

NOT HOME



THE LIVES OF HIDDEN
HOMELESS HOUSEHOLDS
IN UNSUPPORTED TEMPORARY
ACCOMMODATION IN ENGLAND

REPORT

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SUMMARY

When households become homeless, it is often the case that local housing authorities cannot immediately find them a place to live. For some of these homeless households, local authorities have a duty to secure temporary accommodation for them, and an obligation to support them to move on to a permanent place to live (that is, into settled accommodation).

However, for a variety of reasons, many homeless households do not get full local authority support to find a permanent place to live. The lack of other options means that too many homeless adults are driven towards the weakest corners of the English housing market, living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation (B&Bs) and 'houses in multiple occupation' (HMOs), with little support to help them into a secure and settled place to live. The housing conditions and social environments that these 'unsupported temporary accommodations' foster are typically dreadful.

Yet, there is very little good statistical data for these groups of people and households; limited research has been conducted, and their precarious lives go largely unrecorded by research organisations or public authorities. As a hidden population, their numbers are difficult to estimate; however, in this report we are able to outline the potentially substantial scale of the problem, identifying groups of people omitted from official counts but who technically remain homeless.

As part of this process, we have begun to undertake a detailed qualitative study of the lives of 35 homeless households through peer-based research and participant observation. This will be expanded over the subsequent years of the research.

This research report is part of a three-year study into the lives of single homeless people signposted, placed, or self-referring into unsupported temporary accommodation. Initially, the purpose of the research is to define the nature and extent of unsupported temporary accommodation in England, with a focus on the types of people and the lives lived by those who fall through the cracks in legislation and public services. It is intended to bring attention to issues largely omitted from the public sphere, to set a baseline for future reporting and to serve as an introduction to a challenge that has so far been under-reported.

Defining unsupported temporary accommodation

When a household presents to a local authority as homeless, the housing team must make a decision about whether, under the current legal rules, they are obliged to help that person find a home. If they do have a legal duty to assist the household, the local authority may need to place them in sanctioned temporary accommodation while inquiries are carried out, a decision is made on the homeless application, and until settled accommodation can be found.

Using this definition, the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) estimates that there were around 60,000 households living in temporary accommodation at the end of the second quarter of 2014 (DCLG A). This number grew substantially in the years to 2005, fell again to 2010, but since 2010 has been steadily rising to its current level.

While 'official' temporary accommodation is a pathway for many homeless households into settled accommodation, many homeless households will not receive the full assistance of a local government housing team, and will have to

secure permanent accommodation for themselves. Some will be more successful than others, and this project is concerned with those who:

- do not have access to settled accommodation, and
- are not receiving any substantive support to secure it.

These homeless households are living in unsupported temporary accommodation. Official figures will only identify a fraction of these households for two reasons.

- The national figures do not include *all* people living in temporary accommodation if no legal duty applies to them.
- The figures do not include those who self-refer into unsupported temporary accommodation or who are referred by agencies and services other than local authorities.

It is almost impossible to estimate the exact number of households that might fall into each of the above categories. Homelessness prevention and relief statistics offer some insights into local authority activity outside of the statutory homeless framework. This data indicates considerable use of private sector tenancies where local authorities have assisted in finding alternative accommodation for homeless households. In particular, it shows that 13,700 homeless households were directed to either a hostel or an HMO (DCLG 2014).

However, this data provides no clear information on the use of B&Bs or guesthouses; recording is incomplete, and (unsurprisingly) does not include self-referrals. No official tracking of those not recognised as homeless is required by law, and the other aspects of the system that may identify people turned away by the local council (such as the housing benefit system) simply do not record sufficiently detailed information to understand the type and scale of the problem.

