

Summary: 'We've got no home': The experiences of homeless children in emergency accommodation

Around 128,000 children are currently homeless, and with the country still at the mercy of a worsening housing crisis, 2017 has seen the highest numbers of homeless children in a decade.

These children are hidden away, in flats, houses, cheap hotels and shared houses of multiple occupancy. Around one in eleven live in what is classed 'emergency accommodation' where they share facilities (and in extreme cases) even rooms with other families.

Very few people see inside these places. In order to reveal the way that thousands of children live, we spoke to 23 parents living in emergency accommodation about the place itself, and the effect of living there on family life. We then spoke to 10 children, of primary and secondary school age, in different locations across England, to understand the impact that homelessness can have on children, in their own words.

The Accommodation

- Parents were grateful and relieved that they had somewhere to stay. Even so, two thirds of parents interviewed said that the accommodation was inadequate for their needs. Each family had just one room to accommodate all family members, three quarters had fewer beds than people and half the rooms were in poor condition.
- One quarter of families interviewed had no kitchen access at all, and had to prepare meals for their children using only a kettle and a hotel bathroom sink. Families who did have access to shared bathrooms and kitchens reported that they were often left messy, or were too busy to use.

Families often found it difficult to live alongside other residents. Children were kept awake by banging doors and voices from other rooms. Three parents reported experiencing bullying and, in two cases, violence from other residents.

The impact on family life

- Everyday tasks took longer to complete. Four fifths of families with school age children had a longer school run. For some families this involved multiple buses, or even crossing a dual carriageway. Longer journeys made children more tired. It also left them with less time to see their friends or complete homework assignments.
- Some parents struggled to keep their children warm and clean. This was due to having limited access to a washing machine and washing facilities. This led to parents feeling that they had to limit their children's ability to play and get messy. It also led to parents and older children feeling even less in control of their situation, and chipped away at their self-esteem.
- Many families found that bedtimes were harder than in their previous home. Nine of the parents had to share beds with their children. Noises and lights from elsewhere in the building kept children awake.

The impact on children

- Children identified that living in emergency accommodation impacted on their school work, their social life and on their mental health.

- Children reported that school work was affected by long commutes, poor sleep and by having no space away from younger siblings. This led to some children feeling less motivated about doing well at school, as the odds were against them.
- Friendships were affected because the distances between the accommodation and their home area were too great, and because children couldn't invite friends to visit due to hostel rules forbidding guests. In addition, some young people had wanted to keep friends at a distance during this time as they were worried about how their peers would respond if they knew where they lived. Some children also didn't want to tell their teachers about their living situation. This was in case it led to bullying, or just to them being perceived as different.
- Both parents and children reported feeling overwhelmed and in some cases depressed. The main cause of stress and anxiety was the uncertainty around their housing, and not knowing where they would be living week by week. Older children also felt responsible for keeping their parent's spirits up.

This situation will not improve until we deal with Britain's chronic shortage of affordable homes. The government needs to build thousands more homes that are truly affordable and stable for families on low and average incomes, including low cost rented homes. For those who are at risk of homelessness, we need a safety net that is fit for purpose, so that if a family member lost their job, or saw their rent rise with inflation, they can continue to keep housed, or find somewhere else affordable to live.

Homeless families also need advice and support from trained professionals to help them resolve their housing situation and avoid stress. Shelter help millions of people facing bad housing and homelessness each year. Our helpline is open every day, including Christmas day. Last year our telephone advice and face to face support services alone helped over 60,000 people to find a new home, stay in their current one or fix it so that it was no longer hazardous. We are only able to do this with the generosity of our supporters.

'We've got no home': The experiences of homeless children in emergency accommodation

This Christmas, 128,000 children will wake up homeless on Christmas day. That's 52% higher than five years ago. Governments, councils and developers all share the responsibility for not building the homes we need – and government cuts to the safety net have also pushed more people to the brink. But it is the babies, toddlers, and teenagers growing up in insecure temporary accommodation who are taking the brunt of this collective failure.

Hard won, basic legal protections of which we should all be proud ensure that no child should face the danger of the streets¹. But because of the high cost of housing, cuts to council budgets and cuts to housing benefits, local authorities are finding it difficult to find suitable, settled homes for families. Consequently, more and more families are living in temporary accommodation. As things get worse, homeless families are spending longer in 'emergency accommodation', sharing facilities with other families. Emergency accommodation ranges from cheap hotels to hostels to large

houses with a family in each bedroom². Five years ago, under 7,000 children lived in this form of homeless accommodation, there are now more than 11,000³.

Most of us are unaware of how homeless children live. Families rarely experience the most visible symptom of homelessness – having to sleep rough. And as our investigation found, they are often embarrassed to even let relatives or friends see where they are having to live.

Shelter investigations in 2015 and 2016 revealed what life is like for families in this position, from the perspectives of parents. In order to further understand the reality of what it's like for children to live in emergency accommodation, we spoke to 10 children, of primary and secondary school age, in different locations across England. We spoke to them about their living situation and the impact they feel it has on their lives. In addition, we spoke to 23 parents to understand more about the accommodation itself, and how they feel it affects their family.

