

THE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IN WESTMINSTER

BY BECKY RICE



Commissioned by:



Funded by:




Authored by Becky Rice



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the people who have provided their time and valuable insights to support this research. In particular we are very grateful to the families who shared their experiences and the Westminster Foundation who kindly funded this research. We would also like to thank our colleagues at Westminster City Council Housing Solutions and Social Services, Citizens Advice Westminster and Magpie Project, who have gone the extra mile to support the project. Thank you also to those who have provided us with opportunities to be part of the wider conversation highlighting the impact of insecure accommodation and homelessness in London and beyond, including JustLife and London Councils.

 *We are living a very unsettled life and not enjoying [it]. I try to look for a better job but I don't know where to apply. It's disorganising mentally and emotionally in every way. I hope to get out [of temporary accommodation] as soon as possible.*

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
FOREWORD	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION	12
CHAPTER TWO RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	15
CHAPTER THREE WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL'S SERVICES PROVIDING TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION	24
CHAPTER FOUR ROUTES INTO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION	29
CHAPTER FIVE LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: THE ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED	39
CHAPTER SIX LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: IMPACT ON KEY AREAS OF FAMILY LIFE	45
CHAPTER SEVEN MOVING ON	61
CHAPTER EIGHT COPING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION AND WHAT MAKES A HOME	68
CHAPTER NINE CONCLUSION: EMERGING SUPPORT AND PREVENTION OPTIONS	74
CHAPTER TEN RECOMMENDATIONS	77
ENDORSEMENTS	81

FOREWORD

London is facing a critical shortage of affordable homes. For many years, one of the results has been an increase in homelessness and an increase in the number of families and children living in temporary accommodation.

The issues in Westminster are particularly acute, and at any one time over 3,000 of the borough's children are living in temporary accommodation provided by Westminster City Council.

The Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham commissioned this research to better understand the lived experience of those families and children. As small local charities, we felt there was more we should do to improve outcomes now and in the future.

Sadly, this report confirms that the experience of living in temporary accommodation is harmful. It is more than a housing problem, it impacts health, education and child development. Too often it adds financial pressures. It is both a cause and consequence of inequality.

Families can feel powerless, left without any positive option for moving into a secure home. They are left in limbo, not knowing whether to set down roots where they have been placed temporarily or to try to maintain a life back here in Westminster. Children can spend hours travelling to and from school.

But the report also demonstrates strength. The commitment of parents to their children's wellbeing and education. The joy and potential found in every life. It also shows the positive impact that is often found in voluntary sector organisations, as well as the family support the Council and NHS can provide. There is a network of support which has resources that, through collaboration, can be better deployed.

“Families can feel powerless. Without any positive option for moving into a secure home. They are left in limbo, not knowing whether to set down roots where they have been placed temporarily or to try to maintain a life back here in Westminster.”

“The issues in Westminster are particularly acute, and at any one time over 3,000 of the borough's children are living in temporary accommodation.”

Of course the underlying issues are structural – the housing market is pressurised. But the families currently living in temporary accommodation cannot wait for that to be solved. The report demonstrates there is room for a creative response that can support families and enable them to more easily build their strengths now.

It asks us to work together, and in new ways, to reduce the longer term impact of homelessness on children's lives. It calls for a shared endeavour built on a shared understanding to make improvements. It recommends the active involvement of those families who live in temporary accommodation.

We are incredibly grateful for the work that has gone into this report and everyone who has contributed to it. We are now committed to taking forward its recommendations and building that network – one that can amplify the experience of families and can better help them live the lives they want and deserve.



George O'Neill,
Chief Executive Officer,
Cardinal Hume Centre



Thienhuong Nguyen,
Scheme Manager, Home-Start Westminster,
Kensington & Chelsea, Hammersmith & Fulham

“It asks us to work together, and in new ways, to reduce the longer term impact of homelessness on children and families’ lives. It calls for a shared endeavour built on a shared understanding to make improvements.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham (Home-Start WKCHF hereafter) commissioned this research to better understand the experiences and needs of families living in temporary accommodation. Findings are based on interviews with 21 families, interviews and focus groups with professionals, and a literature review. A local cross-sector consultation event was held in March 2022 to help shape the recommendations.

EVIDENCE DEMONSTRATES THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

- The experience of living in temporary accommodation is harmful to families; far more than a housing problem, negative impacts span many areas including health, education and child development.
- This form of homelessness is a cause and consequence of inequality; for example, people from racialised groups and women are more likely to experience it.

FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IS A LOCAL ISSUE FOR WESTMINSTER

- At any given time, there are well over 3,000 children living in temporary accommodation provided by Westminster City Council (WCC) under the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) 2017, with just under half of these being placed within the borough; others are most commonly placed in outer London. Figures are not available on those placed by social services under the Children Act 1989.
- WCC's Housing Solutions service, commissioned to Resident Management Group (RMG) operating in partnership with voluntary agencies, faces particular challenges with move on, securing temporary accommodation and preventing homelessness, due to a very pressurised housing market.
- The drivers of temporary accommodation include wider structural factors such as long-term issues with housing supply and welfare and immigration policy.
- The average time spent in temporary accommodation provided by WCC under the HRA is seven years. Average waiting times for social housing, provided by WCC, include ten years for two-bedroom accommodation and 16 years for three bedrooms.

INTERVIEWEES' EXPERIENCES

- The profile of interviewees in our research was predominately people from Black and minority ethnic groups. Three-quarters were born outside the UK. All were women, the vast majority of whom were single parents.
- Most interviewees were in accommodation provided by WCC under the HRA or the Children Act – one was living in Home Office accommodation. Two had been placed by other local authorities in Westminster.

ROUTES INTO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

- The tipping points into homelessness and temporary accommodation were: moving due to the threat of violence; hidden homelessness or insecure accommodation becoming untenable; and having to leave a tenancy or accommodation.

- Emergency accommodation, usually hotel rooms, are an essential resource at a critical point but very challenging for managing family life. Two families had spent many months in hotel accommodation, which was having an increasingly negative impact including sustained periods out of education for school-aged children and very sedentary periods.

HOUSING CONDITIONS

- Interviewees struggled to obtain the basic equipment and furniture they needed to create a habitable space where they could cook, clean, wash, relax and sleep.
- Many faced challenges with the condition and suitability of the property and struggled to get these resolved.
- Some interviewees felt unsafe within their homes; this was compounded by feelings of isolation and being unfamiliar with the area in which they had been placed.
- Interviewees in section 17 shared accommodation reported particular issues relating to their privacy, security and safety in the accommodation.

MONEY AND WORK

- All of the people interviewed were struggling financially to some extent and many were in debt. Some costs result specifically from homelessness such as paying to travel to school. Parents described feeling guilty or sad that they did not have money for fun activities and extras for their children.
- The provision of vouchers, and similar support, was a lifeline to bolster the subsistence payments provided by social services, especially for those accommodated under the Children Act.
- Working parents living in temporary accommodation faced challenges such as additional travel costs and not knowing where to look for a better job because they could be moved to another area.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

- Mothers of pre-school children were concerned about their children's development due to, for example, the lack of space for their children to play and the lack of opportunities to socialise, both of which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Families with children who had special needs sometimes experienced gaps in the specialist help they required due to moving into temporary accommodation in a different area.
- Children tended to remain in their Westminster schools when placed out of area and travelling to school was a very expensive and tiring routine.

MENTAL HEALTH

- Interviewees described the negative impact of their current living situation and prior experiences on their family's mental health.
- Most interviewees referred to specific mental health problems such as PTSD, depression and anxiety; some were diagnosed with conditions and others were not.
- The counselling service offered by Home-Start WKCHF was mentioned positively by several interviewees; continuing provision during the pandemic and offering an open duration for counselling were key to this.

PLACE AND COMMUNITY

- Interviewees found outer London areas less friendly and less diverse and they felt there were more services and more help for families in Westminster than elsewhere.
- One of the hardest things for people who had moved out of Westminster was the distance from friends, family and places of worship.

SERVICES AND SUPPORT

- Interviewees were very positive about the support they had received from voluntary-sector agencies; a wide range of services were mentioned including advice (including immigration and housing advice), advocacy, practical and material support, and training.
- Several interviewees were in touch, or had been in touch with, Early Help services – in particular the Bessborough family hub – and gave positive feedback on this.
- A small number of people had a particular trusted worker with whom they had an ongoing relationship and this was highly valued and helpful.
- Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF work with homeless families but do not have a specific or targeted offer for this group and they do not collect particular data about the housing journeys of this group of families.
- People who had moved out of borough tended to report difficulties accessing health services, ranging from ongoing support to manage complex physical and mental health needs, through to one-off GP appointments. Some missed out on health visitor services.

MOVING ON

- Families felt stuck and powerless without any positive options for moving on from temporary accommodation in the foreseeable future. The lack of regular updates or contact from Housing Solutions left people feeling forgotten, especially those placed out of Westminster.
- People were aware that the waiting list for social housing was many years, but had not been given another viable route out of their situation, so bidding for social housing was the only action available, although this was often a frustrating process.
- Some were interested in moving to areas outside Westminster. The private rented sector was considered inaccessible by most.

COPING AND HOPING

- The most positive things in interviewees' lives tended to centre around their children and included: the enjoyment of being a new mum; pride in children's achievements; having fun together; children as a motivator to manage and make the best of their situation.
- Positive activities people referred to included seeing friends or family, attending church and going to parks.
- People's hopes for a home were about having a place where they were not constantly under threat of moving and could invest in the area and the space. Feeling safe was also viewed as an aspect of home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To create targeted support for homeless families Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners should:

- design consistent referral processes to ensure services target those living in temporary accommodation, including ideally with Housing Solutions

- consider whether a unique approach is needed for those in temporary accommodation provided by social services
- ensure that plans to target support reflect the fact that many Westminster clients will be placed out of borough for a long period and ensure that thought is given to what might work best for this group of families
- ensure that the voluntary sector offer has a balance of expertise in relevant legal areas as well as holistic family support services
- create specific resources for homeless families and those working with them, with input from those with lived experience.

To ensure collaboration and best use of our collective resources those working with homeless families should:

- work together to create a 'Westminster offer' for homeless families, which prevents families falling through the gaps and creates a shared sense of endeavour and active involvement amongst local partners
- ensure that those in the voluntary sector have a clear and up-to-date view of the pressures facing the Housing Solutions service to ensure advocacy work is effective and realistic
- create a shared understanding between the council and the voluntary sector of what the possible options are for families regarding move on
- improve the accessibility of information about services within and beyond Westminster, for example, through lists or directories
- establish a local forum, multi-agency meeting or action/tasking group focusing on the needs of homeless families.

To reduce the harmful impact of temporary accommodation partners should:

- consider the key identified risks of harm from the evidence base; impact on education, health, including mental health, child development and the opportunity to enjoy family time together
- pilot a navigator support service for Westminster which remains with families during the period of their homelessness and onward housing journey
- ensure regular touch points with services for all families living in temporary accommodation are built into the system
- provide material support at critical points, including the direct provision of money, vouchers and resources for the home
- develop ways to explore and work on families' expectations of moving on from temporary accommodation and make realistic plans as part of family support.

Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF should offer ever-evolving trauma-informed approaches including:

- an understanding of, and responsiveness to, the impact of trauma and ensuring this is embedded in culture and service delivery across each organisation
- creating the safest psychological and physical environment possible
- a strengths-based approach to working with families
- initiatives that create community and peer support, especially those that provide the opportunity for children to experience activities that might otherwise be out of financial reach.

To develop their expert voice in this area, Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF should:

- cover primary prevention and the structural issues in policy and campaigns work, despite the focus on secondary prevention in service delivery
- gather better information and evidence about work with this group of families and their journeys through temporary accommodation
- amplify the voices and experiences of families and develop co-production approaches to the design and delivery of campaigning and policy work
- seek to give insight on issues relating to temporary accommodation, for example, through membership of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Temporary Accommodation
- develop a shared local voice to make Westminster a go-to area to consult on this issue
- work with partners to identify and respond to opportunities to reach specific audiences, for example, elected members post the local election period.

PART A: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

12

CHAPTER TWO RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

15

CHAPTER THREE WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL'S SERVICES PROVIDING TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

24



INTRODUCTION

In May 2021 the Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham (Home-Start WKCHF) commissioned a piece of research to better understand the lived experience and support needs of families who are either placed in temporary accommodation by Westminster City Council (WCC) or who have been placed in temporary accommodation in Westminster by other local authorities.¹ The project was funded by the Westminster Foundation and it was conducted by an independent researcher, Becky Rice, following a competitive tendering process.

1.1 ABOUT CARDINAL HUME CENTRE, HOME-START WKCHF AND WESTMINSTER FOUNDATION

The Cardinal Hume Centre, founded by Cardinal Basil Hume, is a one-site homelessness prevention centre in Westminster offering a range of services aimed at supporting young people, families and individuals to live fulfilling independent lives. These services include: one-to-one advice and representation on housing, welfare and immigration issues; employment and learning support; the provision of food and other basic necessities; supported accommodation for homeless 16-24 year olds; and a family centre. In the last financial year, the centre supported nearly 600 families across the breadth of its services.

Home-Start WKCHF supports families with at least one child under the age of five, or who are expecting a baby. Last year, it worked with 126 families in Westminster who were experiencing difficulties, including social isolation, domestic violence, postnatal depression, and relationship breakdown, as well as parents of children with disabilities and special needs. It has an experienced staff team providing case management, more than 80 trained and DBS-checked volunteer befrienders who visit families in their own homes offering emotional and practical support to help them to link in with or access local services, and free long term weekly therapy with their volunteer therapists.

Westminster Foundation is an independent organisation representing the charitable activity of the Duke of Westminster and Grosvenor businesses. The Foundation works with local organisations who create opportunities for young people up to the age of 25, particularly those facing deprivation or intergenerational inequality, and it believes strongly in helping to build solid foundations to ensure young people and their families are able to lead happy and healthy lives.

1.2 WHY CARDINAL HUME CENTRE AND HOME-START WKCHF WANTED TO DO THIS RESEARCH

Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF both support homeless families through all aspects of their work including advice, family support and centre-based work. They do not, however, have a specific approach to targeting this group of families or a tailored offer to those in temporary accommodation. As such, they wanted to learn more about the specific needs of this group of clients in Westminster so that they could review and develop their services to better meet the needs of this particular group of families.

¹ Home-Start Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham (Home-Start WKCHF) works across three local authority areas as part of a wider network of Home-Start organisations. From this point forwards, 'Home-Start WKCHF' refers to the work Home-Start WKCHF undertakes in Westminster or with Westminster clients only.

1.3 THE RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Although the research focused on the experience of families in Westminster, the findings have wider relevance, contributing to the broader evidence base that exists on family homelessness and temporary accommodation.

1.4 ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report details the findings of the research and includes a number of recommendations for how the support, and therefore the outcomes, for children and families living in temporary accommodation could be improved. Under each of the main sections, the main practice implications for Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and others interested in improving the support and outcomes for families in temporary accommodation are considered.

In the report, the term 'homeless families' is used to describe people living in emergency or temporary accommodation provided under statutory homelessness duties as outlined in the Homelessness Reduction Act, as well as accommodation provided under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. The use of the term 'homeless' is one to explore further in ongoing work with families by the commissioners. Some organisations such as Crisis feel that broadening society's understanding of homelessness to include those in temporary accommodation is important to mobilise solutions to an often-hidden problem.² Others may choose to use the term 'temporary and insecure' or 'insecure' accommodation. During the research interviews, the most commonly used terms were simply 'emergency accommodation' and 'temporary accommodation', which the participants identified with.

1.5 WHAT WE DID

1.5.1 The research questions

The research questions used to guide the research were:

- What are the range of triggers that lead families into temporary accommodation?
- How do families experience the process of moving into temporary accommodation?
- What is the impact of living in temporary accommodation on families' welfare?
- What support have families been offered before and during their transition to temporary accommodation?
- What is the experience of families housed outside Westminster?
- What do families understand about the process of finding more secure accommodation in the future?

1.5.2 The methods we used

The research comprised a combination of desktop research and qualitative research including:

- two focus groups with staff from Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF
- six professional stakeholder interviews to explore the work undertaken by key statutory-sector agencies within Westminster
- semi-structured interviews with 21 families living in temporary accommodation.

² Crisis (2018) Our common experience: The big idea that can help end homelessness.

1.5.3 Who we heard from

Interviews were undertaken with 21 people, all women with dependent children living in temporary accommodation. The families had been living in temporary accommodation for varying lengths of time from several months to more than ten years. The interviewee group included people from diverse backgrounds across a range of variables that are known to impact on the lived experience of families in temporary accommodation (e.g. household composition, length of time in temporary accommodation, in and outside borough placements), as well as the associated risk factors (e.g. gender, race, immigration status).

