I was dreaming. And I saw my little boy's phone, his computer and everything all our clothes, all our shoes. The bags with the washing. I saw everything just swimming around in the room.'

'The water dripped out the light. So because I'm in the basement, I can't see nothing. I can't get light from outside. So I had to just lie back down. I thought, where can I take him? He's got nothing on, he's got his underwear on. So I just lay there until just after 5. And then I could get where to find his trousers and his school shirt and I put him together, took him to get breakfast and took him to school and explained why he looked like that.'

Most families felt they didn't have adequate access to the other parts of a home, (such as a kitchen, living space, and bathroom). More than three fifths of families shared kitchen facilities with other families. In one case this was as many as thirty. Hygiene standards were variable and five families mentioned animal infestations including cockroaches, mice and, in one case, rats.

'It's disgusting, especially because of [toddler son]. I have to keep it clean cos he runs around and eats on the floor.'

Three families had no access to kitchen facilities whatsoever. One even reported that they were not permitted to take food into the accommodation at all. They had to eat meals in their car, in fast food restaurants or occasionally smuggled past the front desk.

Some families had a fridge or hot plate in their room. This made it much easier to cope. But also brought issues such as heat, flies or bad smells into the bedroom. One family had an oven, but couldn't use it as the bed was pressed up against it. This meant that using the hob required them to

cook while sitting on the only bed, creating a potential fire hazard and filling the room with smoke and heat:

'If you turn the cooker on, you have to (take your clothes off and) have a towel around you because you'll pass out. The heat.'

Fourteen of the families had to share toilet and washing facilities. All rated the condition as poor or inadequate. Families told us about a variety of serious and unpleasant problems with bathrooms – including unlockable doors, broken toilet seats, slippery or cracked tiles and even, in one case, dangling electrical wires and windows that were overlooked by neighbouring properties. Some relayed serious hazards:

'There have been used needles found in the toilets. You have little toddlers in here and they are running about, in a slight moment they might run and pick something up.'

The low standard of bathrooms was particularly upsetting when they needed a place they could keep themselves and their children neat and clean:

'I go through so much mould and mildew spray it's untrue. I spray it every morning and every night. No, I clean I clean I clean. Cos if I can't get myself clean that'll be the end.'

Several families raised safety concerns about the distance from the bedrooms to bathrooms. Bathrooms could be far away from their room, sometimes on different floors. This meant that parents had to coordinate trips to the toilet while supervising their children. They faced the dilemma of leaving children unsupervised in bedrooms, or sacrificing their own privacy when bathing or using the toilet. This was particularly an issue for people who had disabilities or children with disabilities:

'The toilets are upstairs but I can't always walk that far. Sometimes at night I can't go upstairs so I have to go in a pan [in front wife and child]. That's really bad.'

Children's privacy and security

Fifteen interviewees said that their room was not secure enough. With this in mind, many families were worried about who they were living alongside. Families reported fighting among other residents, frequent police call-outs and discarded drug paraphernalia or other dangerous items around. They didn't feel they could fully trust the people they lived with:

'You have to walk out there and you don't know who you are dealing with... People are unpredictable on drugs. Of course I don't feel safe. My son is 10 years old and he shouldn't be dealing with that. I try to keep him away. Yet I'm forced to have to live in that environment. There was fire where we lived before [another hostel]. The whole place was burned down. They said one of the men in the rooms below us was arsonist.'

Twenty families said they were concerned about the lack of overall security of the accommodation. People spoke about outside doors being broken as well as doors being left unlocked and other lax security measures. Some shared stories of people sleeping rough in the corridors and people from outside the hostel coming in to take drugs. This resulted in some alarming experiences:

'The other day, 02:58 in the morning, I heard a knock on the door. I know a lady upstairs and sometimes she comes down if she needs a bit of help so I opened the door, because you're not going to come down the hall down in the basement unless you're looking for me... it was a man. It was a strange man I'd never seen before in my life. I could have been

killed. I screamed, he said "I'm sorry I'm looking for number 18". There's a big hole in his story, there's a big number 6 on the door. He came to rob somebody, he didn't know that a woman was there. My son was right there in the bed cos the beds are at the door. I don't know if he was a junkie, a rapist. I could have been robbed.'