¹Shelter advisors regularly encounter families with children who have spent at least a night sleeping outside. In 2016, Shelter helped 523 families with children who were sleeping rough at the time they came to us for help: http://www.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1307361/GreenBook_-_A_report_on_homelessness.pdf

²There 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.

³<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

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Investigation process

Scope of the investigation

We spoke with children and parents from 23 families who were currently living in emergency accommodation, or who had left within the last three months. This comprises B&B accommodation, and similar accommodation where families share common facilities with others. The law defines B&B accommodation as accommodation provided under homelessness legislation, which is not self-contained and where bathroom and cooking facilities are shared by more than one household. Statutory regulations and guidance on the use of B&B accommodation state that it is not suitable for families with children or households that include a pregnant woman. This is unless there is no alternative accommodation available, and then only for a maximum of six weeks. The requirements don't apply if accommodation is owned or managed by a local housing authority, a registered social landlord or a voluntary organisation, or if accommodation is provided under social services legislation, such as the Children Act 1989. However, this accommodation is largely indistinguishable from the former. We have termed these forms of temporary accommodation, 'emergency accommodation'.

Understanding what life is like for children who grow up in this accommodation

We recruited families that Shelter services had an existing relationship with and through approaching households in known hostel accommodation directly. Twelve families were in London and 11 were outside of London. Our sample is not representative of

all families in emergency accommodation. However, it gives us a sense of the range of situations facing families in this type of accommodation and their impact.

We conducted interviews with 10 children from these families. They were aged 6 to 16. Our approach was designed in line with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) guidelines for conducting research with young people. We sought feedback on the research tools from a child interviewing expert. Consent was achieved from the parent and the child, and the parent was present throughout the conversation. We collected standardised information across all the families using closed-ended questions. We also gathered qualitative information about experiences and feelings through open-ended discussion. Interviews were conducted in person in the accommodation, and over the phone. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. We developed the framework for analysis alongside some of the field researchers. Names have been removed for anonymity.

Measuring the scale of the problem

We calculated the number of children who are homeless in temporary accommodation, and in emergency accommodation in Great Britain by adding the total number of children in temporary accommodation in Scotland to the total number of children in temporary accommodation in England. We estimated the number of children in temporary accommodation in Wales using the number of families in temporary accommodation in Wales.⁴

⁴Government 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

About the report

In the first section we draw on the interviews with parents and families to sketch out what emergency homelessness accommodation is like. This includes the private space each family has access to, their access to the other parts of a home (washing, cooking and laundry facilities) and the wider environment.

The second section draws on the insight that parents gave about how family life has to change to fit around the restrictions of not having a home and how they felt living in this accommodation affected daily life for the family.

The third section sets out what the young people we spoke to identified as the biggest impacts of this on them. This includes impacts on their educational attainment, their social life, their health and wellbeing and on their sense of security as children.

The final section looks at what is causing this homelessness crisis, and the help these families felt would resolve their situation.

What is emergency accommodation like?

Everything in one room

Every family we spoke to had just one room. This had to accommodate all family members – in one case seven people.

'There were three double beds, and one single bed. My two brothers, fifteen, and at the time, was six, shared a bed. The youngest one had the single, me and my sister shared, and my mum and dad, we were all in one room for, what, four months, altogether.'

Child (17)

The room had to accommodate the family, their beds and furniture as well as all of their possessions from their previous home. This left limited space for storing clothes or other essentials in a way they could be easily reached. It left limited room to eat, play, or carry out normal tasks.

'I used to have my own room and everything, now I cant even move around... Its difficult now'

Child (15)

Poor conditions

Not only were the rooms small, more than half of families said that their room was in poor condition.

Examples of disrepair included dirty or broken mattresses and beds, fragile furniture as well as damp rooms and rodent infestations.

'It's small and everything is scrunched in and it's just messy all the time, because you always find spiders everywhere, and I don't like spiders, and different types of insects. One time I found a slug in my bed.'

Child (12)

Inadequate for their needs

Parents were grateful and relieved that they had somewhere to stay. Even so, two thirds of parents interviewed said that the accommodation they were provided with was inadequate for their needs.

Fewer beds than family members

Three quarters of the families lived in a room with fewer beds than people. Nine parents had to share beds with their children. This led to disrupted sleep and a lack of privacy for the whole family.

'Three people sleep in the double bed with one person at the bottom and two people at the top. And in the single bed there's my brother and I (and we) top and tail.. my brother.. kicks. My mum talks in her sleep. So its not good sleep.'