The research included people who had been placed in temporary accommodation by WCC Housing Solutions, those placed by other boroughs within Westminster, and those placed in temporary accommodation by social services. The rationale was to include people who were 'clients' of WCC and where partnership work with WCC might have the potential to enhance the service offered to this group of families.

We did not intend to include people living in Home Office funded accommodation because it was felt this would broaden the remit of the research too far given the target sample of 15 to 20 families. This was a dilemma and Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF are keen to explore whether there is scope to undertake some distinct work exploring the needs of this group and the role of the local voluntary sector for these families. One household living in Home Office accommodation was in fact interviewed (because the referral information was not accurate), and this highlighted the need to consider this group in the future given their unique challenges.

1.5.4 How we analysed the findings and shaped recommendations

A framework analysis approach was employed to analyse interview data, summarising and distilling evidence within an evolving framework of themes and cases (interviewees).³

Following the initial analysis and reporting, Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF hosted a local cross-sector consultation event, which was attended by 27 participants. Attendees represented a range of statutory partners including Housing Solutions and Social Services, as well as a range of local, voluntary organisations including Citizens Advice Westminster, Westminster Befriend a Family and Z2K. The aim of the event was to reflect on the initial findings and consider what it means for our collective practice locally. We drew on these discussions to help us shape the recommendations included in this report.

³ Framework analysis is an approach developed in the 1980s by the National Centre for Social Research (now NatCen) and still used today by NatCen and many other social researchers.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This chapter outlines what is already known about temporary accommodation based on both secondary information from research and statistics provided by WCC.

2.1 EXPERIENCING TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IS HARMFUL TO FAMILIES

2.1.1 The immediate impact

There is an increasing evidence base regarding the detrimental impact that living in temporary accommodation can have on the health, wellbeing and safety of families and children, as well as their longer-term opportunities and prospects.⁴ Research carried out by Shelter in 2006 found that children's physical and mental health, as well as educational outcomes and opportunities into adulthood, can be adversely affected by their experience of living in temporary accommodation.⁵ For example, the research found that children who had been living in temporary accommodation for more than one year were three times more likely to develop mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, compared with their peers.⁶ There was also a significant impact on children's education, with increased absence from school due to the disruption caused by moving into and between temporary accommodation, and the fact that children in temporary housing are often forced to move school frequently, causing them to lose out on the stable influence of attending a single school, missing valuable class time and disrupting friendships.

More recently, research published by the Children's Commissioner outlined the serious risks posed to children's health, safety and education as a result of poor quality temporary accommodation.⁷ In January 2022, research undertaken by Human Rights Watch and the Childhood Trust noted the frequently poor quality and uninhabitable conditions of temporary accommodation in which families in London were living, which equated to "a violation of their [children's] rights".⁸

2.1.2 Longer-term impacts

In addition to the immediate consequences of living in temporary accommodation, research carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that there is a link between housing, poverty and material deprivation, with housing having the potential to "mitigate or exacerbate the impact of poverty on people's lives".⁹ Research by Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018) also found that "[childhood] poverty very often predates, and is a powerful predictor of,

⁴ Westminster City Council (2019) Review of homelessness; Shelter (2006) Chance of a lifetime – the impact of bad housing on children's lives; Shelter (2017) 'We've got no home: The experiences of homeless children in emergency accommodation; Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) Homelessness in the UK: Who is most at risk, in Housing Studies, 33:1, 96-116

⁵ Shelter (2006) Op. cit.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Children's Commissioner (2019) Bleak Houses: Tackling the crisis of family homelessness in England, London: Children's Commissioner for England

⁸ Firth, A. (2022) 'I want us to live like humans again': Families in Temporary Accommodation in London, UK, Human Rights Watch

⁹ Tunstall, R. et al (2013) The links between housing and poverty, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[adulthood] homelessness” and they also noted that material poverty and economic status are among the strongest factors for experiencing homelessness.¹⁰

There has been a growing awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the negative impact these can have on health and life chances over the course of a person’s life.¹¹ One commentator, writing for the Institute for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, suggested that experiencing homelessness could itself be considered an ACE; evidence from the United States also indicates a link between childhood experience of homelessness and ACEs.¹² This combined evidence base suggests that previous experience of poverty and homelessness can impact on the likelihood of an individual experiencing similar deprivation later on in life.

2.2 TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IS A LOCAL ISSUE AFFECTING WESTMINSTER FAMILIES

Data provided by WCC shows the number of households with children living in temporary accommodation and the total number of children living in temporary accommodation at the end of each quarter for a two-year period (figure a). The number of households has remained very steady over the period and is on average 1,780. The number of children rose from 2,838 (October – December 2020) to 3,515 (January – March 2021) and has remained at a higher level for the most recent quarter shown.

Figure (a) Number of families and number of children in temporary accommodation as of the end of the quarter

PERIOD	TOTAL NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN	TOTAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN
Jan – March 2020	1771	2855
April – June 2020	1775	2856
July – Sept 2020	1794	2864
Oct – Dec 2020	1804	2838
Jan – March 2021	1774	3515
April – June 2021	1768	3496
July – Sept 21	1769	3495
Oct – Dec 21	1786	3514

Four in ten (40%) families living in temporary accommodation provided by WCC have one child, a third have two children (34%) and a fifth (19%) have three children (see figure b).

¹⁰ Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk, in *Housing Studies*, 33:1, 96-116

¹¹ ACEs are stressful experiences that children are exposed to, including family breakdown due to separation, domestic violence in the home and a close relative experiencing mental health problems and childhood abuse (see: British Psychological Society (2019) Evidence briefing: Adverse Childhood Experiences)

¹² Phillips, A. (2019) Homelessness and its impact on children, blog post for The Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health <https://www.acamh.org/blog/homelessness-impacts-on-children/> (accessed March 2022); Koegel, P., Melamid, E. and Burnam, mA. (1995). Childhood risk factors for homelessness among homeless adults. *American Journal of Public Health*. 1995;85(12):1642-1649

Larger families with four or more children account for 8% of households (but nearly a fifth of children (18%)). Across interviewees, the profile was similar with four in ten (nine) families having one child, a quarter (five) having two children, a fifth (four) having three children and three larger families ranging from four to six children.

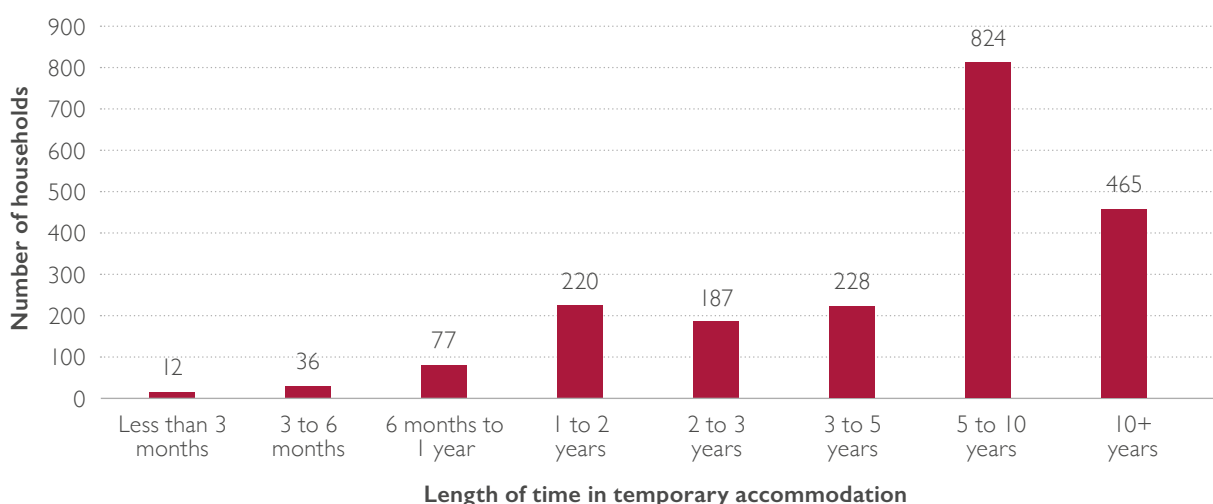
Figure (b) Number of children per household (as at 30 September 2021)

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLD	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS
One	705	40%
Two	595	34%
Three	333	19%
Four	93	5%
Five	32	2%
Six	10	1%
More than six	1	0%
Total	1769	100%

2.3 FAMILIES ARE LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION FOR SUSTAINED PERIODS OF TIME

Data provided by WCC (see figure c) shows that the average time spent in temporary accommodation across all household types under the Homelessness Reduction Act is seven years.¹³

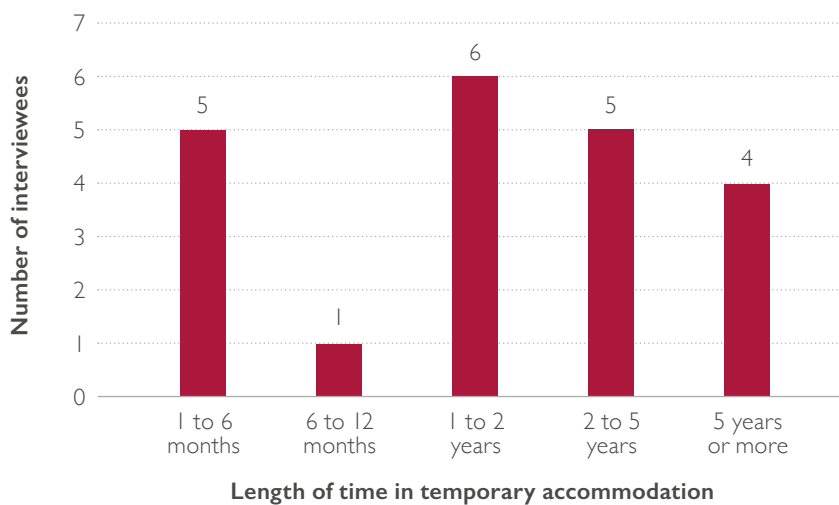
Figure (c) Time in temporary accommodation provided by WCC, all households, 31 January 2022



¹³ Please note this data is not directly comparable with that in figure (d) as the data includes all those in temporary accommodation (not just those with dependent children) and also the sample for this research includes people accommodated by Social Services (three), the Home Office (one) and WCC as a landlord (one).

The graph below (figure d) shows how long the families interviewed had been living in temporary accommodation at the time of their interviews. There was a broad and fairly even spread across time periods from one to six months to over five years. Of those who had been in temporary accommodation for five or more years, two households had been in this type of accommodation for five years, one household for seven years and the final household for 12 years. The people who were housed under section 17 had been in temporary accommodation for two to five years (two families) and one to six months (one family). The person living in accommodation provided by the Home Office had been in this accommodation for just over a year.

Figure (d) Time spent in temporary accommodation, all interviewees



2.4 WESTMINSTER FACES CHALLENGES IN HELPING FAMILIES IN HOUSING NEED

Finding routes out of temporary accommodation and providing temporary accommodation within the borough is particularly challenging in Westminster. A 2019 review of homelessness in Westminster noted that “the tenure structure of Westminster is unusual, with a very large private sector... with nearly 40% of homes having one bedroom...”.¹⁴ It was also noted that “renting a two-bedroom home at the lower end of the market would also require a gross income of £97K”. This context can make it “harder to prevent and respond to homelessness in Westminster compared with other areas”.¹⁵

WCC’s website provides average waiting times for permanent accommodation, ranging from one year for a one-bedroom flat, to ten years for two bedrooms, 16 years for three bedrooms, and finally more than 30 years for four or more bedrooms.¹⁶

Due to the highly pressured housing market, WCC’s Housing Solutions team rely on placing people outside Westminster as well as in borough. At the end of each quarter in 2020/2021,

¹⁴ Westminster City Council (2019) Review of homelessness

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Westminster City Council, How to apply for social housing: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/housing/register-social-housing/how-apply-social-housing> (accessed February 2022)

56% of families in temporary accommodation were housed out of the borough. The figures were very similar for single households. Seven of the 12 people we interviewed who had been housed by WCC under the HRA were placed outside Westminster. All three of those placed under section 17 were placed out of borough.

Westminster do not place large numbers of families outside London and where this does happen, they are generally in the South East close to London. At the end of September 2021, 69 households with children were living in temporary accommodation outside London. Larger households were not overrepresented in this group suggesting that the size of the accommodation required was not the main factor in out-of-London placements.

Data is not available on the number of homeless families placed into temporary accommodation in Westminster by other boroughs, but WCC reports that this is uncommon due to the very highly pressured market in Westminster. Two families interviewed were in this situation after fleeing domestic violence.

2.5 LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IS BOTH A CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE OF INEQUALITY

Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF seek to reduce the impacts of the structural inequalities that exist in our society and to help those who are the victims of racism, sexism, ableism and other discrimination. Within our research sample the following areas were of particular relevance: gender, race, immigration status and disability.

2.5.1 Gender

Evidence shows that living in temporary accommodation with dependent children is something that affects women far more than men. In *Fobbed off*, published in December 2021, Shelter reported an 88% increase in the number of women living in temporary accommodation over a decade and a total of 75,000 women living in temporary accommodation with their families in England.¹⁷ All of the interviews in our research were with women, the vast majority of whom were single parents. There were two families where a partner, in both cases the children's father, was living in the home.

In a recent report, the Centre for Homelessness Impact highlights the strong link between violence against women and homelessness, as well as the increase in domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁸ The report highlights the need for a gender-informed approach to women's homelessness recognising the prevalence of violence in women's experiences and the challenges and barriers women face in resolving their housing problems.¹⁹ The report calls for rapid rehousing models that provide immediate, unconditional access to secure accommodation, support for more women to remain in their homes rather than having to leave the home due to violence, and ensuring women-only provision in temporary accommodation.²⁰

¹⁷ Schofield, M. (2021) *Fobbed off* – The barriers preventing women accessing housing and homelessness support, and the women-centred approach needed to overcome them, Shelter

¹⁸ Bimpson, E., Green, H. and Reeve, K. (2021) Women, homelessness and violence: what works? Centre for Homelessness Impact

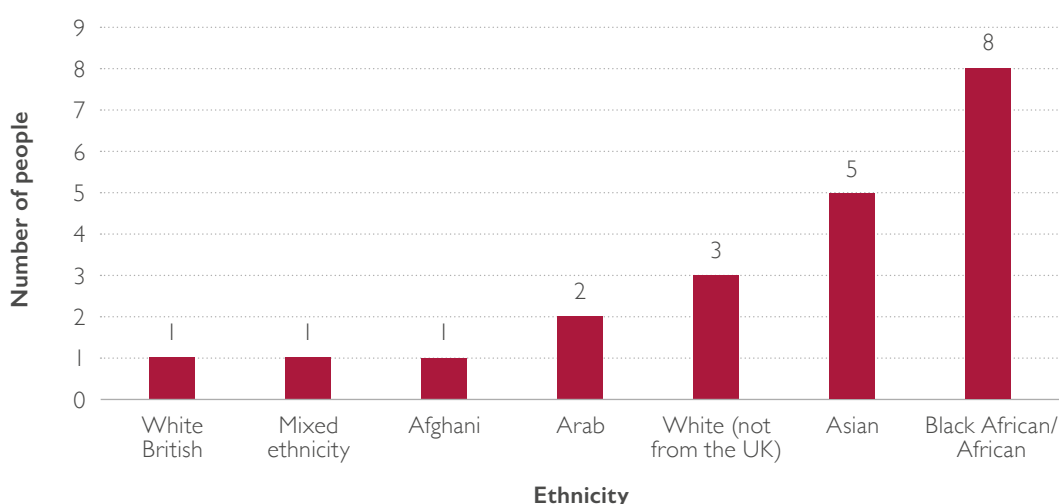
¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

2.5.2 Race

Homelessness, including family homelessness, disproportionately affects people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Shelter reported in 2020 that a quarter (24%) of people making homelessness applications to local councils were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups, even though they make up just over one-tenth (11%) of all households in England, and 11% of homeless people applying for help are Black even though Black people make up 3% of households in England.²¹ The interviewees in our research were predominately from Black and minority ethnic groups, with one White British interviewee.

Figure (e) Ethnicity of all interviewees*



*As described by interviewees

2.5.3 Immigration status and history

Refugees and migrants are at particular risk of homelessness, including those who have just been given leave to remain and then have to leave the asylum support accommodation provided by the Home Office.²² The literature tends to focus on the route into homelessness for new refugees, including being asked to leave asylum support accommodation and delays getting National Insurance numbers and benefits once leave to remain is secured. Many of the issues facing those who have secured leave to remain will, however, persist and the risk of homelessness is likely to continue.