Many of the unaccounted-for households living in temporary accommodation are in what we are defining as unsupported temporary accommodation, a blend of insecure tenancies in B&Bs, guesthouses and HMOs inhabited by people unable to access settled tenancies. There are reasons to believe that the number living in these circumstances is high. In a report by Shelter in 1997, it was estimated that there were 72,550 private tenants (who were self-referred or referred by an agency other than the local authority) living in B&B accommodation. This was nearly 10 times the official local authority estimates of just 7,660 (Carter 1997). In 2002, Crisis and the New Policy Institute estimated that there were 50,000 people living in B&B accommodation, as compared to the 'priority need' count of only 12,000–13,000 (Kenway and Palmer 2004).¹ Although numbers of those who are homeless and those living in official temporary accommodation (supported and commissioned by local authorities) have both fallen (DCLG A)² since these studies were undertaken, there are many reasons, including those outlined above, which suggest that the unrecorded numbers living in unsupported temporary accommodation are significant.

Life in unsupported temporary accommodation

Settled accommodation is important, offering people both stability and security to address their often complex needs. Temporary accommodation generally offers the opposite – not only are these living arrangements costly both to individuals and the public purse, but for people with already precarious lives, they are often

1 The NPI approach adopted a wider legal approach to homelessness, in accordance with the parameters of the Housing Act 1996, rather than the stricter interpretations used by public agencies.

2 The numbers in temporary accommodation peaked in 2004 (at 101,300). The high number of households living in temporary accommodation between 2004 onwards (noticeably until 2007), coinciding with the introduction of the Supporting People funding, has had its ringfencing removed and the number of spaces in supported and commissioned temporary accommodation has consequently fallen significantly, to 59,710 (Q2 2014) (DCLG A).

counterproductive to helping them resolve their complex needs. Moreover, the properties they typically inhabit are generally of a standard commensurate with their having been rejected both by people on the open property market and by local authorities, in executing their legal responsibilities for supported homeless families or in trying to help single people for whom they do not have a legal duty.

Research undertaken in the North East region of England has detailed unacceptable standards in various aspects of premises management, including poor security and poor buildings maintenance, shower and toilet facilities being out of order for long periods of time, poor heating, and repeated incidents of drug-related violence on the premises. The research also identified widespread abusive management practice, including tenants having their cash cards and benefits books confiscated by proprietors, being forced to share rooms with strangers, being locked out of the premises for long periods, and being charged for services which were not provided (Spencer and Corkhill 2013).

Our research has identified similar problems, through interviews with clients of a non-statutory service (Justlife) that assists people to move into permanent accommodation. Through an initial set of journal entries, interviews and focus groups, involving 35 individuals in two locations (one in the north west and one in the south east), we have identified a wide range of serious problems relating to their accommodation. Nineteen people had no lock on their door or the lock was broken; 15 people had been a victim of crime while living in temporary accommodation, and 24 had witnessed or experienced violence; 28 felt that others living in their temporary accommodation were a bad influence and tried not to associate with them. Consequently, and unsurprisingly, 22 felt isolated.

In addition, participants perceived detrimental implications for their physical and mental health. Among our group, 27 thought that their mental health had significantly worsened, citing an increase in stress and anxiety, as well as depression and other mental health conditions; 30 participants reported that their health had been affected by the damp and poorly maintained conditions of temporary accommodation, and 22 felt that the food given or cooking facilities available were inadequate for a healthy diet. All participants commented on drug use and excessive drinking on the premises, and (where applicable) that their own increased drug or alcohol use, or that of others, affected their lives.

The very fact that so many households that require unsupported temporary accommodation do so as a result of existing multiple and complex needs means that such places tend to become hotspots for criminality and social problems. But these problems are exacerbated by the poor condition of temporary accommodation, the behaviour of landlords and management companies towards their vulnerable tenants, and the lack of robust action by statutory authorities and other agencies whose responsibility it is to provide supportive social and health services, and to monitor conditions in the housing market.