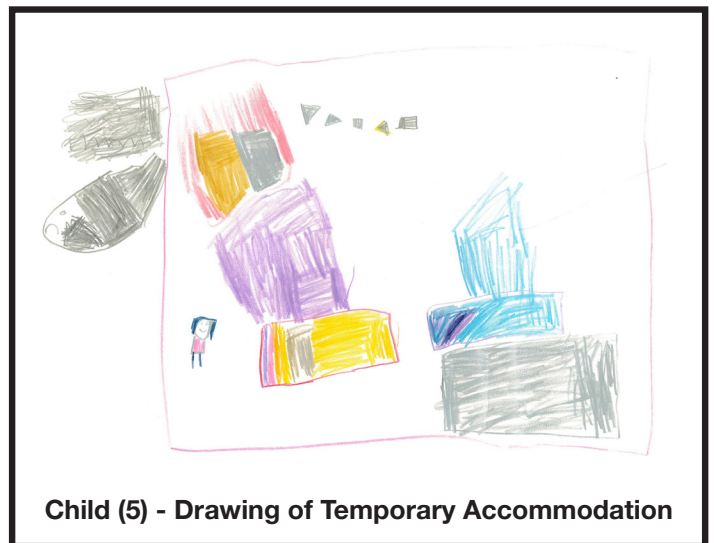
Child (12)

Having to share with other families

Some of families had previously stayed in dormitory style accommodation that they were expected to share with other parents and their children.

'They didn't tell me, when they offered it to me, that it was going to be shared. I got up to the room and I felt so sad, there was this lady, she had a newborn baby. Basically, you walk into the room and it was like a prison. I've never been to prison but it looked like from the films. It had all bunk beds. Six bunk beds, so the lady shared two. The rest of them were for my children.'

Mum (29)



Child (5) - Drawing of Temporary Accommodation

What are the wider facilities like?

Kitchens shared with dozens of others

More than three quarters of families shared kitchen facilities with other families. In one case this was as many as 25 people to one kitchen.

Hygiene standards were variable and five families mentioned animal infestations including insects, mice and, in one case, rats.

...Or no kitchen facilities at all

Six families had no access to kitchen facilities apart from a small kettle. Families living in hotels had no access to water apart from through a bathroom sink. They had to buy and store their own potable water. The lack of basic facilities, but inclusion of some luxury items, was a source of bemusement.

'no kitchen at all. we've got a kettle and a hairdryer. How random - a hairdryer?'

Mum (32)

Nowhere to wash clothes

Half of families had no access to laundry facilities. A further four had to pay an average of £3 for one wash.

No space for all family members

Missing out on a home meant that families couldn't bring pets with them. Children were particularly upset by this.

'My favourite animal is a dog. We've got two but they are with grandma and grandad. We've had one since he was four months and he's nine now. We might have to get rid of them because we've got no home. They're playing up and running away and stuff because I think they know what's going on.'

Child (15)

Missing parts of a home

The majority of families felt they didn't have adequate access to the other parts of a home, such as a kitchen, living space, and bathroom.

Limited access to clean, washing facilities

Half of the families had to share toilet and washing facilities. More than half rated the condition as poor or inadequate. Families told us about a variety of serious and unpleasant problems with bathrooms – including unlockable doors, mould and broken shower heads. This meant that keeping children clean and dry became a daily struggle. 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 children.

'if he wakes up during the night needing the loo, he will wake me up as well... because he doesn't feel safe just wandering out there to the bathroom... So it means both of us get a broken night's sleep.'

Mum (48)

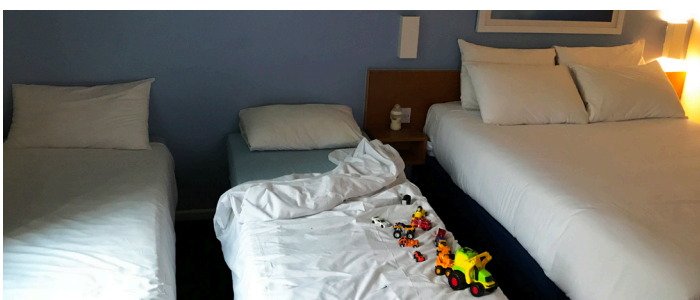
Parents faced the dilemma of leaving children unsupervised in bedrooms, or sacrificing their own privacy when bathing or using the toilet. This was particularly an issue for families with a family member with a disability.

'I have to go down the stairs on my bum... and get one of them (children) to help me back up.'

Dad (36)

Strict rules on 'making themselves at home'

The rules of the hostels also underlined the feeling that it was not their home. Many families were in places that did not allow visitors to rooms. This meant that families faced barriers to see friends. Others shared lists of rules with the investigations team that set out punitive fines for damaging fragile furniture.



What are the surroundings of emergency accommodation like?

Sharing a home with people you didn't feel you could trust

Many families were worried about who they were living alongside. Families reported living next door to partner violence, being assaulted themselves by other residents and finding discarded drug paraphernalia in corridors and shared areas. Young people also worried about who they were living next to.

'Since I've been here, like, a lot of bad things have happened. It just feels really unsafe because you just get people waking past all the time, and people smoking weed and things like that.'

Child (12)

Adding to this, one quarter of the families felt that their room was not secure. Even if people didn't encounter anything specific, families didn't feel safe due to the large number of other families they were sharing space with, and the high turnover.

'There were people coming and going, all hours of the day and night, You had a hotel full of people and literally anybody could have walked in there.'

Mum (35)

Bullying and harassment from other residents

Some interviewees got emotional and practical support from other residents. But living cheek by jowl with other families in a stressful situation, meant that these relationships could become strained, and in some cases toxic. Three interviewees described bullying, racial harassment and antagonism from other residents. Two avoided using the communal cooking or washing areas for this reason.