Of our interviewees, 16 out of 21 people were born outside the UK. Those who were not born in the UK had usually arrived more than three years ago; seven people arrived between 2000 and 2012 and six between 2011 and 2018. Some arrived as asylum seekers and others came to the UK as students or with spousal visas and their situation changed and they then had to request leave to remain.

²¹ Shelter (2020) 'Black people are more than three times as likely to experience homelessness', Press release, 1 October 2020: https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/black_people_are_more_than_three_times_as_likely_to_experience_homelessness (accessed February 2022)

²² Downie, M. (2018) Everybody In – how to end homelessness in Great Britain, Crisis

For many, immigration issues were a factor in their homelessness. For example, some of our interviewees had few family networks, or did not have an education in the UK, putting them at a disadvantage in the labour market. Some faced challenges relating to their reasons for coming to the UK, which will not end when they have accessed the benefits and housing system in the UK.

2.5.4 Disabilities and long-term health conditions

Living with a disability and/or long-term health condition, or caring for someone who has one, may increase the risk of homelessness (for example, if the person is unable to work or find suitable accommodation in the private rented sector) and also create additional challenges when experiencing homelessness. Data from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) identifies the following as the most common support needs identified among people owed a homelessness duty in London in July to September 2021 (the most recent quarter for which data is available): history of mental health problems and physical ill-health and disability.²³

2.6 THE PREVALENCE OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IS DRIVEN BY STRUCTURAL ISSUES

The drivers of temporary accommodation include wider structural factors such as long-term issues with housing supply as well as welfare and immigration policy. The Human Rights Watch report (2022) also found that the increased use and lack of suitability regarding temporary accommodation is due to a combination of reduced funding for local authorities, austerity-motivated cuts to the welfare system, and a lack of affordable permanent housing.²⁴ As such, temporary accommodation is likely to be a feature of the failure to meet demand in our housing system for many years to come.

2.7 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS IMPACTED ON THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

The impact of the pandemic is ongoing and, as with many vulnerable groups, families in temporary accommodation are at particular risk. A comment piece by academic experts in *The Lancet* reported “a myriad of considerable direct and indirect health, social, and educational consequences for children and families experiencing homelessness, while living in temporary or insecure accommodation”.²⁵ The response to people specifically at risk of rough sleeping was developed rapidly in the early stages of the pandemic through the Everyone In initiative, but people with children in more hidden homelessness situations generally did not receive additional assistance. Risks outlined in the *Lancet* article included: problems with self-isolation and infection control in shared accommodation; a lack of space to play; challenges accessing the technology; internet access and space to undertake online learning; and impacts on parental mental health, especially for younger, single mothers.

²³ Being owed a homelessness duty means that the council has to provide accommodation for that person.

²⁴ Firth, A. (2022) ‘I want us to live like humans again’: Families in Temporary Accommodation in London, UK, Human Rights Watch

²⁵ Rosenthal, D.M. et al (2020) ‘Impacts of Covid-19 on vulnerable children in temporary accommodation in the UK’, in *Lancet Public Health*, May 2020

2.8 EXPERT ORGANISATIONS ARE GATHERING EVIDENCE AND INNOVATING IN THIS AREA

2.8.1 Recent Research

A recent report published by Shelter and Healthwatch Hackney explored the current challenges facing households living in temporary accommodation in Hackney.²⁶ The report made a number of recommendations about what should be provided to households including wi-fi; access to functioning, local and affordable/free laundry facilities; and information when they move in about the area, how to access local services, and what rights they have.

The Human Rights Watch report published earlier this year made wide-ranging recommendations including: enshrining the right to housing in domestic law as a basic human right; increasing the supply of social housing; and adjusting housing benefit payments to make private rented accommodation more affordable and accessible to those on welfare benefits.²⁷ Several London-specific recommendations were also made in the report, including “setting up a commission, with London local authorities, to investigate and propose solutions to the habitability crisis in temporary accommodation in London” and “develop[ing] a pan-London quality standards framework”.²⁸

2.8.2 Examples of innovative work with families in temporary accommodation

While the desktop review did not search widely for practice examples or identify any robust, quantitative evidence for their effectiveness, there are some trailblazers in work with families in temporary accommodation that were found.

The Shared Health Foundation has a homeless families project that seeks to improve the mental and physical health outcomes for parents and children experiencing homelessness. The project includes health outreach services, trauma-informed family support, and partnership work to improve standards in temporary accommodation. The Foundation has produced a Gold Standard report proposing the standards that should be required in temporary accommodation. These include standards relating to housing conditions and specific caseworker support for families as part of a whole systems approach.²⁹

Hackney has a Temporary Accommodation Action Group (TAAG), comprised of local organisations, residents, and landlords working together to address the issues faced by people in temporary accommodation. The project was initiated by Justlife after successful pilots in Brighton and Manchester. The groups bring stakeholders together including residents and landlords in a “safe, solution-focused environment” to improve the experience of unsupported temporary accommodation or those stuck living in it, often for a duration that can no longer be considered ‘temporary’.³⁰

²⁶ Shelter and Healthwatch Hackney (2021) We are still human: Stories from temporary accommodation in Hackney:

https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/hackney_ta_listening_campaign

²⁷ Firth, A. (2022) ‘I want us to live like humans again’: Families in Temporary Accommodation in London, UK, Human Rights Watch

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Shared Health Foundation (2021) Homeless families: the Gold Standard – a proposal

³⁰ Yates, R. and Maciver, C. (2018) Are temporary accommodation boards feasible: A Hackney case study, Justlife

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- The experience of living in temporary accommodation is harmful to families and it perpetuates inequality.
- There are a significant number of families living in temporary accommodation and there are serious structural issues driving this prevalence.
- This is a pressing problem locally for Westminster families and organisations.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners should explore ways to target support to families in temporary accommodation, in particular considering the secondary prevention opportunities available to:

- alleviate problems faced by families due to their housing situation; and
- prevent escalation and further harm as result of the lived experience of temporary accommodation.

WESTMINSTER CITY COUNCIL'S SERVICES PROVIDING TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

This section outlines the main statutory sector services and processes that relate to the provision of temporary accommodation in Westminster. This is based on desktop research and stakeholder interviews.

3.1 HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Resident Management Group (RMG), part of the Places for People Group, has been commissioned by WCC to provide the Housing Solutions service since 2001. The current contract, which began in 2017, is a partnership between RMG, Shelter and The Passage, to provide statutory homelessness services (the frontline housing options service), and allocate emergency and temporary accommodation, as well as permanent housing. WCC has budgetary oversight and is responsible for procuring temporary accommodation. RGM also provides the management and maintenance of temporary accommodation.

In line with the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA), significant priority is given to preventing homelessness wherever possible. Where it is not possible to prevent homelessness and the applicant is eligible for assistance (this depends on their immigration status and residence in the UK), the relief duty begins. This is a duty to help the applicant to secure onward accommodation where they can live for at least six months.

Applicants who are in priority need (this includes families with children) are provided with interim accommodation at this stage, under section 188 of the Housing Act 1996 (primary legislation). As part of the council's obligations, a personalised housing plan (PHP) is drawn up with the applicant regardless of whether there is a prevention duty or a relief duty. Several interviewees were asked about this but did not recall their PHP.

If after 56 days the applicant has not secured accommodation and the relief duty has not ended for another reason, the relief duty will end and the council must assess whether the main duty is owed. Where the applicant is homeless, eligible, in priority need, not intentionally homeless and has a local connection with the borough, there is now a duty under section 193 of the Housing Act to secure suitable accommodation for the applicant. Temporary accommodation is provided to satisfy this duty until a final offer is made.

3.2 STAGES OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

There are two types of temporary accommodation in Westminster: stage one and stage two.

Stage one is emergency accommodation provided by many suppliers to the council and includes hotels and hostel accommodation with some shared facilities. It also includes self-

contained accommodation that is available to the council on a longer-term basis. For some families, the stage one flat will then become their stage two accommodation so they do not have to move. When hotel or hostel accommodation is used, this is nearly always a brief placement for those with children, rarely beyond six weeks. If accommodation is not self-contained (for example, bed and breakfast – rarely used for families by Westminster), the council is obliged to move a family into accommodation with their own bathroom and cooking facilities within six weeks. If the accommodation is self-contained but still in a hotel or hostel (for example, a hotel room with kitchenette and bathroom), the council is able to prolong the stay, but it is something that is avoided where possible.

Stage two accommodation is all self-contained.

Temporary accommodation is allocated in line with the Temporary Accommodation Placement Policy.³¹ People in Band 1 have the greatest need to be in or close to a particular location and are prioritised for accommodation within Westminster or an adjacent borough. Band 2 is those who need to be within reach of a particular area for work or education. Those in Band 2 are placed within Greater London. Those in Band 3 can be placed in other areas, but from Westminster this is usually within Greater London or sometimes just beyond.

While people are in temporary accommodation:

- the council reviews the needs of households periodically – for example, checking the composition and needs of the household – usually annually
- where it becomes apparent that the accommodation is unsuitable, there is a transfer list, but keeping this to a reasonable size and ensuring people in the most need move quickly is challenging, so the threshold for access to the list is high.

The council's main duty is 'discharged' by providing a suitable offer of accommodation in social housing or the private rented sector with a minimum of 12 months tenancy. Suitability depends on a number of factors, including the quality, sustainability, location and affordability of the accommodation and on the circumstances of the applicant and their household.

The interviewees living in temporary accommodation under the HRA use WCC's Home Connections Choice Based Lettings scheme to bid for social housing within Westminster.³² If they secure a property via the scheme, the council will discharge its duty into social rented housing. The council can also discharge its duty into the private rented sector, with an offer of suitable accommodation that is available for at least 12 months (unless the person has had a duty owed from before 2012).³³ None of the interviewees reported any pressure to consider private rented accommodation to move on from temporary accommodation.

³¹ Westminster City Council (2022), Accommodation placement policy for homeless households: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-temporary-accommodation/temporary-accommodation-faqs> (accessed February 2022)

³² Westminster City Council (2020) Housing allocations scheme 2020: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/housing-policy-and-strategy/allocations-scheme>

³³ Discharge of duty into the private rented sector was enabled by the Localism Act 2012.

3.3 ACCESSING ACCOMMODATION THROUGH SOCIAL SERVICES

Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, social services has a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area.³⁴ A child is in need “if he or she cannot achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development without support from social services including where a child whose ‘family does not have adequate accommodation or sufficient income to meet their essential living needs’”.³⁵ Support is accessed via a Child in Need assessment carried out by social services.³⁶

Section 17 support is not determined by immigration status and is often needed by people with children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). This was the case for three of the interviewees in this research, who were waiting for the Home Office to decide whether they had the right to remain in the UK. Section 17 support includes providing accommodation where there is no suitable alternative and also subsistence payments where families are not eligible for welfare benefits. Another example of households who might be placed in section 17 accommodation is those who have been found ‘intentionally homeless’ under the HRA and so the council does not have a duty to accommodate them under the HRA. No one in this situation was interviewed for the research and it is a situation the council tries to avoid with as much prevention and intervention as possible.

³⁴ Shelter (2021) ‘Social services powers to accommodate homeless young people’, Legal, June 2021: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/legal/housing_options/young_people_and_care_leavers_housing_rights/social_services_powers_to_accommodate_homeless_young_people (accessed February 2022)

³⁵ Free Movement (2020) ‘Briefing: section 17 of the Children Act 1989’, 11 June 2020: <https://www.freemovement.org.uk/briefing-section-17-of-the-children-act-1989/> (accessed February 2022)

³⁶ This booklet designed for families provides more information about Child in Need assessments: https://www.project17.org.uk/media/71895/Guide_to_section_17.pdf (accessed February 2022)

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- Westminster commissions its Housing Solutions service to RMG operating in partnership with voluntary agencies.
- The HRA and the Children Act are central to the provision of temporary accommodation.
- Temporary accommodation is provided through emergency hotel accommodation and self-contained accommodation for those placed under the HRA.
- For those placed under the Children Act, shared accommodation is also used.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- The delivery of Housing Solutions through a unique partnership with the voluntary sector may present opportunities to build on this foundation of working across sectors to deliver better outcomes for families in housing need.
- Services need expertise in the legal frameworks that relate to temporary accommodation.
- Services need to be responsive to the needs of people placed in different kinds of accommodation and moving between types of accommodation.
- It may be helpful to explore in more depth how well the initial PHPs are working for families who move into temporary accommodation.

PART B: FINDINGS

CHAPTER FOUR ROUTES INTO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION	29
--	-----------

CHAPTER FIVE LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: THE ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED	39
---	-----------

CHAPTER SIX LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: IMPACT ON KEY AREAS OF FAMILY LIFE	45
--	-----------

CHAPTER SEVEN MOVING ON	61
-----------------------------------	-----------

CHAPTER EIGHT COPING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION AND WHAT MAKES A HOME	68
--	-----------

ROUTES INTO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

This section explores the reasons for participant families needing temporary accommodation and their initial experiences of being placed into temporary accommodation. It also explores the experience of living in shared accommodation, which is provided for a short time to some of those housed under the HRA, but for far longer periods under section 17.

4.1 REASONS FOR HOMELESSNESS

There were three broad routes into temporary accommodation experienced by the interviewees:

1. Fleeing violence and immediate risk of harm, usually from a partner but also from family members and people outside the household
2. A change in the household composition and needs – most commonly someone in insecure accommodation becoming pregnant and this changing their entitlements – usually linked to immigration issues
3. Accommodation no longer being available, including being asked to leave friends and family or being evicted from a tenancy in the private rented sector.

Figure (f) Routes into temporary accommodation

GROUP	TIPPING POINT INTO HOMELESSNESS	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS
1	Domestic violence	6
	Fleeing non-domestic violence	1
2	Hidden homeless/insecure housing (with church assistance) – pregnant or with children	4
	Recently arrived in the UK and destitute	1
	Having to leave single homelessness hostel due to pregnancy	3
3	Asked to leave family home	2
	End of assured shorthold tenancy	2
	Council house moves	1

Data from the council shows that the main reasons for households with children approaching the council for accommodation are:

- family no longer willing to accommodate them (29%)
- end of private rented tenancy (27%)

- domestic violence or abuse (12%)
- friends no longer willing to accommodate them (7%)
- Relationship with partner ended (non-violent) (5%).

It is important to note this is the initial presenting issue and additional information is often disclosed as a case progresses, so comparison should be treated with caution. The profile differs from our interviewees' profile; violence is more common among the interviewees, as is a change in circumstances (largely due to those accommodated by section 17).

4.1.1 Fleeing violence

In the cases where violence was the tipping point into homelessness, women described urgent moves that were unplanned and immediate in the context of sustained periods of abuse. The trigger for moves included sudden escalation of violence leading to women deciding they were in immediate danger. In one case the police attended an incident and advised the woman not to return.

“Police were very concerned re me and the kids attending the property; they said it was not safe they could not promise protection, so we went to a hotel that day for 24 hours until we could go to the refuge.”

Interviewee with six children, infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

In the case of the person fleeing violence from outside the home (i.e. non-domestic violence), she had to wait a longer period for a move that she requested out of social housing into temporary accommodation. In the intervening period, the household took measures to protect themselves including her older child remaining in the home at all times.

Women described moving shortly after disclosing to a non-specialist service, e.g. to a doctor (two people) or a teacher (one person), rather than having ongoing support for domestic violence. One of the women interviewed left a situation where she had her freedom severely curtailed following a forced marriage and violence became an increasing issue. Another left when violence escalated to her being kicked. In each case, women had to seek medical help for their injuries, which was a factor in their flight. Women described moving children with small bags, and children having to attend school with no uniform and not having their belongings such as toys and books.

“When my son was born I had some voice [in the house]... Before, I would never fight or argue, I was living as a slave or servant. Then he suddenly become so aggressive, then he kicks me – pulled my head and neck... That time I went to the doctor in [another borough]. The doctor said to come out... If I go there, they will kill me. I called III – one lady was very nice, said go to the council, the housing office.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 2-3 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“...it was not safe.
[The police] could not promise protection, so we went to a hotel that day for 24 hours until we could go to the refuge.”

“The GP... saw bruising in my body and she says I know he hits you. Then he kicked me. I went to friend’s house in the school day, picked children up and stayed on at my friend’s house. The council asked [my friend] can you keep her one more week. We had no toys, no clothes...”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

4.1.2 Hidden homelessness and insecure accommodation

The pathways into accommodation from hidden homelessness related to immigration status and included all the women who were in section 17 accommodation funded by social services. One person had been privately renting, but was unable to continue this when she had a child. Her church assisted her with money for a period but she was living in poor conditions and social services was contacted by the health visitor. As her son was a British citizen, with immigration and housing advice from Cardinal Hume Centre she made a homelessness application.