The role of public policy

The limited reach of public policy is part of the problem. Public policy pertaining to homelessness, temporary accommodation, and the quality of housing is set mostly in Westminster, and interpreted and implemented by local authorities. When policy from Whitehall has explicitly sought to tackle issues related to temporary accommodation, efforts have focussed on priority need groups.³

3 Via legislation including the Localism Act 2011, the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012, and the Gold Standard Challenge established in 2013, and via regulation focussed on families with children, such as the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) Order 2003.

However, many single or childless homeless households do not fall within the priority need categories, or cannot ‘jump the hurdles’ that identify people as officially homeless, and are therefore not covered by the limited conditions on accommodation quality and support provision. As noted already, their destination is generally the weakest corners of the private rental market: short-term tenancies in guesthouses, HMOs and hostels that, while generally regulated, appear to expose the limitations both of the regulatory regime on housing quality and of local authorities’ capacity to enforce it. The private rented sector records the poorest standards of accommodation (Turley and Davies 2014); when this is exacerbated by weak enforcement of narrow HMO regulations and health and safety standards, vulnerable people are left at risk of living in squalid conditions.⁴

While poor conditions can exist for those living in ‘official’ temporary accommodation, for tenants of unsupported temporary accommodation (especially where the local authority has no duty to act) the situation is generally worse. The route into better, supported accommodation is difficult, for many reasons, including limited supply, the requirement to provide referrals and to meet other criteria. Consequently, some choose to stay in this poorest of accommodation in perpetuity. For some, the route out of unsupported temporary accommodation is simply blocked.

Rather than hiding the problem, public policy must confront it head on. Where people have complex lives, it is clear that the effective means of tackling such needs is through a coordinated and sustained approach by specialist and statutory organisations. But this cannot occur (or is less likely to be successful) without appropriate and more supportive housing arrangements in place. To do so demands acknowledging that the problem exists and then **counting and tracing the destinations of homeless households who end up in unsupported temporary accommodation.**

Secondly, far more effective and resourced policy tools and incentives will be required both in terms of housing management and enforcement to ensure that those needing temporary accommodation have some guarantees as to its quality and the length of time they might stay there.

Conclusions

Homeless households living in unsupported temporary accommodation represent a hidden social problem. It is absent from official statistics, and the acute and complex problems associated with such households are left unrecorded. This cannot continue.

This initial report seeks to make a small but important first step in challenging the status quo and putting the plight of the hidden homeless more firmly onto the policy agenda. Over the course of a three-year project, our research with Justlife will uncover what currently goes unreported, providing a detailed longitudinal account of the lives of residents. However, public policy can help immediately to identify the scale of the challenge, and make steps to improve the conditions of those living in unsuitable accommodation.

First, working with local authorities, the **government must develop more accurate tools for measuring and monitoring the true extent of unsupported temporary accommodation in the UK.** The tracking data must combine information from multiple sources to track the lives of single homeless households turned away from

4 Local government obligations are set out in various legislation, including: section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, s4 Defective Premises Act 1972, s82 Environmental Protection Act 1990, part 1 of the Housing Act 2004 (the Housing Health and Safety Rating System), and the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002.

housing support. Sources include local authority housing departments, housing benefit administration data, environmental health teams, fire and rescue services, homelessness recording tools, and referral agencies such as parole boards. Given that the local housing allowance is the main currency in the unsupported temporary accommodation market, bridging the different data systems should be funded by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Doing so will support a better understanding of latent demand for support services and secure accommodation. It will also present an opportunity to fully understand the scope for expanding both the coverage of the homeless duty and consequently the support services available to homeless people who currently do not overcome the statutory hurdles.

Second, as both landlords and market stewards, **local authorities must use their existing powers under HMO and housing health and safety regulations to full effect to tackle those landlords who are exploiting the most vulnerable in society.** Priority for property inspections and enforcement action where necessary should be given to the destinations of households turned away from homeless services.

1.

BACKGROUND: WHO IS RECEIVING TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION?

Homelessness in modern Britain is a complex problem, affecting people with the most complex of lives. Public understanding of and attention to homelessness is often weak, and political attention even more so.