Others felt they had to support people in need, even though they were worried about their own situation and the effect that them getting involved had on their children

'The girl across, her partner kept hitting her. She'd knock on my door and come into my room crying. I couldn't leave her out there.'

Mum (33)

Not only did families have to fit themselves into just one room, they had to do so alongside many other families and in unfamiliar locations.

Too many people in a small space

Almost half of the interviewees had got to know some of the other residents in their accommodation. These relationships could be a source of support, or provide friends for children to play with. However, families related that even if they trusted those they lived with, it was still difficult to live alongside so many people each with their own way of doing things. In particular, other residents could leave kitchens and bathrooms messy.

'It is filthy. I actually cleaned it ten o'clock at night, and I went to the bathroom around 5:30 in the morning, I find it filthy.'

Mum (33)

Living so close to other residents meant that they could overhear conversations and people moving around their rooms. This reinforced the feeling that their space was not their own. Disturbances late into the night affected sleep and left children afraid.

'Downstairs was a woman, she had two young children and they were like screaming and crying. She was feeding them at 3am, so it was not the best sleep.'

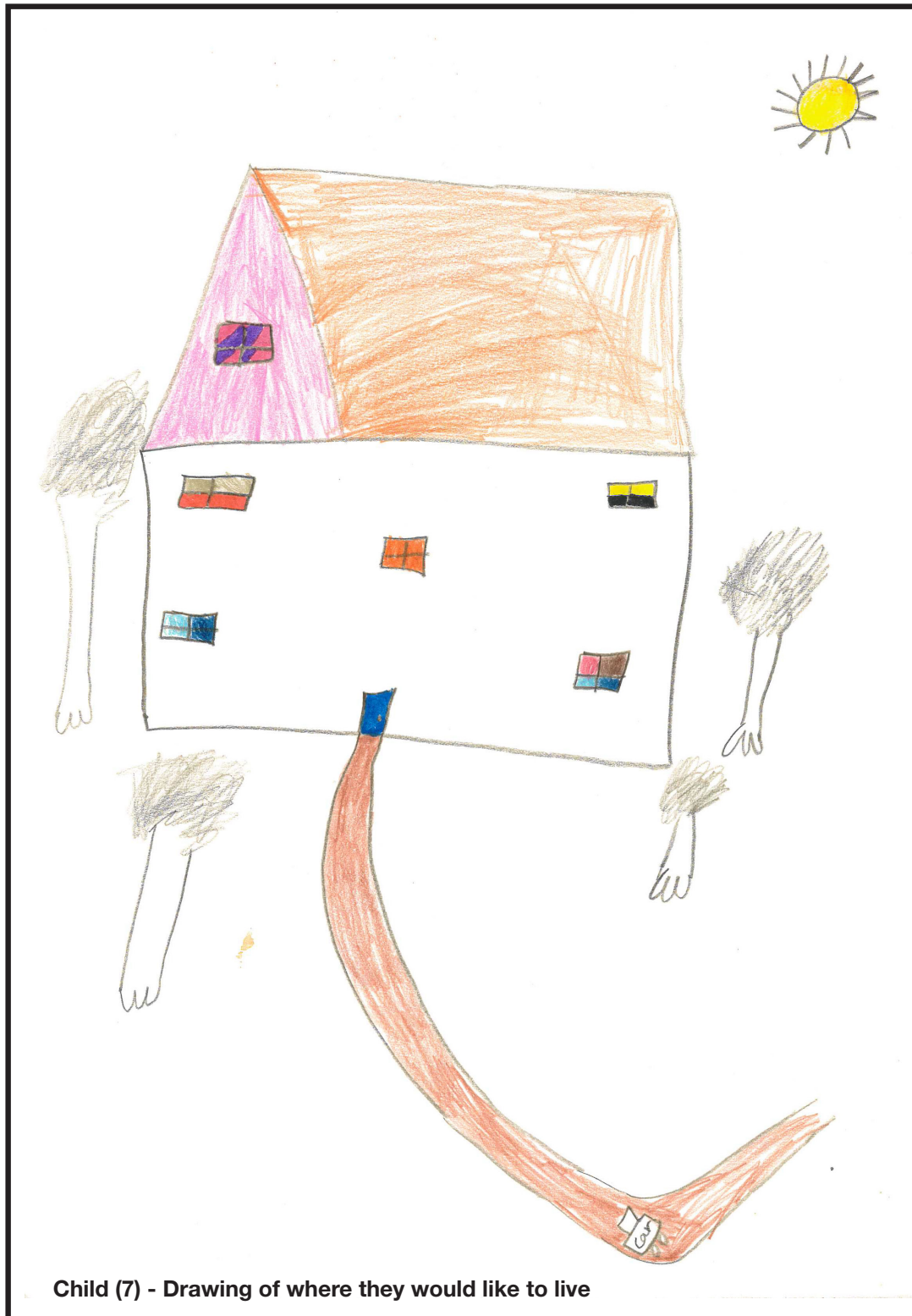
Child (16)

Unfamiliar locations made children anxious

One third of the 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 people being free to wander in and around. Younger children in particular struggled to sleep in unfamiliar places. Older children found it scary to be in an area they didn't know.