“I was in Westminster sharing with friends and not working. I was struggling with [producing breast] milk; my house and my friends don’t like kids. I moved to another house in the community [from my home country]. The Christian community... helped me a lot during that time, difficult times, I didn’t have my own money. I told the health visitor the situation and got a social worker. I was three days in hotel [before moving to section 17 shared house]. The social worker wanted me to go.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 2-3 years in temporary accommodation

Three women were provided with section 17 accommodation by social services because their irregular immigration status did not allow them to access support under the HRA; in each case, the child’s father had status either as a British or EU citizen, which would enable the child and mother to stay in the UK, but getting this documented and proven was a long process.

4.1.3 End of private tenancies

Two households were evicted from private rented tenancies. In one case this was a household of two parents and three children, two of whom have special needs, in one case very severe needs that impact heavily on day-to-day life. The family was evicted from their home outside London and made an application to Westminster due to the father’s work being in the area. This decision was made due to the children’s needs because reducing the commuting time meant that the father was able to provide a lot more support for the family. In another case, an eviction notice coincided with pregnancy and the council provided a move to temporary accommodation ahead of the court date for the eviction.

“Before, I was in Westminster in a studio, a bit smaller, like one room. That wasn’t temporary accommodation – it was private rented for three years. The main reason [for me moving] was because my landlady evicted me. She sent a letter out to all the tenants then she started the court process... I went to the council and showed the letter – they said ... ‘You have to wait for this to go to court.’... Two caseworkers [from Home-Start and Cardinal Hume Centre] helped me with a lot of emails, so in the end they did move me before the court decision.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

4.1.4 Leaving hostel accommodation

Three women were required to leave hostel accommodation due to pregnancy. In two cases this was supported hostel accommodation in Westminster that the women reported had been suitable for them until late pregnancy. An issue at that stage was that heavily pregnant women do not know where they will be living with their new babies, which can cause stress at an already challenging time. Two of the women found that the accommodation they were provided, just after having their babies before moving into stage two accommodation, was unsuitable hotel accommodation.

“Difficult to be there as it was on the second floor, very hard for pushchair... hard to eat. ‘Cos of Covid I had to get takeaway food but I want to have healthy baby and not eat junk food.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“The hotel was clean but I was complaining because... I had C-section and there is very high stair and with pushchair. It was very difficult and I call Westminster Council and I told my situation and they give me my [stage two] temporary accommodation.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-4 years in temporary accommodation

4.1.5 Support to access statutory housing services

Interviewees tended to access housing and welfare benefits advice from Cardinal Hume Centre and Citizens Advice as a result of their housing problems, rather than these coming to light when the organisations were already working with the families. Information about voluntary sector services was found online, through word of mouth and through other services (for example, a referral from Early Help (social services) to Cardinal Hume Centre and another referral from the police). Several people mentioned calling the Shelter advice line.

“I couldn’t pay my rent. I thought I would be on the streets... I was googling for anyone, Shelter, Westminster Council.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 1-6 months in temporary accommodation

“The police lady referred us to Citizens Advice. We didn’t have a choice but to move [due to threats of violence]. She sent statements and an email.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“I couldn’t pay my rent. I thought I would be on the streets.”

The type of help needed at this point was applying for benefits, help with gathering evidence to support a homelessness application, liaising with the council including attending meetings, and explaining the process of homelessness applications that they could expect.

4.2 EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION: SHORT-TERM STAYS

Whilst the council assesses its duty to a family, they are placed in stage one accommodation. For some people this is self-contained accommodation, but for others it is emergency accommodation in hotels, hostels, shared houses or refuge accommodation.

Three of the families interviewed were in hotel accommodation; one woman was in asylum support accommodation; another interviewee facing complex health needs had been living with six children in two hotel rooms for several months; the final person had been in asylum support accommodation outside London and had moved and made an application in Westminster recently. The remaining interviewees were in self-contained accommodation, but many had stayed in first-stage hotel accommodation before this. Two women had stayed in refuge accommodation before moving to second-stage temporary accommodation.

Time in hotel or hostel accommodation was reported to be very unsettled and difficult, although people often qualified this by saying they were grateful to have a “roof over our heads”. Hotel accommodation was usually within Westminster. The relief for mothers knowing they had somewhere to stay was described by one woman who was fearful of being completely destitute and on the streets:

“Yes, you know, once I got into the hotel at least because I just needed a place to rest, because I’d been sleeping on the floor in the woman that helped me from the church, her house, so I just was very happy to even have a bed for me and my children, so that was comforting in the first few days.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age;
1-2 months in temporary accommodation

For another family placed out of borough, the shock of travelling alone for the first time on public transport to a hotel in west London was very upsetting and this was only for one night before having to move again.

“They send me to Wembley hostel. That day was terrible – the social worker said should go tonight, that day. I was totally helpless. [I] didn’t know where to go so they said, ‘Go to Wembley.’ I had never travelled alone before. We had two rooms and in the morning had to check out.”

Interviewee with four children, primary and secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

Interviewees identified the main challenges with the initial stages of living in emergency accommodation as:

- not being able to prepare food in hotel accommodation and the expense of buying food that can be eaten when living in a hotel such as takeaways – one person described her pre-school son’s very painful constipation as for a month they only accessed takeaway food
- feeling uncomfortable with shared facilities, especially during the pandemic
- having rooms booked for one night at a time and being required to move very quickly
- other guests and residents being unhappy with children making noise in a hotel environment
- emergency accommodation not meeting the family’s needs in term of access for those with mobility issues
- the costs of moving including taxis to get to the next accommodation.

“They send me to Wembley hotel. That day was terrible... We had two rooms and in the morning had to check out.”

“We spent two days in reception as we had to be out of the room between 10.30-5.30. They pay one more night at a time so we had to get out with all our luggage all over reception. It was a nightmare.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“I was offered a hotel at 7pm [on the] second floor in [area of London] in a homeless hotel... It was horrible, unsafe, scary stairs, loads of people and from 8pm the receptionist didn't stay. When you are in hotel in middle of nowhere put kids in the buggy and where do you go? If not for the kids I would give up, they keep you going – you have to get up and play with them... I got a really cheap toaster sandwich maker [which] helped at breakfast... It was very expensive and challenging and the food got boring.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and primary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

Several people who had stayed in some of the most challenging accommodation commented that staff were often kind and friendly at hotels. Although this in no way compensates for the poor living conditions, it could make things slightly less alienating during the stay.

“They were very kind, very helpful [at the hotel], but it's just that the facilities are small and old.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

“For three months to October, I was in the hostel [hotel which became a homelessness hostel] with my baby. Difficult to be there. [It] was on the second floor, very hard for pushchair, hard to eat 'cos of Covid... Manager was very friendly and very nice person... Brought food from home from his wife, told me to be patient; he told me a lot of things about my baby; he was my friend, very helpful.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

Two interviewees had spent time with children in mixed accommodation, with households who did not have children; in one case this was provided by Westminster Council.

“I was so tired and scared in there. I had to lock my children in the room to use the washroom. Getting a bath was impossible. My social worker said it's not safe to lock them in the room – I said it's not safe to leave them in room without it locked... [What did they suggest you do?] Nothing, nobody helped really.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (provided by another borough)

“I was so tired and scared in there.”

While people often reported having a moving service provided by the council consisting of a van to move the bulk of possessions, and packing boxes provided where needed, many people then had to pay for taxis to transport themselves and their children. In some cases, people stated they were given some money from the council towards this.

4.3 EMERGENCY OR SHARED ACCOMMODATION: LONGER-TERM STAYS

For most people, their time in stage one emergency accommodation was short lived and they were provided with self-contained accommodation quickly. There were three notable exceptions to this:

- The person in asylum support accommodation had been there for one year with her child who was seven months, and was waiting for her substantive interview with the Home Office.
- The family with one adult and six children aged up to 12 years had been staying in a hotel room for five months, the room had very little natural light.
- Another larger family staying in hotel accommodation for several months having moved from another area of the country after leaving asylum support accommodation.

The interviewee who had a large family in a hotel space for five months had a high-quality room with a kitchenette area, laundry service (through social services) and two large adjoining rooms. The accommodation was well located in Westminster (although this was not her preferred area to live in – she was the only interviewee with a preference to move a good distance outside London). While this would have been a suitable short-term option, it was highly detrimental to the family in the longer term. Due to serious mobility issues the interviewee rarely leaves the building; she has a social care package that provides some intervention for the children in the room.

“I am worried about [the] children’s development and getting negative energy and being settled. It’s not nice to be in a hotel long term – we are homeless. In the start the staff were nice... [Now she feels they are tired of having a large family in the hotel.] There is no exercise for the boys. They can’t go anywhere without attendance so play indoors.”

Interviewee, six children from infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

“I am worried about [the] children’s development.”

4.4 ASYLUM SUPPORT ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED BY THE HOME OFFICE

The interviewee who had been living in Home Office accommodation for over a year was most concerned about the development of her baby, the lack of space in which to play – especially as he was starting to move more and would need to crawl and walk soon – and the limited food she was able to prepare for him.

“Here I’m not even able to cook for myself, even for my baby. I’m only able to give him food in a jar. I have a fridge in my room or a small fridge in my bedroom.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

She had visited a friend who had children and with whom she could speak her first language and listen to music, which was a positive reason to get out of the hotel room. She had also been attending the Bessborough Hub and Cardinal Hume Centre on occasion to get clothing and had attended a group activity. She hoped to do some cooking with her Home-Start WKCHF volunteer at Cardinal Hume Centre.

4.5 MIXED HOTELS

Hotel accommodation with a mixture of paying guests and those placed by the council was reported to be the most favourable option for a short period, especially when it was close to Westminster. Unlike some experiences of stage two accommodation, people generally had the things they needed to manage their stay in a hotel such as beds and bedding, and cleaning services were provided.

“We were all in one room with a double bed and a TV and a sofa bed. It was a nice hotel with bath and lovely shower. Only once someone banged on the walls [because of the children making a noise]. [A large] park was nearby.”

Interviewee with three children, primary to secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

Homelessness hostels or hotels with people who had varying support needs and shared facilities were more problematic however.

“I was in hotel accommodation for nine weeks and after that they provided me with hostel accommodation, which again was not suitable. I struggled a lot there as well as I had to share bathroom, toilet, washing machine, and it was Covid and lockdowns... I was quite scared [when] I [was] there as well... It was not just mums with children; there were other people as well.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“I struggled a lot there.”

“It wasn’t really OK because the hotel, the bathroom was... tiny. Only one person can enter that bathroom. And you know, because of my own special son [with special needs] I want to bath... him, it’s not OK. You cannot cook in the hotel, you only have to buy food, so all the money they give us for every week support, we finish it... We buy food only morning and evening, not three times... Well, you know if you can cook you can manage the money better, it will be enough.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

4.6 REFUGES

The two women whose first move was into refuge accommodation had positive experiences. However, when one person was moved from an out-of-London refuge to a Westminster one, they found the latter to be less friendly, less understanding of their situation and less well equipped for children. One person who went into refuge accommodation before being placed in temporary accommodation described the provision of bedding, food, toys and space to play, as well as a welcome pack including toiletries, extremely helpful and heartening after fleeing with very little. Those moving into temporary accommodation did not have this kind of provision.

“The social worker called the refuge in Westminster and they arranged everything. They are very helpful to me as it was so difficult... That month I was divorcing and my mum died, it was so hard for me... I spoke with the people who work in the refuge and told them I want to see my mum

[before she died] but they said there are a lot of people on the list and they might give my place to someone else. I couldn't go, and I couldn't afford anyway."

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

"I had a very nice welcome pack, even perfume and things I didn't expect. I was so impressed it was... modern and well furnished. Soon as arrived they invited me to the office and gave me documents to sign and £70 [of] vouchers."

Interviewee with six children, infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- The tipping points into homelessness and temporary accommodation for interviewees can be categorised as: moving due to the threat of violence, hidden homelessness or insecure accommodation becoming untenable as a parent, and having to leave a tenancy or accommodation with family.
- Families' immediate routes into temporary accommodation often include a short stay in emergency accommodation; this vital resource is appreciated where the quality of the accommodation is high.
- There are numerous challenges to managing even a short stay in a hotel or hostel room and these are far greater if the distance from the family's local area is far and/or the quality of the accommodation is poor. In the two cases where families had spent many months in hotel accommodation, these challenges persisted and had an increasingly negative impact on the children and families.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Areas to consider for Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners are:

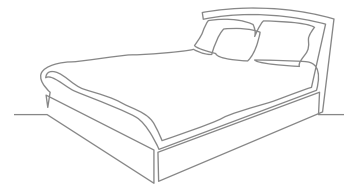
- Recognise the important role that temporary accommodation plays when families have no choice but to move from their current accommodation.
- Develop a trauma-informed service at every level, considering:
 - the journeys of households before seeking help with housing, including experiences relating to gender, race, immigration and violence
 - the needs of families who can be placed in accommodation at any time of day or night
 - the challenges in meeting the most basic needs of the family in the immediate period of moving into temporary accommodation
 - the disconnection, isolation and fear that can be felt by those placed in emergency accommodation.
- Ensure families have access to experts in the fields of immigration, domestic violence and housing.
- Recognise that the way in which help and support are provided, and the acts of kindness that are offered, can go a long way to supporting families through their experience.
- Work alongside partners to review the 'suitability of accommodation' and the criteria that is used to make these decisions (e.g. age-appropriate placements).

LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: THE ACCOMMODATION PROVIDED

This chapter is the first of two chapters exploring the experience of living in self-contained accommodation for those placed under the Homelessness Reduction Act and in shared houses for those placed by social services under section 17. Here, the accommodation itself (including basic needs, safety and security, and the experience of families in section 17 shared housing) is considered. In Chapter 6 other areas including finances and education are explored.

5.1 BASIC NEEDS

Most interviewees struggled to some extent with obtaining the equipment and furniture they needed to create a habitable space where they could cook, clean, wash and sleep. The extent to which equipment was provided varied. Assistance with grants and vouchers was considered very helpful and usually arranged by Home-Start WKCHF or Cardinal Hume Centre, but sometimes by charities from other areas for clients housed out of borough. People also borrowed money from friends and family to meet their most basic needs.



“There were beds when we arrived [but] no pillow and no duvet. Cardinal Hume gave us a voucher for £50... I used a credit card as we had no clothes, not even a plate... If we needed a fork or spoon, we could get from Prêt [coffee shop], but in corona[virus] times it was shut.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“They provided beds, but not towels and no duvets. My other sister got me kettle and microwave.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“When I came to this building, I have to start everything from zero. I had to build up slowly to get what I needed. Even my first child who is severely disabled was provided with a special bed by a charity... I brought beds for me and other child. I applied for a local welfare assistance [from another borough]. After long time they gave me £400. It wasn't... enough. I had to use my benefits and bought things like washing machine with monthly payments.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“When I came to this building, I have to start everything from zero.”

5.2 HOUSING CONDITIONS

Many of those in self-contained accommodation faced challenges with the condition of the property. This ranged from worn and old carpets to serious flooding that meant they had to leave for a period of time. Several people mentioned being unable to use the whole of their flat due to issues with the condition of the accommodation – for example, where heating did not work in a bedroom.



Specifically, some of the challenges participants faced included:

- issues with hot water and heating
- problems with windows – being unsafe for children or broken
- dirty, worn and hard-to-clean carpets, which were aggravating childhood asthma
- infestations, usually mice
- outside areas not being cleaned and cleared before someone moves in.

“Before that I was in TA [temporary accommodation] in [East London] which was really bad. I had to complain about that – there was a basement that was not cleared and there was a mouse infestation. Dirty laundry in the garden...”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“We had three windows, but on the top one there is no window – it was just a net so in winter [it] was like you were outside. The [support worker] brought newspapers and came and helped me fix hole in with the newspaper. I was so happy when [the landlord] sold and we had to move.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“Someone comes every three months – a letting agent... I told them about the mice. I beg the landlord to change the carpets and the walls are breaking down... I appreciate it, don't get me wrong, but it's not a home. The curtains had shoelaces in [instead of being hooked up]!”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“I beg the landlord to change the carpets and the walls are breaking down.”

A key issue facing interviewees experiencing poor housing conditions was not being clear about who to report this to initially, or how to escalate problems that were not resolved. Some people were not clear about what the council was responsible for and what the landlord was responsible for.

“Here the bathroom gets clogged up, sometimes the flusher doesn't work, but there is no landlord and I don't have a housing officer.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“The wall on one side collapsed. It's still there – it will be two years and they didn't fix it. We put buckets there when it rains. My son cannot sleep in his bed. There is mould everywhere. The owner is an agency... they are

not helpful. I was three months on the phone every day; it took them six months to come.”