Definitions of homelessness

Addressing homelessness is made more difficult by the fact that there are different types of homelessness. Homelessness is often assumed to include only those who are sleeping out on the streets (rough sleepers) but being homeless is in fact more widely defined. According to the Housing Act 1996, the legal definition is as follows:

- (1) *A person is homeless if he has no accommodation available for his occupation, in the United Kingdom or elsewhere, which he—*
 - (a) *is entitled to occupy by virtue of an interest in it or by virtue of an order of a court,*
 - (b) *has an express or implied licence to occupy, or*
 - (c) *occupies as a residence by virtue of any enactment or rule of law giving him the right to remain in occupation or restricting the right of another person to recover possession.*
- (2) *A person is also homeless if he has accommodation but—*
 - (a) *he cannot secure entry to it, or*
 - (b) *it consists of a moveable structure, vehicle or vessel designed or adapted for human habitation and there is no place where he is entitled or permitted both to place it and to reside in it.*
- (3) *A person shall not be treated as having accommodation unless it is accommodation which it would be reasonable for him to continue to occupy.*
- (4) *A person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that he will become homeless within 28 days.*

Each of these implies a wider definition of homelessness than might be simply understand as 'having no roof overhead'. However, this potential for a wider view of homelessness is limited by caveats set out in the Housing Act and in further legislation, and also by local authorities, who are responsible for implementing homelessness law and so for interpreting it as well (see Kenway and Palmer 2002).

As a succession of reports has illustrated, the stock of appropriate housing in England is limited (see for example Cooke and Hull 2012, Griffith and Jeffreys 2014). As a result, it is often difficult for local authorities to immediately provide permanent housing to those presenting themselves to the local housing team as homeless. Accordingly, a number of 'hurdles' have to be overcome in order for the local authority to have a legal duty to act.

The local authority must establish whether:

1. a person is homeless (or is threatened to be in 28 days)
2. whether they are eligible for support
3. whether they are priority need
4. whether they are intentionally homeless
5. whether they have a local connection.

Where these conditions are met, local authorities have a duty to provide support to households to obtain settled accommodation. However, these apparently clear criteria are complicated by the question of priority need. The priority need criteria are set out in the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, and have been amended a number of times since.⁵ They are used to determine whether support is automatically guaranteed for homeless people, and used to divide people into those that will need support to find homes and those who might reasonably be able to find property for themselves without the active engagement of the authority.

Those who are automatically in priority need include:

- families with dependent children
- pregnant women
- those made homeless as a result of an emergency
- young adults leaving care settings
- young people under the age of 18.

Others (such as those considered ‘vulnerable’) in priority need may include the elderly, those fleeing domestic violence, former armed services personnel, and people with mental and physical health conditions (Shelter 2014a).⁶ The inevitable corollary of the priority need system, however, is that some people will receive less support than others in finding accommodation. It is these people who receive less (or no) support, and those who do not overcome the five hurdles or receive adequate support to find settled accommodation, on which this report is predominantly focussed.

Supported temporary accommodation, for those to whom a duty is owed

Where a duty to act is recognised, it may be difficult for councils to immediately source settled accommodation. Settled accommodation is either (Shelter 2014b):

- a tenancy in a local authority property
- a tenancy in a housing association property
- A fixed-term assured shorthold tenancy with a private landlord.

Tenancies are typically much longer in the social rented sector than are available for properties in the private rented sector, but even here the typical assured shorthold tenancy is at least six months. Where such a tenancy cannot be found immediately, temporary accommodation may be provided while inquiries are done as part of the assessment of the homelessness application, or following a decision while

5 Most notably in the Housing Act 1996, Homelessness Act 2002 and Homelessness (Priority Need for Accommodation) (England) Order 2002.