'In the early evening, oh my gosh you wouldn't believe it, the screams, the people you get around here its just so scary. Normally we get our food and stay indoors.'

Child (12)



Child (7) - Drawing of where they would like to live

The impact of emergency accommodation on family life

The previous section showed how emergency accommodation is often cramped, and families have limited access to basic facilities. But children are not just affected by the bricks and mortar of the accommodation. They are also affected by the ways in which family life has to change to fit around the restrictions of not having a home. Before speaking with children about their experiences, we asked parents how they felt living in this accommodation affected daily life for the family.

Getting to school

Mornings are busy and chaotic in all family homes, but parents we spoke to reported that being in emergency accommodation brought some particular difficulties. They woke up earlier than normal. This was to use shared kitchens and bathrooms ahead of other families and then start the journey to children's schools. As one family described:

'We get up at 5, or you just can't get in there and we'd be late. 5:30 (another resident and their children) get up, and I don't know what they're doing there for hours and hours.'

Mum (40)

Seventeen of the families interviewed had school age children. Fourteen reported that they had further to travel to school than from their previous accommodation. Longer journeys meant that children often did not have time to have breakfast, or sometimes got in trouble with school for being late.

Not only were journeys longer, they were also more complicated. Three families had resorted to paying for taxis to cut out part of the journey. One family had to cross a dual carriageway to reach the nearest bus stop

and another had sent the oldest child to stay with a family member who lived closer to where they went to school. This was in order to ensure they could reach the school in time.

Eating well as a family

Families found it a challenge to eat healthily, and enjoy family mealtimes. The majority of families mainly ate takeaway food. This could be low on nutritious value, and be very expensive. However, families with only a kettle, or with a single oven shared between multiple families, found they had few other options.

'my children are not used to takeaways. I always cooked freshly. I don't even like frozen food, microwave foods, always fresh. Here all we have is McDonald's, KFC.'

Mum (40)

A third of the families mainly cooked in the B&B. However, this had its own challenges. It was difficult to gain access to shared kitchens at mealtimes. Preparing dinner often had to begin with a full clean of the kitchen. Families with young children had to bring them into a hazardous food preparation environment in order to keep them supervised.

Two thirds of families 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.

'Just beds, and we eat in bed, we sleep in bed, we do homework in bed. Everything we do in bed, that's it.'

Dad (35)

Other families relied on parents and friends for somewhere to eat. Four families said they mainly took their children to cook and eat in the homes of friends and family every night, and others used their kitchens to batch cook meals. Some families, particularly those with very young children and babies relied on friends and church members travelling to the accommodation with deliveries of food and potable water. This required extra time travelling back and forth between work, school and the accommodation.

'it was two hours, pretty much (to travel from Mum's where they would eat dinner). So, we'd leave at seven... and by the time we got in, it was 9, and then she was up again at six, to go back out at seven to go to school.'

Mum (32)

Staying clean and well

Keeping the family clean could be fraught with difficulties. The poor condition of bathrooms meant that families also had to spend time cleaning it before using it, or sometimes had no access to showers or baths as they waited for them to be fixed. Three of the families had a family member with disabilities. The lack of specialist facilities meant that they had to wash in buckets in the families' room. Having to share washing facilities with so many other families led to a lack of privacy, which affected children and their parents.

Half of people interviewed had no access to laundry facilities in the accommodation. This meant that families used costly laundrettes, or had to take their washing to friends or family. The difficulties of keeping themselves and their clothes clean and tidy could chip away at people's ability to feel they were maintaining basic dignity, allowing their children to be themselves and to keep a sense of control over their situation.

'I gave them strict warnings today, because one of them came back one day with a load of paint. 'Oh the teacher didn't let me wear an apron.' I said tell her that you have no washing machine.'

Mum (29)

Strengthening family relationships

Living in a small space meant family members had no privacy from each other. Half of parents agreed that they did not have the privacy they needed for family life in the accommodation. Families raised problems like parents and siblings having to change clothes in front of each other, and of other residents overhearing them argue, or barging into their rooms. Parents described feeling guilty about telling their children to stop playing, or making noise if it meant they would disturb the other residents. This led to further boredom and resentment from children.

Living in emergency accommodation put a strain on relationships – both between partners and between parents and children. A combination of no sleep, boredom and uncertainty left children difficult to manage. Half of parents said that their children's behaviour had been affected by living in the accommodation. Arguments and frustration could be elevated as a result of being 'cooped up'. The living arrangements made disciplining children almost impossible as there was no way of putting children in different rooms.

'They just argue, they fight, you know. They had their own space where, if they argued, one would walk away and just cool off. One will somehow just go and even just continue. Yes, they don't have their own space or anything so it's made a big impact on them.'

Mum (33)

One of the major issues that many parents raised was that they struggled to reassure their children about the future. Children had questions about what was going to happen to them in the future. Parents struggled to reassure them that things would be alright. Being unable to give clear answers, left parents feeling unable to give strong boundaries and set children's expectations. This made parents feel their authority with their children was eroded.