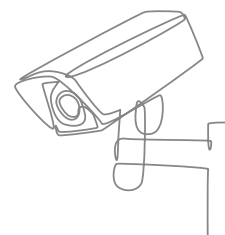
Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“Sometimes it’s very hard; sometimes I run out of hot water and the service is very poor. Even for an emergency they take a few days, like when the other day there was a flood in my bathroom [on the ceiling where] there is pull light... It’s very, very poor. I can’t get hold of the emergency service.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

5.3 SECURITY

Some interviewees in self-contained flats felt unsafe within their homes. This was compounded by feelings of isolation and being unfamiliar with an area, issues which are explored later in the report. One interviewee who had been living in temporary accommodation for a year said she found it hard to sleep because she felt anxious and scared in the night.



“I don’t know if it’s secure... There is no gate [entrance to the block], just a door that’s open all the time. From my first time I came here I am scared of the backyard and the kitchen door is glass.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

By contrast, an interviewee who moved to Westminster fleeing domestic violence found her accommodation in a busy area of town to be a very safe and reassuring place, in part due to the concierge.

“It’s safe and secure; there is concierge 24 hours a day; it’s the safest place [I’ve] ever lived.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

People who had experienced anti-social behaviour in temporary accommodation reported that the council had taken this seriously and taken action, although this had not always been effective.

“Guy downstairs in summer time, high-volume party, smoking weed, so... I call Westminster [to] complain. They are very nice few times I call; they came to see him.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age, 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

5.4 SPACE AND PRIVACY

Several interviewees in temporary accommodation provided under the HRA were finding it hard to live in the confined space of their accommodation. Issues ranged from privacy to having room to play and for the equipment needed for a disabled child (see also later section on disability).

“I have one room with two beds; there is no privacy at all. I want to change my clothes; there is no privacy. I want two bedrooms for privacy – [my child] sees me dressing; [it] feels really embarrassing.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“...there is no privacy at all.

“The morning has become more annoying and stressful when they are fighting for privacy. My son is 13 now. So many changes. My daughter, she has recently [started] her period; that’s when it’s really annoying. When she wants to change clothes, she’s asking, ‘Can I change my clothes now?’ I say to my son, ‘Go to my room’ [to give her some privacy], but he says no. Their bedroom doesn’t take two single beds; it’s a bunk. When they are young, it’s nice. Because she is tall [now], when she gets up, every time she bangs her head on the bed.”

Interviewee with three children, pre-school and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

The interviewees who were staying (or had stayed) in shared house accommodation allocated under section 17 of the Children Act reported issues relating to their privacy, security and wellbeing in the accommodation.

“We were so disappointed... I just didn’t know what to do because (after a month in a hotel room) I’m looking for a place where my son can crawl, can be free, can be happy, but I realise that in this house everybody’s marching on the floor... And then because of where I came from, I came from a place that they were trying to kill me... so you know I was [hoping] these other housemates will not be afraid [of my family or want to harm us]...”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

The use of cameras in the shared accommodation meant that women felt unable to go to and from the bathroom in a robe or night clothes, and generally made them feel uncomfortable. The extent of the rules and restrictions in the shared house were described as oppressive, although there was some very positive feedback about the support provided by a member of staff at the house.

“The camera thing is not OK at all. It’s like as if you are infringing on people’s privacy.”

Interviewee two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

All the interviewees in section 17 accommodation felt that the accommodation was not sufficiently large or well-equipped for the number of families living there, which made the accommodation a poor environment for children and adults alike.

“Kitchen and everything is shared. Cabinets are shared. It’s not enough for five families... It’s just ... very depressing, the entire atmosphere – they treat us like children. Constantly behind you with room checks – you are living on someone else’s terms. In those houses only one person visit can

come to room. There is constant conflict and misunderstandings.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 3-4 years in temporary accommodation

One of the interviewees experienced a deeply traumatic incident where her young daughter was sexually abused by an older child in shared accommodation. She felt that the mixed age of the accommodation was the reason for the incident. Due to the slow response to moving one of the households out, she had to take legal action with the support of a children's legal charity.

“*It's just... very depressing, the entire atmosphere... There is constant conflict and misunderstandings.*

“They have a responsibility to place age appropriately, not placing children with older children.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 3-4 years in temporary accommodation

Although not an issue for them personally, two interviewees felt that it was hard for residents who were practising other faiths to be accommodated by a Christian charity. An example given involved incidents where negative attention was drawn to someone's religious reminders on their phone.

Shared accommodation posed a challenge in terms of cleanliness and protecting children from Covid-19. One mother described the way she had to keep her child in the confines of one room during the pandemic. She struggled with the decision to leave him alone or try and carry him to the toilet.

“For example, I take it upon myself every day, I cleaned all the handles of my door, of the kitchen door, of the laundry room, every handle I pass by, and the doors to the exit, everywhere I just clean because of my daughter and my son. My son is special needs, so I don't want anybody touching it. In fact, since this isolation, I have refused to take him out of my room, except I want to grab bath for him or go to toilet for him. He doesn't go out of the room because he doesn't have hands and legs, so I don't want him to go and crawl and touch something.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- Very often, families struggled to obtain the equipment and furniture they needed to create a habitable space.
- Many faced challenges with the condition of the accommodation, which impact on life every day.
- Some families felt unsafe; this was compounded by feelings of isolation and lack of familiarity with a new area.
- Families talked about the lack of space and privacy in temporary accommodation.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF could explore how they can extend and develop their work in:

- supporting families in making temporary accommodation as habitable as possible and meeting their basic needs during risk periods – for example, waiting for Universal Credit or managing some of the costs of moving
- supporting families who are moved to a new area
- managing families' expectations about how long they may be housed in temporary accommodation and supporting families to make choices based on this information
- ensuring a clear understanding of how to report and escalate issues with unfit housing and disrepair.

LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION: IMPACT ON KEY AREAS OF FAMILY LIFE

This chapter explores the experience of living in self-contained accommodation for those placed under the Homelessness Reduction Act and in shared houses for those placed by social services under section 17 in the following areas:

- finances and work
- child development and education
- place and community
- health.

6.2 FINANCES AND WORK

6.2.1 Paying for the basics and debt

All of the people interviewed were struggling financially to some extent and many were in debt, ranging from around £200 to several thousand pounds. Those in receipt of additional benefits such as Personal Independence Payment (PIP) or Disability Living Allowance (DLA), and/or in a household with two adults where one was working, were struggling less.



“We buy second-hand clothes. The boys get disability living allowance and they like to go to [soft play]... We try and manage our money in a way that doesn’t leave us in debt but we have a little bit.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I literally have about £60 to last a month with food... The thing I don’t understand is that the foodbank are only there to help people a certain amount of times, but it’s a situation that keeps happening... I do appreciate... UC [Universal Credit]... but the money is not stretching... I am trying to get myself to understand my entitlements...”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I have literally about £60 to last a month with food... the money is not stretching.”

It was common for interviewees to describe costs resulting specifically from living in temporary accommodation. These included travel costs from other

boroughs to take children to school, having to use a laundrette, having to buy things to make a temporary situation bearable, and moving from stage one to stage two accommodation.

“My friend gave me £50 and social services gave me £10 for travel here... Washing of clothes I have to give up; to do washing and drying here it’s £3 wash, £3 dry and then you need £3 to dry again. I had a solicitor (from the church). I am now paying back for that. For rent arrears I owe £50-60 a month... Friends I owe about £20-40 a month to pay back. I do feel pressure because of debt.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age;
1-3 months in temporary accommodation

“...to do washing and drying here it’s £3 wash, £3 dry and then you need £3 to dry again.”

“So, I took taxi – and for my stuff it was the council that sent a van... There was only a sofa and the bed and a kids’ bed there. I needed to get everything I need. I am trying... I got a grant, not from Home-Start but with the help of Home-Start, it was for home stuff plates and things. [With my universal credit I am] just trying to manage it all the time... I have debt from friends.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

“I am in debt as I have to buy new stuff and to travel. My money [situation] is not very good. I am getting £400 a month. I did apply for child benefit but I have not heard back yet. When you move... they provide you with a van and you give a list of your stuff. I got taxi; it was £60 from Westminster to here!”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

Help with grants, vouchers and foodbank referrals, as well as being given clothes and nappies by voluntary sector agencies, were viewed as very helpful. Several people had to claim benefits for the first time or were entitled to new benefits when they became homeless; and support with this was also often valued. In some cases, people needed support from Citizens Advice and Cardinal Hume Centre with claims and appeals.

“Cardinal Hume Centre got money for a carpet and help me how to claim benefits. They gave [me] supermarket vouchers for clothes and for the foodbank where they give food for those who need it. A lot of cans and bread. [It was] helpful. They were very kind getting books and clothes, school uniform, help to write letters to Westminster.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

For those who did not have access to benefits, the provision of vouchers, and similar support, was a lifeline, bolstering the subsistence payments provided by social services.

“[Charity outside Westminster] gave me £200... my social worker gave me the £100 for coats and clothes. They’ve been very, very nice. Then they [the charity] did [an event where you could get free] clothes for children.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

6.2.2 Working

Several interviewees were working, and in the case of the two families with two parents living in the household, one parent was working. Two single parents were social care workers in Westminster; another was on maternity leave from a catering role and hoped to secure childcare to return to this. In the two families where one adult worked, one was an electrician and one was a civil servant.

Work posed challenges financially, especially for single parents – for example, needing to travel, doing extra washing of work clothing and varying levels of income (as working hours fluctuated week by week). Interviewees who were working described how it gave their time more purpose and demonstrated a work ethic to their children. Several of those who were not working were very keen to return to work.

“This temporary accommodation is £500 a week. When I work a 20-hour week I have to pay £100 for rent; it’s up and down, sometimes [I pay] £70-80 depending on how much work I do. If I end the week with £150 and I pay £100 for rent, then I get £50. It’s better than nothing... Working does so much good... You get peace of mind because you are working and earning money; you are going out for work. I have really good network in my work. We are lovely team.”

Interviewee with three children, infant and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

“Working does so much good... You get peace of mind... I have really good network in my work.”

“I am a carer in Westminster three days a week... I need to wash my uniform every day. I have six to seven clients so it’s not good to wear the same clothes. I have to wash in the hotel bathroom as it’s too expensive [to use the washing facilities where I live].”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I do care work in Westminster. It’s hard but I have to do it as I want my kids to see me working. If I don’t work, they will wonder where I get money from!”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

6.2.3 Money to do fun things

Parents described feeling guilty or sad that they did not have money for fun activities and extra things for their children such as toys and games. One commented that even the school disco was £3 and that being short of money could feel very visible. Where children had been able to access holiday clubs, outings and activities, for example, through social services or Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF, this was beneficial to the whole household. Interviewees gave examples of things they would like to be able to do, including joining a gym, providing access to sports activities for children, and buying games or toys.

“[I would like him to do] karate and stuff; there is a boxing place but when you add the £3 a session up it adds up. It’s something he really would enjoy but my vulnerability with financial stability is not fitting the need and I feel like he is missing out. Paddington Arts is £30 membership for the whole year – you can do drama... and his friend goes there. Also, you can pay for gym membership there.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I love their [Home-Start] summer programme. Sometimes you go to the zoo, sometimes a picnic. You would love it for disabled children too. It’s nice. We’re free to let them be. I love Home-Start.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“It’s something he really would enjoy but my vulnerability with financial stability is not fitting the need... I feel like he is missing out.”

6.3 CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

6.3.1 Early years

Several of the mothers of pre-school children were concerned about their children’s development. Two commonly cited factors were the lack of space for their children to play and the lack of opportunities to socialise due to the pandemic.



“My daughter is not talking yet as we have been all the time alone. It was lockdown – then when we meet friends very few times she runs away.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“My daughter had an assessment for autism; I will get more tests for her after the assessment. Friends notice that she doesn’t play with other kids and is not talking. I don’t have much space in my room. I had to be ten days with her in my room [isolating]; it was very hard to stay in the house. Her attitude is changing more – tantrums [when] she wants to go out.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

Some households had not had the usual input from health visitors due to moving when they had young children during the pandemic.

“[Did you see a health visitor?] Nothing. No one. I was watching her to see how to feed, I just worked it out myself, I had no one to help me.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“The health visitor, because of the Covid, I saw just three times or two times, but she also retired. After that we didn’t get anything. Even when I called with questions, they said she left. Covid changed so many things;

I got less support. When I had my two older children, it used to be good and I had support from health visitor and everything.”

Interviewee with three children, infant and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

6.3.2 Disability

Four families had children with special needs; in three cases these required complex, ongoing specialist input – for example, a special school and various therapies including occupational therapy. A move between areas created a gap in the specialist help required by two households with young children with special needs. Another family in accommodation provided by social services lacked the provision they needed for a child with very restricted mobility and found sharing accommodation a concern during Covid due to potential infection risk.

“There are more than 25 professionals involved in my first child’s care. My second child has some professionals involved. To get the same services I had to wait a long time. I had to wait more than six months to get all the services we needed, which again impacted my child’s development.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“To get the same services, I had to wait a long time.”

“Yes. You know, because he doesn’t have hands and legs... they are thinking occupational therapy for him. There have been three occupational therapists in Westminster, but now they referred us to this one in this [borough], they have not given me dates to come for appointments. They have write letter to me where they say they will book us dates, but they say [there is a] queue... they are telling me that it’s 18 weeks or so that you will be on the queue or something. The help in [here] is OK, but I think that in Westminster it was better... [In] Westminster the occupational therapist was already coming to see my baby in the hotel, she was already attending to him... she was very kind.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

Sleep disorders were an issue for two of the families whose children had special needs, which was made harder to deal with in small accommodation. In one instance the living room was used as a third bedroom to enable some children to sleep while the disabled child was having more disturbed nights in the bedroom. One mother described taking her child to A&E twice due to her being very distressed and unsettled during the night.

6.3.3 Education

One of the most pressing issues for those with school-aged children placed out of borough was getting to and from school. Children had tended to remain in their Westminster schools rather than moving to a new school in the area of their temporary accommodation. People feared being moved again and that changing schools would create additional upheaval for children already unsettled by their housing situation. For some parents there was a sense that children's schooling was the top priority for them and something that was going well. This meant it informed the way they organised their whole lives.

One family, for example, had been in temporary accommodation for nearly ten years and continued to make the long journey to Westminster for school and to work as a carer. They still feel far safer in Westminster than in the area they are staying. Spending hours travelling to and from school each day took its toll on families in many ways.

“He changed primary to secondary, and changed housing. All these places are temporary – how many times will I change [his school if we do that]? It’s still the same problem [whether we are in East or North London]. We have to get up at 5.30[am]; it’s a long travelling time.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age;
3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“*All the places are temporary – how many times will I change [his school if we do that]?*”

“The school is very good and my children are very smart. My son and daughter are at secondary. It’s a 6am – 7pm day. We get bus for four stops, then overground three stops, then underground... It’s far away and there is no time for homework. We are very tired. They also used to have activities like free football and the gym, but now we do nothing. It’s too much to do anything on Saturday or Sunday or after school activities. There is no chance to go with friends to stay over. It’s just not possible when we are so far away and I know they are sad.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

Several mothers raised the challenge of what to do with their own time when they needed to take children on long expensive journeys to school. Due to the distance, even older children who would have walked to school in Westminster were too anxious to travel alone (this was noted by two families). One person described how she had to kill time during school hours wandering around waiting for the children to finish school.

“I go to coffee shop or supermarket or sit in Victoria Station. Look around. Friends come and sit with me, but they are working and they all have something to do – everyone has lives. I go to Sainsbury’s and have very big look around; people think I’m going to steal as I am there so often.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

In two households, children had missed significant amounts of school due to homelessness and the pandemic.

“He had no school during pandemic; he wasn’t in school for one year and he is very behind. I don’t know how they support him; his spelling and writing [are] very behind. He started school in year one. [When he would have been in reception] it was lockdown and I didn’t know if [we] would stay [in this area] or not... So he had a gap of all reception.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“For my 12 year old, I made five schools admissions checks [in Westminster] but there is no space or I’m in position 19 out of 25 [for example].”

Interviewee with six children, infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

Access to the internet and technology was another challenge facing parents who needed to support children with learning during lockdown, but also to complete homework at any time. People had devices or internet access provided by charities, schools and social services.

“We have to come outside the building to use phone. For my son to do his homework he has to go moving around with the phone to get a connection – he can get one in the kitchen, but it’s by the gas [cooker]... The TV doesn’t work.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

“We didn’t have internet. When we were home schooling, school gave to us. Now I am set up with PIP, I have got internet. When only on UC [Universal Credit] I struggled to eat and get clothes... Other mums bring notebooks and pens [to school] for the children.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

While some interviewees were very strongly committed to continuing school in Westminster, one family was considering moving to local schools near their accommodation, but this was a source of great anxiety because some of the children in the family were willing to change and others were very resistant. Overall, it is clear that even though families know they could be in temporary accommodation long term, there is still the chance that they will be moved to another temporary home or secure accommodation in Westminster, so moving schools feels risky.