Living so close to other families meant that they could overhear conversations and people moving around their rooms. Disturbances late into the night reinforced the feeling for the families that their space was not their own:

'Yeah – boyfriends knocking hell out of their girlfriends, there've been arguments, you hear it all through the walls. And the drug dealing that goes on down there.'

The rules of the hostels also underlined the feeling that it was not their home. Some families were locked out of their room during the day for cleaning or other management reasons. There were restrictions on visiting which meant that families faced barriers to see friends, carers or advocates.

Families shared stories about other people being able to come and go from their room, even though this was meant to be their only private space:

'The housekeepers just walk in every day. Other people just come in and check your room. One of the twins was coming out of the shower the other day and a bloke walked in. He said "Oh they've given me a key for this room".'

One of the issues that a few families raised was the inability to escape from their appalling living conditions, even just for one night. Some families expressly said that they could not stay anywhere else for the night without forfeiting their place and potentially leaving them without further assistance. These rules interfered with relationships and their ability to maintain normality. It felt unfair and intrusive:

'You're dictated how you live, what you can do, who you can bring in. I am not able to take a weekend with my son, just escape for two days, I'm not able to cos I have to sign the register. Every single day... In a way, you feel like it's a prison sometimes. Everything is dictated to you. And yet you pay for the 'privilege' of it.'

Overall, it's clear that these families do not have anything approaching a 'home'. And these reports of potentially dangerous or unsanitary conditions are hard to believe in 21st Century Britain. Not only are families having to live in extremely cramped and unsuitable conditions, they feel unsafe and vulnerable in their home. The next section sets out how such living conditions impact on families' ability to live their lives.

Daily life for homeless children

'Whenever I get up in the morning, I'm always sad.'

Mornings

Mornings are busy and chaotic in all family homes, when we have to be out of the door on time for work and school. But a major impact of living in a B&B is the length of time it takes to undertake ordinary, everyday tasks. From getting washed and dressed in the morning, to doing laundry and preparing meals. This was due to the lack of basic facilities and the numbers of people sharing bathrooms or cramped conditions.

We found that families typically woke up earlier than normal. This was to get ready for longer distances to school, juggle childcare or to use shared kitchens and bathrooms ahead of other families:

'When you get to the toilet, everywhere is messed up, I have to get up earlier to clean it before I use it for my kids.'

Because accommodation was often far away from their previous homes, the school run was longer and journeys more complicated. Twenty of the families interviewed had school age children. Sixteen reported that they had further to travel to school than from their previous accommodation. Most had to get to work. Four-fifths of families had at least one person in work. Many discussed how difficult it was to balance work with their living conditions. This was due to lack of sleep, long commutes, a lack of space, and a lack of internet in the accommodation. Some families were travelling up to three hours each way to maintain their jobs and children's school places. This could also entail long waits in the cold for young children or unsustainable costs:

'Every day... I need £35 (just to get to work) cos I need to drop her off to nursery, and then take a cab which is £10. It's really, you guys don't spend that kind of money getting to work.'

Daytimes

The majority of interviewees said that living in emergency accommodation had a negative or very negative impact on their ability to work. Three interviewees said that they had had to give up their job due to the accommodation being too far away. People looking for work mentioned barriers, including the need to supervise children at all times, being far from family, the time needed to undertake basic tasks, needing to find a new home as well as not knowing where they would be living in the future.

Restrictions on access to the accommodation made daytimes more complicated for parents caring for young children. Some families had to vacate their rooms during the day meaning that parents had to find ways to keep young children warm, dry and occupied outside while trying not to spend money. Families who could stay in their rooms described cabin fever from long periods stuck inside the same four walls while trying to keep small children calm and occupied:

'There's nothing to do.... It's very noisy. We have some crazy neighbours who just fight or shout all day. All the time.' [Partner – joking] "Her best friend is the TV right now".'