'They would just talk and they were just like, 'Oh, shut up,' you know. It was, like, they lost respect for me, if you know what I mean.'

Mum (33)

The uncertainty of the situation, the pressure of living so close together and the lack of privacy also took its toll on couples.

'He goes to work, comes home at six o'clock, sees the kids and then goes back out again because we argue, because we're all in here. He comes home eleven o'clock when I'm asleep, I can just hear him coming in, or he wakes me up and he's crying... That's how I know he's home. (Before we lived here) he was home, weekends, my husband would never go out. He was a guy who went to work, came home, looked after the kids.'

Mum (40)

Getting rest

Thirteen 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. The difficulty of sleeping was also something that children also reported as a key issue. In particular, how the accommodation was not designed to be

a restful sanctuary in the way that a young child's bedroom would be designed to be:

'We have to turn the lights out but there's still a green security light stays on all night so it's never that dark.'

Child (15)

One of the most striking situations 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. Early nights and not having separate space got in the way of families trying to work or study.

'there are times that I would love to stay up, you know, try and unwind on my night off, but I can't put the light on, I can't listen to anything, you know, for a bit of a distraction, because she's sleeping.'

Mum (45)

Many of the parents, and some of the young people reported struggling to sleep due to the worry that they could be asked to move at any time. This uncertainty also led to families living from suitcases and keeping familiar items in storage or stored with friends. This made it even harder to get rest. Both parents and young people reported struggling to sleep due to uncertainty of their situation.

'it's just I can't sleep, I just keep thinking about things.'

Child (12)

Parents, as well as children, felt the strain of living this way. Half of interviewees said that their physical health was affected by living in emergency accommodation. Three quarters said their mental health was affected. Many identified that this was because of stress

from the uncertainty of their situation and the sense of loss from going from a family with everything they needed, to one that was totally reliant on others, and living without basics. As one mother described, she felt 'very poor', and unable to come to terms with how fast everything had changed.

'I feel like I'm in a different world to where I was. We lost everything, now we're in a place where we've got nothing. I feel very poor. I can't even afford to buy myself clothes. I just feel we're very poor, and what the government put us through is not fair on my children, not me, but my children. Three months ago, it was different. Three months, just three months changed my whole life.'

Mum (40)

The impact of living in emergency

accommodation on children

Growing up is hard enough without having to move away from friends, share your bed with younger siblings and live alongside strangers. We asked parents directly whether they felt that their living

arrangements had affected children's friendships, education and wellbeing. We asked young people to describe how their living situation had affected them.

Education

Annie is sixteen. She lives with her Mum and her brother in one room in a house just outside of London. They share the house with two other families.

The family became homeless when their landlord wanted to sell their home. Annie's mum works part time and takes home £250 a week. However, even with housing benefit and working tax credits they were unable to find another home to rent on their budget, that would accept them as a family on housing benefit.

The family stored most of their possessions at Annie's Grandma's. They also ate and washed there most nights, as the cooker in their accommodation was broken and the kitchen and bathroom left dirty by

other residents. The long journey to and from school, the accommodation and her grandma's house gave Annie limited time and space to complete her homework in the evenings and before school. She struggled to sleep as the young children in the room next door cried and ran around late at night.

She spoke to the school who gave her extra time during the day to do her work and let her off detentions. Even so, she felt frustration, and some resignation that her housing situation meant that she wasn't able to maintain her performance:

'I do some homework in my room but I just thought to myself, I can't really blame myself because it's not my fault I'm in this situation.'

Seventeen of the families had school aged children. Two thirds of these parents felt that their children's education or development had been affected by the time they had spent homeless. Some young people experienced major disruption to their education. Three had to change schools mid-way through the school year. As a result, two missed more than a month of school.

For young children, the most significant impact on education was the longer distances that they had to travel back and forth from school. This made them tired and left limited time in the evening to complete homework, or participate in extracurricular activities and

clubs. For older children, a major issue was finding a space apart from younger siblings to concentrate on schoolwork. In addition, three quarters of families had no internet access in the accommodation. This affected young people's ability to carry out wider research and to access online homework.

'In year 10 there's loads of revising to do but we can't do it here as its too noisy. We have to do it in break or lunch. It's too stressful to come back and try and do it in the room... you get little ones try and draw on you. It's too noisy in here and there's no desk or anything like that.'

Child (15)

For young people, not being able to maintain performance, or good practices fed a sense of fatalism with some young people, feeling like there was little they could do.

'I do some homework in my room but I just thought to myself, I can't really blame myself because it's not my fault I'm in this situation.'

Child (16)

Play and Friendship

Amy lives with her Mum, Dad, brother and sister in a room in a B&B in the Midlands.

The family of five share one double bed and one single camp bed. The room also holds all of the family's belongings. There is no communal lounge or kitchen, and just a small toilet with a shower that they share with other families in the block. Her brother is disabled and afraid of water, so she helps her Mum wash him in a bucket in the room. Amy and her sister want to be vets when they grow up. But they say they struggle to do the revision they need to due to limited space in the room, and limited time after their long journey to and from school.