6.4 PLACE AND COMMUNITY

6.4.1 The area around the home

Those who had been moved away from Westminster to outer London generally saw the new area they had moved to as less well connected, less friendly and less diverse. In one case someone regarded the area they were in as dangerous. Some found new areas very unsettling, whereas others could see that places were reasonable, but still did not feel they were suitable for their family.



“I have moved to a different world... In Westminster I know the surrounding, know the people. Here people move out of the way of you. Some families don't like their kids hanging out with children from a different culture... We don't fit in; they move out of the way. In Westminster... people just like you for who you are.”

Interviewee with children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“*In Westminster,
I know the
surrounding,
know the people.*

“There is a park and a playground nearby but shops not that much. Not really my kind of shops. It's a nice area, very quiet but very far and isolated and people are not friendly – everyone is living their life. It's hard to make friends.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“It is dangerous here. I have lost my phone twice – it was grabbed from my hand with fighting force... I had wanted to go to the children's centre... I lived in Westminster long term and that never happened. I don't go that side now; I have trauma about it.”

Interviewee with one child aged two; 2-3 years in temporary accommodation

Conversely, those who had moved into Westminster, and the person who moved to another central borough from Westminster, generally found these to be good areas to live in.

“The boys have made some good friends in the community. People know [my son who has special needs] and if there is an activity going on and he's misbehaving they say, ‘Oh, that's how it is.’ If we go further, for parties and stuff, it can be really difficult. It's nice here; the [communal] courtyard... is very beautiful. It has lovely people. They show me where I can get cheap things. They give me clothes. People are very helpful.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“The borough I currently live in is very nice area because my nursery is four minutes and my GP and hospital very near my house and shopping in Iceland and Aldi, Poundland. I have been here almost three years.”

Interviewee with three children, infant to primary school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

Interviewees commented that they felt there were more services and more help for families in Westminster than elsewhere. In one case, someone felt that they would be reluctant to move back to their previous area, and felt that they had found a sense of community in Westminster.

“I want to stay here [Westminster] because I get used to people. Also I am getting a lot of help from Citizens Advice and also from people from church. Some of the times when things are very hard... one of the members will take my kids to stay over or take them to activities which I can't afford to pay [for].

Sometimes when they have church there is a lady there, she wants to keep kids out of street and she creates activities in church.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“[Are you going anywhere at the moment?] I am going to try and take my daughter to a soft play centre. None of the boroughs give as much support as Westminster; there would be more help there.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

6.4.2 Support networks – informal

One of the hardest things for people who had moved out of the borough was the distance from friends and family in Westminster and the time and expense to get back to the area by public transport. For people who had moved to the UK in adulthood, connection to community via a place of worship (in all but one cases this was a church) was often significant. For others, family ties were something impacted by moves.

“It’s very far from everything. I’m just being isolated in here I am very depressed. Nothing like my community and friends. They say they can’t come and see me; they have to take two buses... I liked to meet friends to go to a place of worship... being in a community is good.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“Most of [my] friends [from Westminster] are from all different countries. I am involved in the church and the children’s centre and I know people in the corner shop... I go to worship. I try to go each Sunday but it’s hard ‘cos we keep moving.”

Interviewee with two children, infant and primary-school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

“It messes with people’s minds. [When I was in Westminster] I would go out to do a bit of shopping and I could get my dad to pick the boys up or my brother could... It’s like I am secluded here; I have nobody.”

Interviewee with children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“It’s very far from everything. I’m just being isolated in here. I am very depressed. Nothing like my community and friends.”

People often commented that, while they understood it was hard for the council to secure places in Westminster itself, locations with good transport links would be far better for them. Several people commented that they felt that their support networks would find it hard to reach them in an emergency.

“[I know it would] not [be] in Westminster as it’s impossible; everyone want to be there... but somewhere you could easily get a bus like Manor Park or Finsbury Park. It’s two trains and one bus [from where I live to my home area]. I have to pay and it takes two hours or three hours. If there was an emergency no one would be able to come to me.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

6.5 ACCESSING PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

6.5.1 Voluntary sector support

Interviewees were very positive about the support they received from the voluntary sector agencies they were in touch with.

These were most commonly Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and Citizens Advice in Westminster, and also the Magpie Project in East London. Two interviewees mentioned Praxis. Routes into these services varied and included word of mouth, referrals from midwives and health visitors and via the Bessborough Family Hub (sometimes by referral and in one case through seeing posters and flyers).



The interviewees often accessed more than one voluntary sector service within Westminster; these were complementary and did not appear to duplicate. Cardinal Hume Centre tended to be accessed for specialist advice on housing and immigration issues and Citizens Advice was usually linked to housing and welfare benefits advice; this tended to be at the start of their journeys into temporary accommodation. Home-Start WKCHF was accessed for more general family support including visits from volunteers and the well-regarded therapy service.

Each element of support was highly relevant to the needs of those accessing temporary accommodation. Several people with immigration issues also referred to accessing solicitors, which they paid for directly or with help from friends and family. All services supported people to access vouchers or grants to help them meet their basic needs.

“Home-Start told me about Cardinal Hume Centre – and it was the midwife told me about Home-Start. They came to my house, a volunteer... both of them helpful, really good. The [Cardinal Hume Centre] caseworker sends emails to housing solutions [on my behalf]. The volunteer is a really different kind of help... for support, chatting. She came around twice or once a week. It was someone I can actually see even during the pandemic.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“Citizens Advice are very helpful; they have worked very well – to do with my housing, having communication with housing benefit and UC [Universal Credit]. I have a particular worker.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“My partner worked for two years and they were not adding the 50 points on [to my bidding account for choice-based lettings]. I was asking Westminster council and [it’s] very complicated when you don’t speak good English... Cardinal Hume Centre and... a lady who worked for WCC helped me... to put the 50 points on.”

Interviewee with three children, infant and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

Due to the pandemic, Cardinal Hume Centre was viewed by some interviewees as an advice service rather than a place to spend time. Conversely, one family with very challenging needs was able to spend time in the centre as a break from their accommodation. There was a sense from those who accessed advice from Cardinal Hume Centre that once the presenting issue was addressed, or could be progressed no further, this would probably be the end of their

support journey with Cardinal Hume Centre. There were some people who sought advice but were unable to get input from Cardinal Hume Centre because caseloads for immigration or housing advice were full.

“Cardinal Hume Centre, a family friend gave me their number when I was first in TA [temporary accommodation and] I got in touch. [Cardinal Hume Centre caseworker] helped me email the council and gave me advice... They helped me until I got here. I think then they closed my case. I have Home-Start – the local one here. My social worker put me in touch with them. The volunteer comes round and it’s very helpful. She watches my daughter while I get stuff done like housework; it’s very nice.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

Those who had earlier experiences of Cardinal Hume Centre from before the pandemic reported attending the Centre for a wider range of activities.

“Cardinal Hume Centre – I used to go there and they give me food when things are very hard when you go in the morning. Food from Prêt. I just go there and they give me for the kids. This man was there; he said if you need anything you can come here... [At] Cardinal Hume Centre I just used to go to do English classes; it was good. Before [the classes]... if someone left voice message, I had to listen four times!”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

Both Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF are constrained in terms of working with people if they move out of Westminster. An interviewee who had received support from Home-Start WKCHF was put in touch with Home-Start in the borough she was moved to, but found this ineffective and did not receive good onward support.

There were several people who referred to a sense of holistic and personal support, usually with a particular member of staff, and the far-reaching benefits of this, ranging from increased confidence and self-esteem to disclosing domestic violence.

“[Home-Start staff member], she was very helpful, a nice lady she helped me with contacting Westminster and making the decision to disclose DV [domestic violence] because that was a valid reason to get rehoused [here instead of my previous borough]. She provided emotional support. And then she said she is happy to go with me to any appointments or make any applications. She has provided me with a really nice supporting letter for the council; she has been really helpful.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

“Cardinal Hume Centre helped me email the council and gave me advice... I have Home Start... The volunteer comes round and it’s very helpful.”

6.5.2 Social services

Several interviewees were in touch, or had been in touch, with Early Help services and in particular the Bessborough Family Hub. Feedback on this was positive and it was often accessed in combination with support from, or onward referral to, Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF.

“I have someone from Early Help working [with] me... Comes to my house... I’ve been learning about ... circle of security; it’s ways that our children can communicate with us. Reason behind why [my son] is behaving the way he is... Since they have been involved with me and [my son], I feel more supported. I gave [my family practitioner] a good report of how we working together as he asked if he could talk about my situation with others. I have waited so long for someone like that, some consistency.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

Where people had social services support due to child protection issues or a Child in Need plan, relationships with social services were more strained and women felt that advocacy from voluntary sector agencies helped them to navigate these relationships. For one interviewee, whose child was on the child protection register, moving from borough to borough was problematic because she had to retell her story repeatedly. In other cases, there were disputes about how accurately information was recorded at meetings, and having an advocate really helped women to work through this. Interviewees’ experiences of how flexibly social services would assist them when they were placed out of borough varied.

“My social workers are not in Westminster, they were in [one borough], then [another borough], then [another borough]. It’s really annoying as I have anxiety and some already know my past, but some want to go into detail all over again. It’s quite annoying but it’s not their fault. The [most recent one] said, ‘I can’t help with housing as you are housed by Westminster.’ Social worker used to come here before she closed the case but I didn’t get the help I needed.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

The ongoing contact with Westminster social services was felt to be limited for one of the women staying in section 17 accommodation, with a gap in having an allocated social worker and a very long gap between Child in Need meetings. Another interviewee had a more positive experience of support with social services:

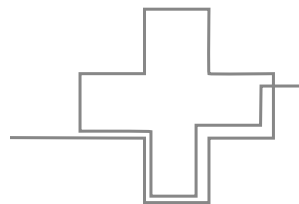
“Our social worker was very good, she gave her laptop... [so my daughter can] be reading every day, doing like online school. ...she used to ask us how we were doing... I wish that they’d give us the house in Westminster because that social worker is really good. The Westminster people, they are very good.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

“My social workers are not in Westminster, they were in [one borough], then [another borough], then [another borough].”

6.6 HEALTH

Some people retained GP services in Westminster despite being moved out of area because they thought they might move back to the borough. Those who transferred GPs found it hard to get appointments with their new local GP.



“I tried to get an appointment for my son [at our new GP] – two months and no appointment. He has eczema so it’s not an emergency. I phone every day.”

Interviewee with children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“In [the borough I now live in] another catastrophe was the doctors and GP. In Westminster something regarding my daughter is an emergency I got the same day or next day. [Here] they don’t care about a kid; it’s just like an adult. I had to take her to A&E; I didn’t have a choice... I have not spoken to the doctor about depression. They have an appointment in three to four weeks so I give up.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“I have had three different GPs. I want to see my GP re my mental health but I haven’t yet. There is no availability for an appointment with them.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

Two interviewees were managing serious, long-term health conditions themselves, including cancer and a rare condition impacting greatly on mobility and overall health. One person was in receipt of a social care package to help her manage her condition. Both these interviewees had experienced problems in the continuity of care as they moved area. For example, one person struggled to get the intensive medical help she knew she needed during pregnancy because her notes were in her previous home area (outside London).

“[Charity] has been wonderful. Then also they helped me to fill the form, HC2, or BHCS form, so that I can book for my teeth, because my teeth essentially is paining me if I drink hot water or cold water. So I want to see a dentist, but sadly all the dentists, I’ve called up to ten dentists, they say they are not taking NHS patients, they are booked or except they will do private. But at least now I have the form.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

6.7 TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH

Interviewees described the impact of their route into temporary accommodation and their current living situation on their mental health and that of their children. This theme cut across many of the other areas explored including immigration status, domestic violence, poverty, housing conditions, uncertainty about the future, and tiring and arduous routines.



6.7.1 Children's mental health

One of the parents interviewed, who has two children with special needs requiring special schools and a care package from social services, found that the temporary nature of their accommodation and having to move impacted on their wellbeing. Her oldest son, who does not have special needs, also felt anxious about the wellbeing of other family members. Attending a service for children with disabilities who also work with siblings was helpful for the older son.

“Because it’s temporary... we don’t know where we’re going and change is [a] huge issue for [my two autistic children]. They get very anxious to know where they’re going. I try and keep things repetitive for them. When we moved from [the previous block], it took them a long time to understand. It took them two to three weeks to settle into school... My [other] son suffers from anxiety. We go to [local charity] and they work with disabled people. They also do a siblings group. They make it like an activity and fun, but they also try to talk to the young people [who have siblings with special needs].”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“Because it’s temporary... we don’t know where we’re going and change is [a] huge issue for [my two autistic children].”

Another factor in children's mental health is trauma related to witnessing domestic violence.

“My son has so much problems because of my situation; he was witness [to what I went through]. I am constantly talking to school and teacher. He’s coping now, better than me, but before he was... not wanting to go to school, emotionally down. He went to doctor... he had counselling... [He has] low confidence, very scared about what’s going to happen to mummy, someone will come to harm mummy. He became very anxious. Hard for him to deal with other children. He is in trauma.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

6.7.2 Adult mental health

15 interviewees referred to mental health problems; some were diagnosed and others not. Previous trauma and PTSD, depression and low mood and anxiety were mentioned by several people.

Interviewees described many traumatic events relating to their homelessness including violence, exploitation and experiences during childbirth. In addition, some described feeling overwhelmed as they tried to navigate systems and paperwork. Several commented that they had accessed help or tried to access help from NHS services, but found these to have long waiting lists or be inflexible. One interviewee explained that a move between boroughs created a delay for reassessment.

“I used to have CAHMS in Westminster, then when I was 18 they stopped helping. They were going to give me adult mental health [support service] but that didn’t happen.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“I would say that I am suffering from trauma... I had CBT with Community Living, which has stopped – I don’t know why. I have depression and anxiety and childhood trauma.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

The counselling service offered by Home-Start WKCHF was mentioned positively by several interviewees; being flexible, continuing during the pandemic, and offering an open duration for counselling were key to this.

“I was going crazy. The GP wanted to give me therapy. [Home-Start team member] said she could give me a counsellor. My head was going to explode. I had the second diagnosis [of autism]. There was long queue [for the doctors counselling]. They’ve still not called me from the GP; I think I’m still in the queue. I just wanted to see a counsellor. The lady arranged by Home-Start was very good. It wasn’t just counselling. She told me a lot of things.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I was going crazy... I just wanted to see a counsellor.”

“Even with counselling, talking therapy, the problem is I missed a couple of appointments as the kids were ill and I couldn’t go. So they ended my sessions. The NHS is not flexible. I said I have kids and I did cancel [in advance]... Got counselling [via Home-Start] with a student in the final year. It changed me. It was on the phone as it was [during] Covid. It was really brilliant; each week she would call.”

Interviewee with two children, infant and primary school age; 1-3 months in temporary accommodation

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- Living in temporary accommodation is far more than a housing problem; the impact spans many areas including health, education, child development and financial situation.
- Families have often had traumatic and difficult experiences before and around the time they became homeless.
- Those living in temporary accommodation face multiple barriers in accessing the services and social networks they need as a result of being in temporary accommodation out of their usual area of residence.
- Opportunities to prevent the most negative impacts are wide ranging.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

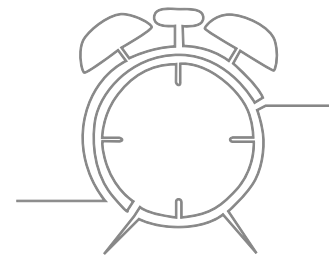
Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF could explore how they can extend and develop their work in:

- providing benefits checks, budgeting and debt advice and supporting people to access work, training and education or begin exploring options for this in the future if they wish to
- helping families navigate the need to access multiple services, sometimes across different boroughs and ensuring that people are connected with vital services such as health visitors and social services, as appropriate, when they move
- helping families identify and navigate opportunities to access services and support in the area they have been placed in, including proactive referrals and handovers rather than just signposting
- having clear, shared approaches to ensuring that those at risk of harm are identified and supported appropriately
- considering ways to support families living out of borough in the short or medium term
- supporting multi-agency approaches where services under pressure can be greater than the sum of their parts in meeting a family's needs and identifying where there are escalating risks
- providing support for children in education and helping them to access and thrive in education, considering some of the challenges around journeys to school, school equipment and space to learn
- providing flexible mental health support to parents and helping them to navigate statutory mental health services as part of a multi-agency approach
- supporting families with opportunities to have fun and enjoy leisure time.

MOVING ON

7.1 THE UNKNOWN: TIME IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Although their accommodation was formally ‘temporary’, many families we spoke to had been in stage two temporary accommodation, or social services provided accommodation, for a significant period of time, from several months to over ten years. Some had moved between temporary accommodation placements when properties were no longer available to the council, but most people had stayed in their self-contained accommodation for years.