Families also found it harder to carry out basic tasks. More than half of people interviewed had no access to laundry facilities. Families were forced to rely on either costly laundrettes, or friends and family to clean their clothes. Those who did have access to washing machines spoke about how they were also expensive, often broken or dirty, or if working were in use by the other families. This could prove costly:

'A laundrette... is normally £10 a time. If not I try and get two or three buses up to my Mum's, wash it all, then try and bring it all back in between picking the boys up from school, dropping them off.'

Other families spoke about how these obstacles chipped away at people's ability to feel they were maintaining basic dignity and to keep hold of a sense of control over their situation.

'The washing machine is occupied 24/7. One of the other guys who is suffering from psychiatric illnesses so he cleans everything 3 or 4 times a day. We don't have a chance to clean the child's clothes. These are my clothes – dirty for a few days. All these marks.'

Evenings

Mealtimes were problematic in the limited kitchen space available. Three families said they mainly take their children to cook and eat in the homes of friends and family. This meant families making trips between these houses, school and the hostel.

Fourteen of the families mainly cooked in the B&B. The sheer number of residents meant it was difficult to gain access to shared kitchens for the time needed. Sharing space with so many other people led to people losing their cooking utensils and even their food. One woman described taking her children to the bathroom while her dinner was cooking in the oven. When she returned, her children's dinner was missing.

The lack of access to storage or access to fridges meant they could not prepare fresh, nutritious food. All highlighted the high cost of this and also health concerns of relying on takeaway food. Shared kitchens caused other issues. Families with young children had to bring them into a hazardous food preparation environment in order to keep them supervised:

'I don't like leaving my son in the room on his own, unattended. But then I don't like bringing him in the kitchen either when people are cooking.'

The majority of families (20) ate as a family on the bed or the floor of their room. Very few had space for a table in their bedroom, and many reported there either wasn't enough space to eat in communal areas or they felt uncomfortable doing so. Eating on beds meant that bedrooms felt even less like a place for rest.

Evenings should provide us with a period of free time, where children can play and parents can unwind. A significant issue for many of the families is that there was inadequate space and facilities for children to do their homework. Most of the accommodation didn't have internet access – this made completing homework assignments very difficult. There was limited opportunity for adolescents to find privacy or a quiet space. As one mother shared, the small space was full of hazards for young children:

'In the room he's smashed his face on the bedside table, he smashed his teeth on the sink. He's jumped off the bed, he's tried to climb out the window, the fire door slammed on his fingers. I just keep him in his bed now.'

Bath times were also fraught with difficulties. The poor condition of their bathroom facilities made it hard to ensure children were kept clean and rested. Having to share facilities with so many other families led to a lack of privacy and violations which affected children and their parents:

'The locks broken on the bathrooms and so many times this man's walked in when they're in the shower.'

All of the families interviewed reported that bedtime was now more difficult. The lack of space and the need for family members to share beds were the main issues but families also mentioned the noise of other families, children's anxieties about drifting off to sleep in an unfamiliar environment and the disruption to routine. Younger children woke easily at the sound of movement in the room or outside, and struggled to settle back down. This often resulted in the whole family waking up through the night or very early in the morning:

'She doesn't sleep at night here. She won't sleep till 6am now. And neither will the rest of us really.'

One of the most striking realities was that older children and parents had no time for themselves once younger children were in bed. The entire family had to go to bed at the same time and turn off the light when the youngest child needed to go to sleep. This means that parents and older children had to lie awake in the dark from 7pm or 8pm – struggling to go to sleep. Early nights and not having separate space got in the way of families trying to work or train and left some trying innovative measures to get some solitude and allow young children to sleep:

'Obviously I'm active till later, reading my books and trying to research. Obviously that does affect him cos he moans at me to turn the brightness off my phone. Sometimes, when I'm researching on my computer, I'm in the cupboard doing it so I can block the light out so he can sleep.'

Some people went to bed early as they could do very little else in their small room:

'I give it to him and he eats it on the bed. And then I just lie down and go to bed. Cos there's nothing to do, you can't...so I eat and lie down. That's all I can do, that's all he can do.'