One of the main impacts that they mentioned was feeling bored and socially

isolated. They don't see their friends very much, as they live so far from them.

'The room is so small you can't really move around. You hurt yourself just spreading your arms... You come back and you've got nothing to do. We've hardly got any social life anymore because we're so far away from our friends and we can't keep spending money on busses to get back and forward. We see out friends at school but that's about it. were just basically staying in here most of the time.'

They also miss their two dogs who they've lived with since they were five years old. They are currently staying with their grandparents, but might have to be given away because, in Amy's words: 'we've got no home'

Young people commonly reported feeling bored. This was a combination of not having space to store toys or game consoles as well as not having space or privacy to get on with homework. The lack of internet meant that they couldn't keep in touch with friends on email or social media. Young people struggled to play in the limited space in a room not taken up with beds and belongings.

Eight parents reported that losing their home was affecting their children's friendships. Many families described that a big issue was having to move far away from their children's schools or friends. As one parent described, her son had started to get upset at the idea of going to school, as it reminded him that they would have to move soon and he would have to leave behind his friends.

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Child (15)

'He didn't want to go to school, especially when he knew that we might have to move out of London and he was worried he wouldn't get to say goodbye to his friends properly. It was hard getting him ready for school because he was just, like, shouting.'

Mum (33)

Keeping in touch with, and nurturing friendships was inhibited by hostel rules that meant that their children could no longer invite friends over or have sleepovers. Not being able to do what they had always done maintained the feeling that life was not 'normal'.

'It's just kind of hard to say to my friends, like, 'Oh, I do this,' or, 'I do that,' because it's embarrassing. And I can't invite my friends around anymore, like I used to'

Child (12)

As in the above example, some young people felt that their friends wouldn't understand their situation, or that they were embarrassed to tell them. Other young people shared that they held back from seeking emotional support from friends, because friendship can be a fickle and fragile thing for teenagers, and not always a source of support. Going through an experience that could be stigmatised and used against you was an extra source of worry for older children. Some were ashamed

of their living situation and concealing it from their friends in case it led to bullying.

'I don't tell them because in the end you can't trust a friend. You have ups and downs and when we have that down they could spread rumours about you. I can't explain anything to anyone. I go to school with a smile on my face.'

Child (13)

Some young people got extra support from school to help them to cope. Seven parents had told the school and three said that the school were providing some form of help. This ranged from letting children off late detentions to assisting them with housing advice. However, as with friends, some young people said they did not confide in teachers as they didn't want to be reminded of their situation, or to be treated differently.

'(Does the school know?) 'Not really. I try to be like be on time because I don't want people to feel sorry for me, stuff like that, because I don't really like it.'

Child (12)

Health and Wellbeing

Hannah lives with her Mum in hotel in London. The place they are living has broken doors. Her and her Mum have found drug paraphernalia in the corridors of the house and regularly hear noises and screams coming from some of the adjoining rooms. Hannah's Mum is worried about how this is affecting her daughter.

School has been a source of support for Hannah. But this is only temporary.

'the only time I don't really feel (unhappy) is when I'm at school. Its only when like it gets to, we have to leave and I just don't want to go home.'

One of the major issues that Hannah says affects her mental health is the uncertainty of their situation. She says it is hard to not know where they will be staying one night to the next. It is also difficult to adjust to living without her furniture and clothes.

Half of all parents reported that their children's physical health had been affected. This included bed bug bites and picking up illnesses going around the hostel. Half of parents interviewed stated that their

children were more tired since moving in the accommodation with long travel times and early starts, both from travelling to family and friends' homes or school, as well as being kept awake contributing.

Three quarters of parents interviewed felt that their children's mental health had been affected by living in emergency accommodation. Older children, like their parents, struggled with the uncertainty and worry about the future.

'You just can't relax, or just thinking about what's going to happen'

Child (14)

Younger children were afraid in unfamiliar surroundings. Children's imaginations could be hard for parents to counter.

'They're not settled, do you know what I mean? ...there was a big hole in the roof and they couldn't sleep because they thought something was going to come out of it. The more they were saying it, I was thinking, maybe, what if? Like, it was big massive, like, and it was all damp, so that they hated that completely. They couldn't wait to get out of there.'

Mum (33)

Many young people spoke about school being a respite from their situation. This meant that young people who faced difficulties keeping up with their school work, were even more upset by this.

'the only time I don't really feel (unhappy) is when I'm at school. Its only when like it gets to, we have to leave and I just don't want to go home.'

Child (12)

Sense of safety and security

Shauna lives with her parents, two brothers, and sister in two rooms in a hotel in London. Her room includes a bunk bed, single bed and one chest of drawers. Shauna says its frustrating to have gone from having a house that she and her Mum used to really care about, to having no space, limited clothes and broken furniture. Shauna says she has started to smoke since moving to the accommodation because it 'just felt like it would calm me'.

Shauna used to go out with her friends most weekends to an ice cream parlour or the shopping mall. Now she turns down her friends as she feels its just too depressing and hard on her Mum if she leaves her in the room to cope with the situation, and look after her little brother.

