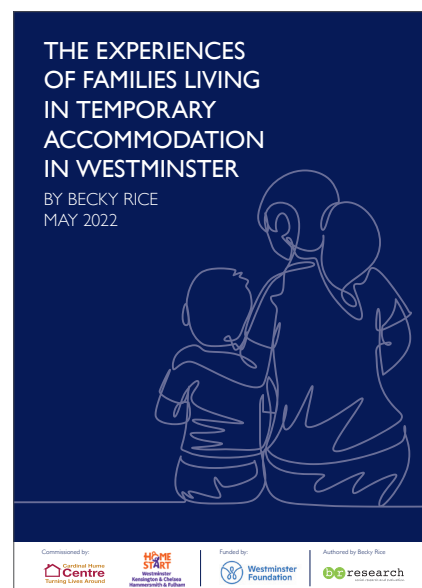


THE EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES LIVING IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IN WESTMINSTER

BY BECKY RICE
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“We are living a very unsettled life... It’s disorganising mentally and emotionally in every way. I hope to get out [of temporary accommodation] as soon as possible.”

INTRODUCTION

In May 2021, the Cardinal Hume Centre (CHC) and Home-Start Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Hammersmith & Fulham (WKCHF) commissioned a piece of research to better understand the lived experience and support needs of families living in temporary accommodation. The project was funded by the Westminster Foundation; it was conducted by an independent researcher, Becky Rice.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH TELLS US THAT...

- Experiencing temporary accommodation is harmful to families: it can have immediate and longer-term impacts on health, education and wellbeing.¹
- Temporary accommodation is a local issue affecting Westminster families; 1786 families and 3514 children were in temporary accommodation at the end of 2021.
- Families are often living in temporary accommodation for sustained periods of time.²
- Westminster faces challenges in helping families in housing need: many families are being placed out of borough and there are long waits for permanent accommodation.³
- Living in temporary accommodation is both a cause and consequence of inequality. Women; families from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds; refugees and asylum seekers; and those living with a disability or long-term health condition, are at increased risk of homelessness.⁴

¹ See for example – Children’s Commissioner (2019) Bleak Houses: Tackling the crisis of family homelessness in England, London: Children’s Commissioner for England; Firth, A. (2022) ‘I want us to live like humans again’: Families in Temporary Accommodation in London, UK, Human Rights Watch; Shelter (2006) Chance of a lifetime – the impact of bad housing on children’s lives, London: Shelter.

² See data provided by Westminster City Council.

³ See for example – Westminster City Council (2019) Review of homelessness.

⁴ See for example – 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; Shelter (2020) ‘Black people are more than three times as likely to experience homelessness’, Press release, 1 October 2020; 7 Schofield, M. (2021) Fobbed off – The barriers preventing women accessing housing and homelessness support, and the women-centred approach needed to overcome them, Shelter.

METHODOLOGY

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

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

Participants were invited to take part by the commissioners, as well as other local statutory and voluntary sector partners. Following data collection, a cross-sector consultation event was held in March 2022 to help shape the final recommendations included in the report.

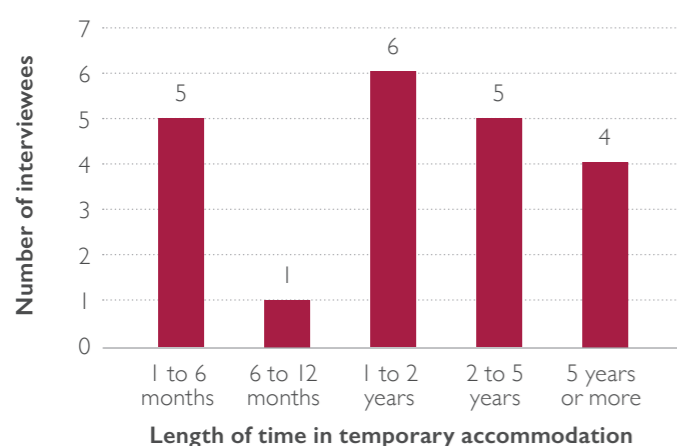
ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

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 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 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).