Raising children and juggling work is unimaginably challenging in this environment when everything comes together. When a child becomes unwell or a family member is sick or has to work overtime, it becomes almost impossible. Parents shared stories about sick family members being interrupted by people coming in and out the room. It was extremely difficult to care for sick children without a private bathroom or a washing machine. Other families had to persuade their employers to let their children sit in staff rooms or offices as they felt they couldn't even leave older children alone in the accommodation.

Bringing up children in emergency accommodation means that even the most basic daily tasks become difficult and time-consuming. This has many impacts. In the final section we set out the main impacts on children and families raised by interviewees.

Devastating impact on homeless families

'It's crossing my mind whether or not to give the girls up to make it better for them. Because I don't know what to do anymore... I think it's just a case of the depression now is due to...I'm not being a proper mum. I can't feed them. I can't... I'm not doing what I should be doing, what I've done for years. Cooking for them, cleaning for them... My daughter's had this eating problem for a while, she's been hospitalised before. Well there's nothing I can do, she's meant to have full fat milk every day but we can't keep milk. The doctor wasn't impressed with that.'

Parents shared their thoughts on the impact that homelessness was having on the family, on themselves and on their children.

Impact on children

Living in B&B took away some of the most important aspects of childhood. Twelve parents reported that losing their home was affecting their children's friendships. Many families described that a big issue was that their children could no longer invite friends over or have sleepovers. Others noticed that children were ashamed of their living situation and concealing it from their friends.

'He's becoming a recluse. He said "Mum, do you know everybody when they leave school, they go home. Where do I go?"

A further impact on childhood was a loss of safety and security. Some parents said they were worried that their children were worried about them. Parents reported children being more tearful and anxious.

Living in emergency accommodation meant that children had to witness things that their parents didn't want them to see. Half of parents agreed with the statement that their children have seen things they shouldn't. Children had seen their parents be physically attacked by other residents and witnessed many scary incidents:

'There was a police intervention last Friday because the lady, one lady in the house she just treats her son in an unacceptable way. My son, heard everything. He was covering his ears with his hands cos he was really terrified cos the shouting, the boy was crying, oh that was emotionally draining really. Especially for (son) because that is his friend, and when the boy is crying and shouting and his mum is shouting and then (son) is just scared, he's asking me "Mum what's going on. Why is he crying?"'

Most of the parents interviewed felt that their children's mental health had been affected by living in emergency accommodation. Many parents reported issues with anxiety in particular. Children's distress was not only due to the trauma of losing their home, but also from being placed in unsettled and unsuitable emergency accommodation. This could be very serious.

Half of all parents reported that their children's physical health had been affected. This included insect bites and picking up illnesses going around the hostel. Long travel times and early starts, both from travelling to family and friends' homes or school, as well as being kept awake, means it is unsurprising that a major impact is that children are more tired and susceptible to illness. Twenty-one of the families we interviewed stated that their children were more tired since living in the emergency accommodation. Several reported that their children had become distressed and tearful

due to tiredness. Others stated that a combination of no sleep and no space to play had left them difficult to manage.

'He's really hyper. He's tired but he can't burn off the energy so he's always just 'up'.'

More than three quarters of the families interviewed felt that their children's education or development had been affected by the time they had spent homeless. This resulted from lack of sleep and anxiety but also because it was difficult for parents to establish routines in the often-chaotic surroundings. One parent reported her son going down two sets at school 'because he was so tired'. Others were particularly badly affected as the period of upheaval and uncertainty happened at important times for their education or big exams. Parents took steps to ensure that older children had some space to complete homework tasks:

'Last week she had three exams. She says 'I can't learn in here' so now she just stays at school till late. Sometimes, if she has an exam, I go out, just walking around at night with the baby... I walk around and sit in the park. I walk in the cemetery.'

Impact on parents

All of parents interviewed stated that their or their partner's mental health was affected by living in the emergency accommodation. Some people spoke about anxiety and depression and some of having thoughts of self-harm, including taking their own lives, in the past. Many people were badly affected by feeling they had a lack of control over the situation:

'It's affected me horrendously. On the one hand, it's safe, it's dry. On the mental side, no it's not OK.'