Interviewees did not know when they were likely to be offered permanent accommodation and this impacted on many of the other areas of their lives – for example, when considering whether to move from schools they were happy with in Westminster to local schools which were an unknown; how much to invest in their current temporary accommodation to meet their needs; and whether to seek work in the area. The sense of being in limbo and powerless to change their housing situation impacted on nearly all of those interviewed.

“I want somewhere more settled. Don’t know how I will get out of TA [temporary accommodation]. They have said nothing; they don’t even provide any info – you just wait.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“We are living a very unsettled life and not enjoying [it]. I try to look for a better job but I don’t know where to apply. It’s disorganising mentally and emotionally in every way. I hope to get out [of temporary accommodation] as soon as possible.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“We are living a very unsettled life...”

“Even though it’s good accommodation in terms of location, living in a temporary rather than secure is very stressful as you don’t know what will happen next where will you go – your future is unpredictable. You cannot make any changes to the home to meet your needs and your children’s needs more. You don’t feel like you are living in own home.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

One interviewee was living in high-quality accommodation within Westminster, and while she was far more satisfied than most, she still felt the impact of the lack of somewhere she considered to be a settled home.

“In a way it could be worse. I could be in a worse area in a one bedroom. The flat is in amazing condition, furnished, but it is still not my home. I can’t really do

“...it is still not my home...”

anything... it's not my permanent home. I would like to know if there is maybe a better option to be a bit further out from where I am."

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

All but one of the families interviewed for the research hoped to move into social housing – usually provided by WCC. The data shown in Figure (g) below shows that only a very small number of homeless families (most of whom are living in temporary accommodation) move into social housing – an average of 21 households per month across the 22 months shown below. The two months with particularly low numbers – April and May 2020 – reflect the impact of Covid-19 restrictions.

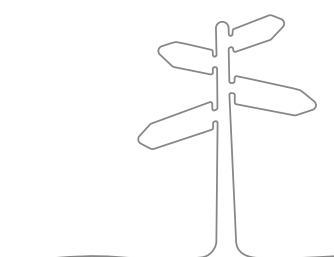
Figure (g) Number of homeless households moving into social housing

MONTH	2020/21	2021/22
Apr	1	17
May	2	33
Jun	26	20
Jul	33	25
Aug	19	25
Sep	14	15
Oct	18	16
Nov	26	12
Dec	28	18
Jan	15	18
Feb	36	
Mar	42	
Total	260	200

Interviewees were asked about what their expectations and wishes were in terms of their onward housing journey. Most wanted to get out of temporary accommodation, especially the Westminster families who were living further away from Westminster.

7.2 A LACK OF MEANINGFUL CHOICE AND CONTROL

There was a strong sense in the interviews of households being stuck without any positive options for moving on from temporary accommodation in the foreseeable future. People had commonly been told that the waiting list for social housing was many years but had not been given another viable route out of their situation.



“I explain to the headteacher [that we are in temporary accommodation far outside Westminster]. She gave me the number for [local MP] and she said send an email and explain. I sent her an email. She respond to me that someone will get back to me, then no one gets back – I send again then [she] told me some people live in a temporary flat for 20 years.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult;
5+ years in temporary accommodation

Struggles to get responses from busy Housing Solutions officers and not feeling a sense of regular contact or progress was an issue raised by several interviewees.

“I’ve moved from one place to another with domestic violence and my [very limited] mobility but I’m still struggling to put evidence in front of housing to get the right banding; it’s all about communication and evidence.”

Interviewee with six children, infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

Interviewees who had a local connection to Westminster assumed they had to return to the Westminster area because this was where they could secure social housing. Some mentioned that they would be interested in living outside London or in different parts of London.

“They said I’m allowed a two-bedroom flat and it has to be in Westminster. Other areas? I never thought about that as it’s my borough so I have to return there.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“I don’t have to [stay in Westminster]; I can move to other areas. I want to stay in London; [I’ve been here] more than 18 years. I would like to live in Caledonian Road. I like where Elephant and Castle is. [And] Surrey Quays.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“I don’t want [my] son to go to a secondary in Westminster. I would prefer to be like half an hour out – Bushey, Chessington.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

An interviewee who was moved to Westminster from outside London due to domestic violence would like to be able to move to a completely different area of the country and had looked for options online to see if this was possible given the very high demand for accommodation in central London.

7.3 PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR AS A ROUTE OUT OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

None of the interviewees reported being under any pressure to accept private rented sector offers and only one recalled being made an offer that was unsuitable due to accessibility. It may be that it is hard to identify suitable offers of accommodation in the private rented sector for the families we spoke to due to the affordability of private rented sector accommodation suited to their needs. There were various factors that meant most interviewees had explored and dismissed it as an option:

- It was felt that it might result in repeat homelessness and all the waiting in temporary accommodation would have been for nothing, whereas holding out for social housing would eventually result in a more affordable and stable home.
- The private rented sector is viewed as even less stable than temporary accommodation because in temporary accommodation the council has to move you if the landlord sells, for example.
- The private rented sector is not affordable and often landlords are unwilling to rent to people on benefits.
- Voluntary sector organisations sometimes advise specifically against moves into private rented accommodation due to the risk of repeat homelessness.
- People with serious health problems felt that the private rented sector was acceptable for people in good health, but too risky for people who were in poor health.

“I don’t know what to do. When they put me here, they say you are in a house now, if you want to go private go private – and he wants me off the phone. If I go private, I could lose all my rights. I feel sad all the time. The only thing that makes me happy is kids... My heart tells me I want a permanent house, but my head tells me [I should look at moving into PRS]... It’s happy versus secure. I don’t know what to do. I could get into private and for three years be happy, so comfy, but have to move after that – that would worry me because of the kids’ school.”

Interviewee with children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“A council flat is better. Maybe I would be open minded but the landlord can evict you at any moment and I wanted something more settled and secure.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

One person had been offered a private rented flat through the council, but it had not met her needs in terms of space and accessibility and it had felt like a poor option given the potential instability. Another had tried to find her own tenancy, but had found it impossible to find something suitable.

“Private renting is difficult. They don’t want someone on benefits; they want someone who is working full time. I was offered and went to see [private rented accommodation] in Clapham. It’s a better area, but top floor with no lift, one room very small two bed. The living room was like a kitchen space. I have gone through a lot; I want something I can get and be at peace.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“I finally gave up and started looking for private rented accommodation. I asked friends and family to help me with six months’ rent in advance. I tried everywhere and as soon as I mentioned I would get housing benefit everyone refused to give me the property.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

7.4 MAKING AN APPLICATION AS HOMELESS IN A DIFFERENT BOROUGH

Two interviewees felt there was the possibility of making a new homelessness application to another borough: one person to make a new application to Westminster due to newly disclosed risks to her safety in her borough and another who had been in temporary accommodation a long time in another borough and wanted to apply there, forgoing her Westminster connection. Both were nervous about this and unsure about the process.

“Going through the homelessness [application] was an entirely difficult process and I am still not in a secure accommodation. I am making application to Westminster Council based on info I have about domestic violence and my child’s needs. I am not sure whether they will accept this or not. My children are settled at the nursery now. I feel a lot better compared to where I lived in [my previous area]. Even if Westminster accept to rehouse me, they might send me somewhere unfamiliar and I will feel so helpless and so lonely again.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“I contacted councils in [Wales] and [outside London and the South East] – they said you have to be in the place to make a homelessness application; I had to approach Westminster. It was not in my plan at all. I didn’t know it would be a nightmare to seek support.”

Interviewee with six children, infant to secondary school age; 1-6 months in emergency accommodation following stays in other emergency accommodation

“Going through the homelessness [application] was an entirely difficult process and I am still not in secure accommodation.”

7.5 BIDDING

Most interviewees housed under the Homelessness Reduction Act were actively bidding for properties. This was widely considered to be a frustrating experience with no indication of when it would prove successful. Several people said they had been told that it would be an extremely long time to wait for a property.

“I was bidding in Cat 4, now I’m in Cat 3. The lady said I was 826 for bidding, and that would be 10 years. Cat 3 is someone who must have a lift. I bid but what’s the point? Often there is nothing with three bedrooms.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“We are bidding but we never get any bid. We don’t want to be in temporary anymore. They do come up but we never have the points that you need or you bid and then you just don’t hear anything.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“...we never have the points that you need or you bid and then you just don’t hear anything.”

“I am bidding... There are some of the flats I bid on and I am the only one and they never call me. I don’t know what is the reason... I don’t understand how much points or how it works before they call you to see a property.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

Two people had their bidding stopped: one due to rent arrears and the other due to uncertainty around her income and potential redundancy pay.

7.6 HOUSING OFFERS

One interviewee was offered to keep her temporary accommodation long term when a duty was accepted, but it was not clear whether this would be a social tenancy. It was a very long distance from her son’s school so she declined. The person who had been in temporary accommodation for more than ten years had two housing offers over that time.

“Eight years ago, I saw a flat in [South London borough], two bed, but it has damp. It’s on the ground floor – perfect – but it was damp. As soon as I went [in] I could tell, so I said ‘no’... The second one was three or four years ago in Victoria. The rent was £310 per week for the two-bedroom flat... even if I said okay the housing association wouldn’t let me take it as my son was nearly ten. When they see me, they will say what’s the point [as you will be overcrowded soon].”

Interviewee with three children, infant and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

7.7 MOVING ON FROM SECTION 17 ACCOMMODATION

The three interviewees in section 17 accommodation had different routes out of temporary accommodation. For two women it is likely that they will make an application as homeless when they are required to leave their accommodation, assuming they are given leave to remain in the UK. The other person plans to work in a role that will enable her to access the private rented sector comfortably, again assuming her immigration status is resolved and she is then able to work. The speed at which they are able to move into the mainstream housing, benefits and labour market is subject to Home Office processes and there is little they can do to expedite this.

“OK, for me in six months’ time, in one year time, I’d like the Home Office to... give us the asylum or the [Leave to Remain] we are seeking, I would have the British passport for my son and my daughter and myself, you know? So that we’ll be free, we will not be in the camera house, we will have our own apartment, and then I’ll be able to work. I’d like to work or go to school.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- There are very limited options for families to move on from temporary accommodation with long waits for social housing and a lack of affordability and stability in the private rented sector.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

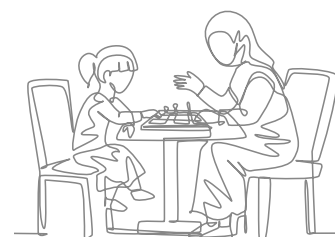
The lack of a plan or realistic hope of moving out of temporary accommodation is one of the greatest challenges for families. Opportunities to work with families on this include:

- working with WCC to ensure a shared understanding of the possible routes out of temporary accommodation and how they can be accessed, including understanding the importance and best approach to accessing the bidding system
- working with families to check they have the correct access to bidding systems and any other support to move on from temporary accommodation
- supporting families to understand their potential routes out and their rights, including exploring different options in a proactive way that is led by the parent and children but encouraged by trusted professionals or volunteers
- supporting people who want to study or return to work to explore options available to them now or in the future
- working with WCC and the wider sector to assess the impact of lengthy stays in temporary accommodation on children and families' wellbeing and development in an ongoing way.

COPING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION AND WHAT MAKES A HOME

8.1 COPING WITH LIFE IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, interviewees described incredibly challenging situations, with multiple pressures impacting on every aspect of their lives. However, during interviews, either when expressly asked or as part of answers to other questions, people outlined a range of ways in which they cope and the positive things about their families' lives.



Unsurprisingly, many of the positives were centred around interviewees' children. One interviewee described children as "healing" and having a positive impact on her mental health overall, despite her worries about them and her poor health. Two of the youngest interviewees reflected on how pleased they were to be mothers and the focus and company this created for them.

"I love it [being a mum]. It's nice having someone there all the time."

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

"I am very happy when I become a mother as I have more responsibilities, not like a student – so not getting stressed or get fed up, being stronger, getting back to work, doing exercise and eating healthy food."

Interviewee with one child, infant; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

"The children come first, so as long as a mother knows they feel safe they can be more at ease."

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

Another interviewee described a sense of achievement and pride in managing the household and ensuring that her children were always fed and had some money for treats (sweets and snacks).

"I don't take drugs or drink. I cook our meals, keep the fridge full, and decorate."

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

"The children come first, so as long as a mother knows they feel safe they can be more at ease."

For some people, their children doing well in education was a source of great pride and a central factor in decision-making, especially given worries that their housing situation was impacting on their children's education and wellbeing.

“He is doing well academically. He was discouraged but he made friends in his football team and relationships with people around the place.”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“School is very good and my children are very smart... We go to the library in Westminster.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

Interviewees were very limited in the kind of leisure activities they could do with their children, but some referred to playing and cooking with their children as being a pleasure in life. One interviewee referred to having a McDonalds after work and school in Westminster before she and her son made the long journey home.

“Make food, go to the park; we have a football. We all cook together... Everyone invites my children to parties. They see different things.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“I play with my daughter and cook [for us]. Food from my country – spicy vegetarian and chicken and fish – I cook very well!”

Interviewee two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

“Make food, go to the park; we have a football.”

Some interviewees referred to links with community and friends as a positive aspect of life including some who travelled from outer London boroughs to reach gatherings or see friends and family.

“All [people from my country] in Westminster church – every Sunday go to church and there is food and gatherings after mass. I can talk own language.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

Three mothers reflected on how they manage to have some time to themselves when they have children with special needs. In one case, the interviewee had previous experience working in research and used these skills to find out information for her own interest but also on themes that might help her to look after her son.

“The only thing I enjoy is fitness at home and trying to look at the goodness and positive things... I did my workout this morning. I was going to go out for a walk, I get myself too attached [to being indoors] then I don't want to go out and it takes me a lot to go out. I [am]... working on my motivation. I have a positive outlook in me, but some days are so tough.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“When they go to school [after being up in the night], I have a nice cup of tea.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“I love to research, I love to browse, so I do a lot of online research... I have books on special needs people, I know about [a type of syndrome]... I watch documentaries, I watch National Geographic, I listen to a lot of Al Jazeera and Witness programmes on TV and then I go online and I read a lot of books. That’s something I love to do, research in books, reading and watch movies.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school and secondary school age; 1-2 months in temporary accommodation

Whilst it is important to recognise families’ different ways of managing life in temporary accommodation, the pleasures described were often very hard won and did not compensate for the struggles that families described.

8.2 ADVICE TO OTHERS

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give to other families being placed in temporary accommodation. Interviewees’ advice centred around: accessing support, including from voluntary services and for mental health; the importance of remaining in contact with local authority housing services; and understanding one’s rights.



“My advice would be [to] go to Cardinal Hume Centre and Bessborough [family hub Early Help team]; they will help. If I know that in first place, maybe I wouldn’t spend so much on a credit card.”

Interviewee with two children, primary and secondary school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“What would I say to other people? I’d say bidding is not helping me. I wouldn’t recommend that. If we didn’t have special needs children, we’d consider private renting... If I get a job and save and we have more than one income, maybe we will get a mortgage or something.”

Interviewee with three children, infant and secondary school age; 10+ years in temporary accommodation

“Advice? I would say, focus on themselves as in mindfully and get the most support whether it [be] therapy or counselling, something to guide them in that way. It can really, really help. The children come first, so as long as a mother knows they feel safe they can be more at ease.”

Interviewee with one child, primary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“You need to know your rights... You can stand up for yourself.”

“Finding places to go that are free. And you have to fight to get out of [temporary accommodation]. Keep on at them as they will forget you. They [the council] don’t see people.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“You need to know your rights. Here in [charity name] we had a seminar to tell us here are your rights, human rights... People can’t bully you. You can stand up for yourself.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

8.3 WHAT WOULD MAKE A HOME

People were asked about what would make a home for them and their children. The most common responses were about having a place where you were not constantly under threat of moving, and could invest in the area and the space because you felt more settled. Others spoke about having the basic material things that would make their lives more pleasant. Two mentioned being in a safe area.

“Furniture, a dining table. A nice bed to sleep on. Just to have a normal life... I would like somewhere where the children can bike or walk to school...”

Interviewee with one child, secondary school age; 3-6 months in temporary accommodation

“Just a nice, small place, not too far from family and not in an unsafe area.”

Interviewee with one child, infant; 6-12 months in temporary accommodation

“Proper home – it’s really important when you have a proper home, you will live there, not thinking of moving and you can buy what you think will last you for 10-20 years.”

Interviewee with three children, secondary school age and adult; 5+ years in temporary accommodation (placed by another borough)

“A home which is for you, and you feel like living in this home forever. You don’t need to change and move again. You get familiar; you make local connection to that place without fear of moving and make your home accessible and the most suitable place for you and your needs.”