Time spent in temporary accommodation, all interviewees



Ethnicity of all interviewees

Ethnicity	Number of people
Black African/African	8
Asian	5
White (not from the UK)	3
Arab	2
Afghani	1
Mixed Ethnicity	1
White British	1

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Routes into temporary accommodation

Amongst interviewees, there were three main tipping points into homelessness and temporary accommodation:

- moving due to the threat of violence;
- hidden homeless or insecure accommodation becoming untenable; and
- having to leave a tenancy or accommodation.

“...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.”

Families' immediate routes into temporary accommodation often included a short stay in emergency accommodation, usually in a hotel room. This was appreciated as a vital resource at a critical point in time, and it was short-lived for most (– although this was not the case for two families placed by social services).

“...I just needed a place to rest, because I'd been sleeping on the floor... so I was just happy to have a bed for me and my children, so that was comforting in the first few days.”

However, there were numerous challenges to managing family life in these spaces, even for a short amount of time. For example, being unable to prepare food, having rooms booked for one night at a time and being required to move very quickly, and access difficulties for those with mobility issues. These challenges were far greater when the distance from the family's local area was far and/or where the quality of the accommodation was poor.

Living in temporary accommodation

Interviewees had struggled to obtain the equipment and furniture they needed to create a habitable space where they could cook, clean, wash, relax and sleep: “When I came to this building, I have to start everything from zero”. Many also faced challenges with the condition of the accommodation, which impacted on everyday life and were often difficult to get resolved: “The wall on one side collapsed. It's still there – it will be two years and they didn't fix it.” Some families felt unsafe within their accommodation, which was compounded by feelings of isolation and lack of familiarity with a new area. Families who were placed in shared, section 17 accommodation also talked about the lack of space and privacy, and the challenges that came with sharing with other families.

“It's not enough for five families. It's... very depressing... they treat us like children. Constantly behind you with you room checks - you are living on someone else's terms.”

From the interviews, it was clear that living in temporary accommodation is far more than a housing problem; the impact spans many areas including health, education, child development and a family's financial situation. Families had often had traumatic and difficult experiences before and around the time they became homeless, and families' daily routines were significantly affected including long journeys to school and work. Most families had decided to keep their children in their Westminster school in order to protect them from further upheaval amidst fears they would be moved again:

“He changed primary to secondary, and changed housing. All these places are temporary – how many times will I change? ... We have to get up at 5:30am; it's a long travelling time.”

Many participants were struggling financially, with some costs resulting specifically from their homelessness situation, such as additional travel costs, having to use a launderette and having to buy things to make a temporary situation bearable. When moved out of borough, participants faced multiple barriers in accessing the services they needed and they were isolated from their usual social networks. However, interviewees were very positive about the support that they had received from voluntary agencies and Early Help services, in particular the Bessborough Family Hub.

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

Moving on from temporary accommodation

Although formally 'temporary', many families we spoke to had been in (stage two) temporary accommodation for a significant period of time, from several months to over ten years. Interviewees did not know when they were likely to be offered permanent accommodation and the lack of regular updates or contact from Housing Solutions left people feeling forgotten, especially those placed out of Westminster:

**“[I] 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.”**

All but one of the families interviewed for the research hoped to move into social housing. Whilst interviewees were aware that the waiting list was many years, they did not feel they had another viable route out of their situation.

Overall, interviewees described being in limbo and they felt powerless to change their housing situation. And it was clear that their experience in temporary accommodation was in direct contrast to what they feel makes a 'home'.

**“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.”**

However, the love and aspirations they had for their children helped them to manage and cope: “The children come first, so as long as a mother knows they feel safe they can be more at ease.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations were wide ranging, including:

- Creating a targeted support offer for homeless families that focuses on consistent referral processes and takes into account that many families are placed out of borough.
- Investing in collaborative approaches that are based on a shared understanding of the problem, utilise stakeholders unique set of organisational assets and strengths, and improve the accessibility of information about services within and beyond Westminster.
- Piloting a navigator support service for Westminster that remains with families during the period of their homelessness and onward housing journey.
- Developing services that are co-produced and offer ever-evolving trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches.
- Continuing to gather evidence and find ways to amplify the voices and lived experience of this group of families to influence national and local policy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you have any questions about this research or you would like to talk to us about taking forward these recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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