'I needed to help her, I couldn't go with my friends, it wasn't right to leave my mum and go that far.'

A further impact on childhood was a loss of safety and security, and the ability to be a child. Living in emergency accommodation meant that children had to witness things that their parents didn't want them to see. One third of parents agreed with the statement that their children have seen things that they shouldn't. This included instances of drug taking, violence and soliciting.

Parents took steps to protect their children from what was going on, and the stress of not knowing what was coming next. Parents of young children talked about trying to make the children feel like their situation was an adventure. Some younger children responded positively to the warm atmosphere that parents created. As this exchange shows:

**'Do you like the place you live'? 'Yes'
'Why?' 'I like staying with my Mum'**

Child (8)

However, older children were far more receptive to the situation and parents reported being worried that their children were growing up too fast. Older children corroborated this and said that they felt responsible for helping their parents. They gave examples of turning down social invitations so they wouldn't have to leave them to care for younger siblings on their own. They also talked about trying to put on a brave face so as to not worry their parents.

'I did think to myself, I was like, right well there's got to be something I can do because Mum's not going through a good time... I mean I just try to stay as happy as I can.'

Child (16)

This investigation found that spending time in emergency accommodation is bad for families and for children. Young children find the unfamiliarity, the loud noises and the poor conditions scary. Their parents struggle to reassure them, (or to provide a safe, clean, and relaxing home) as they themselves feel their future is out of their control. Older children worry about their parents (and siblings). Even if children try and seek respite through school, the lack of space and facilities and longer school runs make it harder for children to participate in school. Both parents and their children seek support from family and friends. However, the stigma of their living situation, as well as rules that prevent them hosting visitors, make it even harder to draw on this support.

What is causing the number of children living in temporary accommodation to rise?

The parents we spoke to just wanted a stable place to bring up their children and the children a chance to meet all of the other challenges of growing up, without the added difficulty of having no home. This should be simple to meet. But this situation will not improve until we deal with the reasons why so many families are homeless.

The underlying reason that so many children are homeless is because of the shortage of affordable housing. The shrinking social rented sector and increasing property prices are pushing more and more families into the unstable private rented sector where families can be asked to move out of their home with just two months' notice, and rent typically takes half of a family's income.

Until our housing market is fixed, families on low incomes will be reliant on help to afford these housing costs. Recent reforms to social security, such as lowering the benefit cap and freezing Local Housing Allowance rates, have cut away at this safety net,

leaving families with nowhere to turn to if they lose their jobs, or their rent increases. The depleted welfare safety net is also preventing homeless families getting back on their feet and finding stable accommodation.

What can stop it rising in the future?

Ultimately, this situation will not improve until we deal with Britain's chronic shortage of affordable homes. The government needs to build thousands more homes that are truly affordable and stable for families on low and average incomes, including low cost rented homes. To do this we need a land market that's efficient, transparent and public and private investment in affordable housing. We also need to introduce stable rental contracts in the private rented sector, 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, we need a safety net that is fit for purpose, so that if a family member lost their job, or saw their rent rise with inflation, they can continue to keep housed, or find somewhere else affordable to live. For private renters (the families most at risk of losing their home) Local Housing Allowance must be reformed so that it adequately bridges the gap between income and rents. And when the worst happens, local authorities must be adequately funded to provide suitable temporary accommodation for families and avoid the use of B&B in all but exceptional circumstances. Where families are threatened with homelessness, or already homeless in B&B and other forms of temporary accommodation, they need support to find a stable place to live.

The parents we spoke to felt a personal responsibility for resolving their situation and were resourceful in doing so. They used free time 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 government policy, such as welfare reform, is making it more difficult for them to help. Sometimes, people need help to overcome the barriers to renting, such as tenancy deposits and other up-front fees, or help to find landlords willing to let to families with children or welfare recipients.

The parents we spoke to found the process of seeking help and finding a permanent home difficult to navigate, with calls going unanswered and the instructions they were given seemingly contradictory. This led to people feeling in limbo, with their family at the mercy of staff too stretched to pick up their case. The feeling of uncertainty was a major cause of stress.

What support do families need?

While living in limbo, families relied on friends and family for support. This included for places to prepare food or do laundry, as well as social and emotional support. A few had sought support from their children's schools.

However, none of these sources of support could provide the knowledge and expertise

families needed to navigate the system, or to relieve the sense that they were at the mercy of a system that they did not understand. Housing law is complicated and the housing market is difficult to navigate. It is clear from our interviews that advice and support from a trained professional at such a traumatic time was vital in helping families both resolve their housing situation and avoid stress. Once the interview was complete, we offered to put all of the families we spoke to in touch with a Shelter adviser to look at their case.

Shelter help millions of people facing bad housing and homelessness each year. Our helpline is open every day, including Christmas day. Last year our telephone advice and face to face support services alone helped over 60,000 people to find a new home, stay in their current one or fix it so that it was no longer hazardous. We are only able to do this with the generosity of our supporters.

There is so much that can be done to help families in emergency accommodation to find a settled place to live. We need to act now, to ensure that by next Christmas, there are far fewer families living in this way.