Interviewee with two children, pre-school age; 2-5 years in temporary accommodation

“We would love a ground floor flat so that we don’t disturb the neighbours as our son wakes up and runs around.”

Interviewee with three children, primary and secondary school age; 5+ years in temporary accommodation

“Sure, the community helps me, but the most important thing for me is to be somewhere safe.”

Interviewee with one child, pre-school age; 1-2 years in temporary accommodation

“...you feel like living in this home forever... you make local connection to that place without fear of moving and make your home accessible and the most suitable place for you and your needs.”

SUMMARY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

SUMMARY

- Families living in temporary accommodation are motivated by their children's safety and wellbeing.
- Interviewees described being proactive in seeking and accessing advice and support.
- Their advice to others in temporary accommodation included reaching out for support, remaining in contact with the local authority and understanding one's rights.
- Interviewees sense of home is impacted on by the stability of their accommodation, whether they feel able to invest in their physical space and whether they feel connected to the local area.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This section provided evidence on what was important to helping interviewees cope in temporary accommodation. Opportunities to respond include:

- creating opportunities to build on the strengths and wishes of individual families – for example, providing activities or personal budgets to help families do the things that matter to them/keep them strong e.g. spending time outdoors, cooking, reading, going to places like the zoo³⁷
- offering child-focused support to ensure minimal educational disruption and additional support for children's education and mental health to help mitigate the impact of temporary accommodation
- provide support that enables families to make their environment as safe and homely as possible
- supporting parents to protect their own wellbeing with opportunities to connect with others or pursue goals such as returning to work or managing physical and mental health
- helping families to understand and exercise their rights.

³⁷ This refers to the type of personal budget widely used in the homelessness sector – usually for single homeless people with multiple needs. See: Homeless Link (2020) Tips from the frontline: Personal budgets: https://homelesslink-lb54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Personal_budgets_briefing.pdf

PART C: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION: EMERGING SUPPORT AND
PREVENTION OPTIONS

74

CHAPTER TEN

RECOMMENDATIONS

77



CONCLUSION: EMERGING SUPPORT AND PREVENTION OPTIONS

9.1 KEY FINDINGS: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF FAMILIES LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

1. At any given time, there are well over 3,000 children in temporary accommodation placed by WCC, with just under half of these being placed within the borough; others are most commonly placed in outer London. This is therefore a significant issue locally.
2. Wider structural issues and government policies relating to immigration, housing and welfare policy are driving the levels of need for temporary accommodation. As such, this is an issue that is unlikely to quickly disappear.
3. The evidence base in England shows that experiencing temporary accommodation is harmful to families and children and it perpetuates inequality.
4. Moving into temporary accommodation reflects a period of upheaval and trauma, including the trauma of hidden homelessness or domestic abuse.
5. The experience of emergency and shared accommodation comes with its own unique set of challenges. Whilst often short-lived, for people housed by social services this was not the case.
6. Interviewees' experiences show that living in temporary accommodation is far more than a housing problem; the impact spans many areas of their lives including health, education and child development, and families' financial situation.
7. The 'temporary' nature of temporary accommodation creates a huge amount of uncertainty for families, leading to a lack of choice and control, and families being in a sense of limbo for a prolonged period of time. This is in stark comparison to families' idea of home.
8. There are very limited options for families to move on from temporary accommodation with long waits for social housing and the lack of affordability and stability in the private rented sector.
9. The lack of a plan or realistic hope of moving out of temporary accommodation in the short or medium term is one of the most challenging things facing families and it means that, very often, the experience is by no means temporary.

9.2 WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR PRACTICE LOCALLY?

Throughout the report, we reflected on the range of possible areas for action identified through the research with people living in temporary accommodation.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES MOVING INTO TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The initial routes into temporary accommodation are often the culmination of traumatic experiences, in addition to the trauma of leaving their home or not having a home. Areas to consider for Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners are:

- ensuring a trauma-informed service at every level, considering:
 - the journeys of households before they reached out for help with housing including those relating to gender, race, immigration and violence
 - the needs of families who can be placed in accommodation at any time of day or night
 - the challenges in meeting the most basic needs of the family in the immediate period of moving into temporary accommodation
 - the disconnection and isolation felt by those placed in emergency accommodation
- being expert or connected to experts in the fields of immigration, domestic violence and housing
- working with the local authority to ensure the most effective advocacy approach possible, based on an understanding of the context and resources available and the best outcomes for homeless families in Westminster
- service providers acting as a partner to the council in different ways – as a critical friend, as a conduit for the experiences of families and as a respected adversary, as appropriate to different scenarios.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The period during which families live in temporary accommodation is often long and there are numerous challenges across different areas of their lives. Opportunities to prevent the most negative impacts are wide ranging. Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners should explore how they can extend and develop their work in:

- supporting families in making temporary accommodation as habitable as possible and meeting their basic needs during risk periods – for example, waiting for Universal Credit or managing the costs of moving such as through targeted financial support
- providing benefits checks, budgeting and debt advice

Continued

- helping families navigate the need to access multiple services, sometimes across different boroughs, and ensuring that people are connected with vital services such as health visitors and social services, as appropriate, when they move
- helping families identify and navigate opportunities to access services and support in the area they have been placed in, including proactive referrals and handovers rather than just signposting
- ensuring clear, shared approaches to ensuring that those at risk of harm are identified and supported appropriately
- considering ways to support families living out of borough either short or medium term
- supporting multi-agency approaches where services under pressure can be greater than the sum of their parts in meeting a family's needs and identifying where there are escalating risks
- providing support for children in education, helping them to access and thrive in education, considering some of the challenges around journeys to school, school equipment and space to learn
- providing flexible mental health support to parents and helping them to navigate statutory mental health services as part of a multi-agency approach
- ensuring a clear understanding of how to report and escalate issues with unfit housing and disrepair
- supporting families with opportunities to have fun and enjoy leisure time.

EXPLORING OPTIONS FOR MOVING ON FROM TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The lack of a plan or realistic hope of moving out of temporary accommodation in the short to medium term is one of the most challenging things facing families. This is well understood by WCC; the Homelessness Strategy 2019 – 2024 includes a 'Temporary Accommodation Reduction Strategy'. Specifically, it acknowledges the need to reduce the time households spend in temporary accommodation; provide them with settled housing more quickly; and offer households more choice over the location of these homes. Opportunities to work with families include:

- working with WCC to ensure a shared understanding of the possible routes out of temporary accommodation and how they can be accessed
- working with families to check they have the correct access to bidding systems and any other support to move on from temporary accommodation
- supporting families to understand their potential routes out and their rights, including exploring different options in a proactive way led by the parent and children
- supporting people who want to study or return to work to explore options available to them now or in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are based on all the evidence collected through the research as well as cross sector consultation with key stakeholders in the homelessness field.

10.1 TARGETED SUPPORT FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES

- Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners should create a consistent referral process to ensure services target those living in temporary accommodation. This could include linking directly with the Housing Solutions service and continuing to build on the referral route from social services and voluntary sector partners. An example could be an automatic referral when the caseworker from Housing Solutions ends their involvement because a main housing duty has been determined and from that point a caseworker is no longer assigned.
- There are specific risks and issues facing those who are living on subsistence payment from social services and/or living in shared accommodation; Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF and partners should consider whether a unique approach is needed for this group.
- Ensure that plans to target support reflect the fact that many Westminster clients will be placed out of borough for long periods and what might work best in this case – for example, intensive support during the transition to a new area, outreach and visiting approaches, periods of remote support, more proactive referrals and handovers to local services.
- Ensure that the voluntary sector offer has a balance of expertise in the legal areas needed to help families access their rights, including immigration, housing and child protection, as well as holistic family support services.
- Create specific resources for homeless families and those working with them (as a written resource will not be accessible to all), providing tips and advice on common issues such as damp. Include people with experience of temporary accommodation in creating the resources.

10.2 COLLABORATION AND MULTI-AGENCY WORKING TO MAKE THE BEST OF OUR COLLECTIVE RESOURCES

- Partners should consider working together to create a 'Westminster offer' for homeless families, which prevents families falling through the gaps and creates a shared sense of endeavour and active involvement in the cases of those in temporary accommodation where desired. What do we aspire to or what can we commit to as organisations working in the family support, housing and homelessness system?
- Partners should work together to ensure that those in the voluntary sector have a clear and up-to-date view of the pressures facing the Housing Solutions service to ensure advocacy work is effective and realistic – for example, understanding what the reasons for being accepted onto the transfer list might be and knowing how to escalate issues with repairs, suitability and housing conditions.
- A shared understanding of what the possible options for families are should be developed between the council and the voluntary sector exploring, for example:
 - Is there scope for those who would like to move out of London or to another area to explore this?

- Are there any people who could be usefully encouraged to explore the private rented sector through a supported scheme such as Real Lettings or Capital Letters or the council's own scheme?
- Could any further guidance be developed on likely times in temporary accommodation that are more personalised than the waiting times on the council's website, to help people work out whether to make connections in their current area?
- How important is it for families to bid regularly? Is there a way of giving families a more specific and realistic idea on their success of bidding on listed properties?
- What are the risks facing families in terms of being moved at short notice to another area?
- More detailed collaborative systems mapping of services in Westminster – both statutory and voluntary sector – to create a more coherent and clear sense of the network of services and gaps for this specific group. There is an aspiration to know more about each other's offer and build on this.
- Improving the accessibility of information about services within and beyond Westminster, for example, through lists or directories and potentially a pan-London directory of support services for families in temporary accommodation to avoid duplication of effort in local areas.
- A local forum, multi-agency meeting or action/tasking group focusing on the needs of homeless families should be convened. The priority should be getting the right people round the table and a balance of those from the voluntary sector rather than the format or regularity of meetings. Existing examples of such forums should be considered in the design.

10.3 TAKING A SECONDARY PREVENTION LENS TO REDUCING THE HARMFUL IMPACT OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

- Support should consider the key identified risks of harm from the evidence base: impact on education, health including mental health, child development and the opportunity to enjoy family time together.
- Cardinal Hume Centre and/or Home-Start WKCHF should consider piloting a navigator support service that remains with families during the period of their homelessness and onward housing journey. Within this, consider the development of a transition and support plan for those experiencing a change of accommodation and location.
- All agencies and any navigators should consider the inaccessibility of the system for many people, including the alienating and confusing language of homelessness and other sectors, the need to repeat accounts of traumatic events, and the complexity and difficulty of completing forms.
- A priority for developing services is ensuring that they include a health focus and education focus, supporting children to access, enjoy and succeed in education and supporting people to access the health services they need.
- Regular touch points with services for all families living in temporary accommodation should be built into the system; there are clear risks and all those experiencing this situation should have proactive and regular contact from an agreed agency. Ensuring that families have the means of communication to help them navigate applications and systems including phones and internet, and seeking to communicate in the most flexible and appropriate way possible – for example, for some that may be WhatsApp, for others it might be phone or email.

- In seeking to reduce harm to families, a personalised case-by-case approach should be taken; for one family travelling to school may be less harmful than changing school, but for another the reverse may be true (see also trauma-informed approaches below).
- Practical, material support at critical points, including the direct provision of money, vouchers and resources for the home should be an element of the service from Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF. This should be a clear element of the service reflected in written policies and processes such as induction and monitoring. Examples to consider are ensuring those moving to self-contained accommodation have bedding; providing money to wash clothing; providing school clothing packages; vouchers for food; money to have a meal in a café during support work; and providing a kitchen pack of cutlery and crockery. Provision of this practical help should be used as a tool for building engagement and trust, and showing an understanding of the individual or family's situation. Wherever possible, choice should be built into these offers.
- Ways of exploring and working on families' expectations and making realistic plans should feature in family support; this may include helping people explore the benefits and disadvantages of accessing services in Westminster when they will be living out of the area for the foreseeable future.

10.4 TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES

- Central to the vision for Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF's services should be offering an ever-evolving trauma-informed service. This should include:
 - an understanding and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, including training and where possible reflective practice sessions offered to staff
 - creating the safest psychological and physical environment possible for families, building trust within services and in their homes
 - a strengths-based approach to working with families
 - creating opportunities for families to make choices and have control over decisions that affect them
 - being mindful of events that may retraumatise them – for example, the disappointment of realising there is not a medium-term route out of homelessness and being 'stuck', often away from support networks.
- All those working with families should:
 - ensure the needs of the child and the impact on the children are considered, as this is of paramount importance to families
 - ensure families are talked to about their options rather than left in limbo in a situation that is unlikely to be 'temporary', despite the name.
- Consider projects that create community and peer support, especially those which provide the opportunity for children to experience activities that might otherwise be out of financial reach. Interviews suggest that this is secondary to targeted, personalised support.

10.5 EVIDENCE AND CAMPAIGNING INCLUDING CO-PRODUCTION

- Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF should find ways to provide an expert service provider-based voice at a local and national level and deliver this in partnership with others as appropriate.
- The basic issues of primary prevention and overcrowded, unfit, temporary accommodation should not be lost in overall messages, despite the focus on secondary prevention in service delivery.

- To help with campaigning and policy work, Cardinal Hume Centre and Home-Start WKCHF should also gather better information and evidence about work with this group.
- Those working with homeless families should seek to amplify the voices and experiences of families and develop co-production approaches to the design and delivery of campaigning and policy work. Some of the messages that emerged directly from the interviews were:
 - All those in temporary accommodation (not just those with children) should have someone to check on them and make sure they have food and some emotional support. (This was in the context of social services accommodation).
 - The aim should be that all temporary accommodation for families provided under the Children Act is self-contained.
 - Failure to undertake essential maintenance around plumbing, damp and disrepair should mean someone can no longer rent out a property.
 - People should not be required to provide so much evidence of their status before they are provided with emergency accommodation.
- Nationally, Cardinal Hume Centre, Home-Start WKCHF and partners should seek to give insight on issues relating to temporary accommodation – for example, through membership of the APPG.
- Developing a shared local voice will make Westminster a go-to area to consult on this issue. Local partners could consider a joint awareness-raising campaign in this area, which also takes into account the need to deliver partnerships with the statutory sector on the ground.
- Different messages will be appropriate at different levels. Following local elections there may be a good opportunity to speak with elected members about the research findings. Locally, issues such as how much social housing is included in new developments may be an area for a partnership of voluntary agencies to work on.
- Further research on the experiences of those in Home Office accommodation in Westminster should be considered. With families from Afghanistan and now Ukraine accommodated in the borough, this is an area of relevance locally.

ENDORSEMENTS



Citizens Advice Westminster was very pleased to enable families we are working with to participate in this important research. The multiple pressures of distance from community, services and school, uncertainty and poor housing conditions mean many families in temporary accommodation are in a limbo which can feel both destructive and never ending. We very much endorse the proposals to work together to focus attention and resources on homeless families and to reduce the harmful and long term impacts of living in temporary accommodation which this report sets out so starkly.

Citizens Advice Westminster



Living in temporary accommodation can be devastating for children and their families, with serious impacts on their mental and physical health. This is an important report and one that central government policy makers should study closely when thinking about solutions to the housing crisis.

Laurence Guinness, Chief Executive
The Childhood Trust



Westminster Befriend a Family works with families and young people who face significant disadvantages in Westminster, and housing routinely comes up as an issue for many of our service users. We see a direct connection between this and exacerbated stress levels, poor health and mental health concerns. We strongly believe that a more joined-up approach to addressing the dysfunctional housing system is required, and we wholly endorse the findings of this report.

Catherine Mahony, CEO
Westminster Befriend a Family

ENDORSEMENTS *(CONT)*



Temporary Accommodation (TA) is a vastly complex, often misunderstood aspect of homelessness. We have seen through our work at local and national level that a collaborative, multiagency approach is essential to finding solutions that both address need in the short term and bring about change in the long term. Involving people who are living/have lived in TA alongside landlords, service providers and local authorities is critical to establishing a greater understanding of the issues of TA and working towards meaningful systems improvements. As such, we endorse the recommendations of this report, particularly the call for collective and coproduced working practices. Justlife looks forward to supporting the work of Cardinal Hume and other partners through our Temporary Accommodation Action Group (TAAG) network and as co-secretariat of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Households in Temporary Accommodation.

Alex Procter, Research and Policy Co-ordinator
Justlife

This research was undertaken by Becky Rice and project managed internally by Rebecca Moran, Evidence, Impact and Learning Manager at the Cardinal Hume Centre.

Cardinal Hume Centre

3-7 Arneway Street
Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 2BG

Company Number 04333875
Registered Charity Number 1090836

Home-Start

Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham

Registered Office:
St Paul's Church Centre,
3 Rossmore Road,
London
NW1 6NJ

A charitable company limited by guarantee.
Charity no. in England and Wales 1109568

February 2023