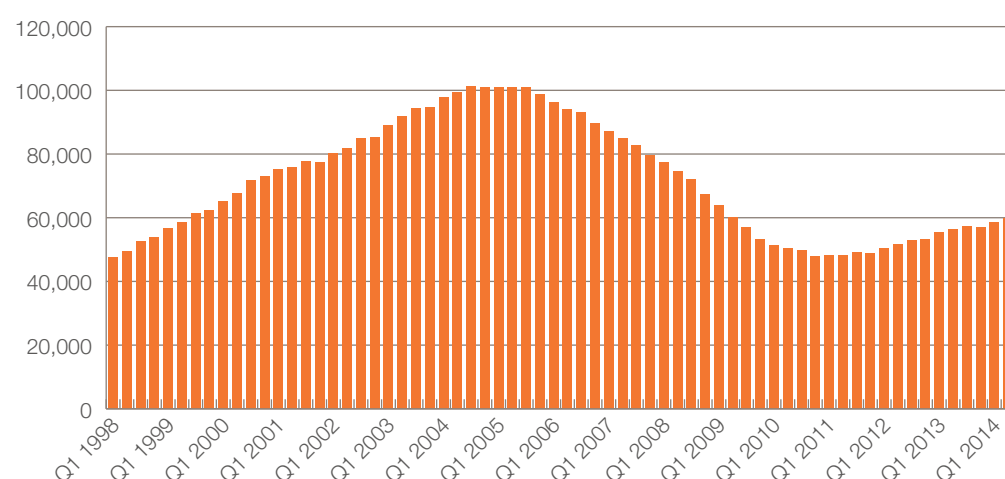
6 Interpretations of vulnerable and in priority need vary across the country. A local authority may decide that a person is vulnerable if, for instance, they: are an older person; have a physical or learning disability or mental health problems; had to leave their home because of violence or harassment; have been in care; were in the armed forces; they have been in a young offenders’ institute or prison in the past. However, a local authority might not automatically consider a person vulnerable even if they fit into one of these categories. For example, the council may decide that a person is not vulnerable if they have support systems in place, such as family support, or if they have an illness but it can be suitably controlled by medication.

settled accommodation is secured. The provision of temporary accommodation for priority need households, especially those with children (for whom the maximum length of tenure is set out in regulations), is one stage of a process towards obtaining more permanent accommodation. While the length of time spent by households on a statutory pathway to settled accommodation will vary from place to place, temporary accommodation strictly implies a short but limited stay, with no expectation to settle permanently.⁷

Therefore, the following data refers generally to those housed in temporary accommodation as executed by the local authority homelessness duty. The number of households living in temporary accommodation recorded by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has fluctuated significantly over the past 15 years, as is shown in the figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Temporary accommodation placements



Source: DCLG 'Homeless households in temporary accommodation', table 775 (DCLG A)

The definition, and therefore statistics, may be stretched slightly to include those not who do not meet the full 'five hurdle' requirements. For instance, Shelter explains that:

'Under current homelessness legislation, local authorities must ensure that suitable temporary accommodation is available for homeless households who are in priority need and unintentionally homeless until settled accommodation can be found. Households found to be intentionally homeless may be provided with temporary accommodation for a 'reasonable period' (normally about 28 days).'

Shelter 2007

Regardless, this data underestimates the number of people who are homeless on account of lacking permanent residence, and therefore the number of people who may need support to secure settled accommodation. This data gap is compounded by the fact that local authorities are only required to provide the DCLG with detailed information about those who are accepted as having a duty owed.