Many of the interviewees shared how hard it was to raise their children in the way they wanted. Many families reported feelings of guilt and distress for any negative impacts on their children. Tragically, parents who had taken all possible steps to prevent the loss of their home still felt a sense of personal responsibility.

'It's harder when you're a family as you just feel that you're not looking after your child properly. The way it makes you feel, it's really, really bad.'

Impact on family relationships

Living in emergency accommodation had a significant impact on relationships – both with partners and with children. Parents reported arguments and frustration as a result of being 'cooped up'. Many parents also spoke of the need to put on a brave face, and appear strong for their children. Maintaining a normal relationship was impossible.

'It has affected our health, our sexual life. We all sleep here.'

The lack of space impacted families in other ways. Living in a small space meant they had no privacy from each other. Nineteen of the parents agreeing that they did not have the level of privacy needed for family life. Families raised problems like parents and siblings having to change clothes in front of each other and teenage girls embarrassed at having to share a bed with relatives when menstruating. When asked what the most difficult thing she found, one respondent answered:

'I need to change my sanitary wear in private, I need to get dressed in private, I need a minute to cry in private. I can't do everything in front of that little boy it's affecting him. I need a private moment, life's too difficult... The heat. The noise from upstairs. Constant banging, noise from down the corridor.'

Parents said their living arrangements made disciplining children almost impossible as there was no way of removing them from the room. Others had found ways of coping using the space that was available:

'He keeps running away. So now, when he says 'can I have a minute' he has to sit on the toilet seat. Or I have to sit on the toilet seat. That's our time away from each other. This is how we get to compose our thoughts, sitting on the toilet seat.'

It also interfered with parents trying to move on with their lives. As documented above, one father who was studying for a degree while also working described how he would have to hide in the cupboard to study away from his sleepy children. Four-fifths of interviewees said that it interfered with their ability to work. One interviewee had folded her business as she could no longer manage the long commute, and struggled to work out of the hostel.

What is causing this?

This investigation shows that emergency accommodation is no place for a child. Yet, as the housing crisis bites deeper, more and more children are again forced to grow up in this environment. Parents that we spoke to described many difficult and upsetting stories.

The parents we interviewed were grateful for the support they had received. But they craved stability and normality. When asked what they were most looking forward to once they found a settled home, interviewees listed everyday activities. They emphasised the importance of home as a place of safety and normality. They felt that a lack of a home was really holding them and their children back.

'This is not fair. Come on, I'm trying. I'm working full time, I'm teaching my boy morals, manners and he needs to get an education so he can elevate. If you stick me like this and put me backwards. I was trying to push out of that for him. He's so well spoken, I speak to him properly. This is not fair. Please care about other people. Please. This is not right, this is not right, this cannot be right. I can't go on. I can't string a sentence together, I can't articulate myself to write letters. This is not like me. This is not like me at all. Sorry.'

This need is so simple to meet. But this situation will not improve until we deal with the reasons why so many families are homeless and can support those who are in such damaging situations.

The main reason that so many children are homeless is because of the shortage of affordable housing. England is particularly badly affected. Only half of the 250,000 homes we need each year are built – and the majority of these are sold at market rates. The shrinking social rented sector and increasing property prices are pushing more and more families into the unstable private rented sector.

The end of a private tenancy is now the leading immediate trigger of homelessness in England⁵. The majority of the families we interviewed cited this as the reason they lost their home⁶. The private rented sector is unstable, and families can be asked to move out of their home with just two months' notice. Increased demand has meant that rent costs have spiralled upwards as landlords let their properties to the highest bidder. This causes issues for many families on lower local incomes. Notably, some can afford to pay ongoing rent on a monthly basis but do not have the ability to find the large amounts of cash needed to pay up-front costs, such as letting agent fees, tenancy deposits and rent in advance to start a new tenancy.

Reforms to social security, such as lowering the benefit cap and freezing Local Housing Allowance rates, have cut away at the safety net that families on low incomes can use to stay in their homes and avoid homelessness while they look for work or shop around for a cheaper property. The Ministry of Justice has reported a marked growth in bailiff evictions from rented properties over the last few years⁷. This suggests that an increasing number of families are not able to find new accommodation when asked to leave by their landlord and are instead reaching the traumatic point of eviction before turning to the council for help.

Our depleted safety net is also preventing homeless families getting back on their feet. Some families we spoke to about trying to find a settled home said that they hadn't been able to find a private landlord who would accept housing benefit, even if they were working. Landlords are also reluctant to let to families with children or people who they perceive to be immigrants. Overall, it is the lack of affordable homes, instability and high costs in the private rented sector and the lack of an adequate safety net are resulting in families struggling to keep a roof over their head.

⁵ See DCLG, '[Live tables on homelessness](#)'

⁶ Other families had had to leave after staying with friends or family and some had left situations of violence.

⁷ Ministry of Justice, '[Mortgage and landlord possession statistics: April to June 2015](#)':

What can fix this?

This situation can absolutely improve if we deal with Britain's chronic shortage of affordable homes. We should strive to build millions more homes that are truly affordable and stable for families on low and average incomes, including low cost rented homes.

We can do this by creating a land market that's efficient, transparent and stable, and promoting a diverse house building sector, which makes it easier for new and smaller builders to break into the market. We also need public and private investment in affordable housing and to give local authorities more power by removing barriers to development and linking infrastructure spending with house building in order to meet local needs⁸.

Stable rental contracts⁹ in the private rented sector would also make a huge difference, so families can find a secure home to raise their children without the constant worry of unexpected rent hikes or whether the tenancy will be renewed.

For those who are at risk of homelessness, having a safety net that is fit for purpose can make all the difference, so that losing your job, or seeing your rent rise, doesn't automatically mean losing your home. Local housing allowance (LHA) must be aimed at preventing homelessness by adequately bridging the gap between income and rents.

And when the worst happens, it is important that local authorities are adequately funded to provide suitable temporary accommodation for families and that they avoid the use of B&B in all but exceptional circumstances. The Government is currently consulting on a new temporary accommodation fund for councils to procure and manage temporary accommodation. This must be sufficient to procure decent, self-contained temporary accommodation.

Where families are threatened with homelessness, or are already homeless in B&B and other forms of TA, they need support to find a stable place to live.

We found that those we spoke to felt a personal responsibility for resolving their situation and were resourceful in doing so. They used whatever free time they could to search for a new home. But the chronic shortage of stable and affordable homes meant that it was very difficult to find anything. Councils had provided some assistance to the families we spoke to but welfare reforms have made it more difficult for them to help. Help with overcoming the barriers to renting, such as tenancy deposits and other up-front fees, or finding landlords willing to let to families with children or welfare recipients, can make a huge difference.

It was clear from our interviews that advice and support from a trained professional at such a traumatic time was very important. Housing law is complicated and the housing market is difficult to navigate. So it can make a huge difference to have an organisation like Shelter on your side.

Shelter help millions of people facing bad housing and homelessness each year. Our helpline is open every day, and our face to face support services alone help over 60,000 people each year. We advise people on their legal rights and help them to weigh up the options available to them, as

⁸ See more about the shortage of affordable homes in Great Britain and the things that the government can do to fix it here: <http://thehomesweneed.org.uk/>

⁹ Bibby, J. (February 2016) [The need for stable renting in England](#) and see Shelter's forthcoming report: *Time for Reform* (Autumn 2016)

providing support through the process. We offered to put all of the families we spoke to in touch with a Shelter adviser.

At the time of the interviews, some of the families were now living in more settled accommodation after previous contact with Shelter. They shared the difference it had made to them to have someone to talk to, to explain their rights and to advocate on their behalf. This reassured them, made them feel less alone, and resulted in positive change.

'Ian helped me through a lot. He was just there for me.... he really did help... from the minute I first spoke to him to the last session... If I hadn't gone to Shelter I think we'd still be in a B&B.'

Almost daily we hear from parents desperate to escape the single cramped room of a B&B, hostel or shared house, parents who are constantly struggling to raise their children in such appalling living conditions.

With public support, Shelter can continue to be there for the thousands of families who need our help this Christmas. We won't rest until every homeless child has realised their dream of a settled place to call home.

Shelter helps millions of people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Please support us at shelter.org.uk

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