7 For some groups, the length of stay is legally limited – see chapter 4.

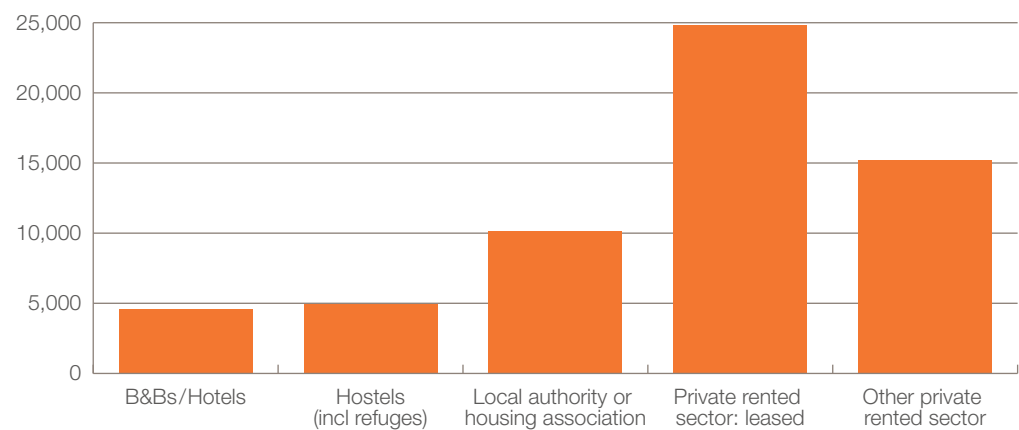
According to the Housing Act 1996:

'In most cases, the authority is discharging a main homelessness duty to secure suitable accommodation until a settled home becomes available for the applicant household. However, the numbers also include households provided with accommodation pending a decision on their homelessness application, households pending a review or appeal to the county court of the decision on their case, or possible referral to another local authority, and households found to be intentionally homeless and in priority need who were being accommodated for such period as would give them a reasonable opportunity to find accommodation for themselves.'

The type of supported temporary accommodation that is available varies from place to place, as local authorities have access to differing housing stock and make different budgetary decisions. The official provision of temporary accommodation is broken down as follows:

Figure 1.2

Official temporary accommodation (2013)



Source: DCLG 'Homeless households in temporary accommodation', table 775 (DCLG A)

Note: The distinctions between property types used here are far from satisfactory, and the recording practices of local authorities and landlords lead to inconsistencies over time and between local authorities.

At a national level, the majority of stock used for temporary accommodation is either rented or leased from the private sector, while a smaller proportion of it is drawn from housing associations, local authorities' own stock, or hostels, which are typically run by third-sector organisations. The latter are more common outside London and the south east, notably in the north of England.

Outside London and the south east, most people will move on and into settled accommodation fairly quickly, with active support from the local authority. Local authorities not only have a duty to do so in most cases, but temporary accommodation is often expensive, and therefore moving households into settled accommodation will be in their own financial interest.

2. DEFINING UNSUPPORTED TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

The number and circumstances of those living in supported temporary accommodation obscure our view of another significant group, the ‘hidden homeless’, who are living in unsupported temporary accommodation.

As outlined in chapter 1, statutory hurdles and priority need criteria inevitably restrict some homeless people’s access to services to help them secure settled accommodation. Many of those affected will find settled accommodation for themselves on the open market, through the housing waiting lists, through living with family, or other housing arrangements. Many others, however, will not, for one or a combination of the following reasons.

1. constrained housing supply limits access to settled accommodation
2. financial problems or a history of drug abuse, criminality or violence act as barriers to a settled tenancy
3. their support needs are too minimal, and the supply of services too constrained, to qualify for support in their area
4. they do not want to live in supported accommodation – for some, the unregulated environment of unsupported accommodation may be preferable to, for instance, supported accommodation in a hostel, which may impose a curfew or drug-free policy or otherwise supervise residents.

Irrespective of the cause, people in this group are defined by what they cannot get, or get help to get, or elect not to engage to get, namely settled accommodation in either the social or private rented sector. In short, unsupported temporary accommodation is used where the ‘homeless’ person:

- cannot access settled accommodation
- cannot obtain, or does not engage with, support to move into settled accommodation.

Security of tenure matters because of its understood impacts on its residents. The lack of a secure, settled tenancy is problematic for reasons both general and specific. Generally, insecurity of tenure is believed to result in poor physical and mental health outcomes (Credland 2004), and typically single homeless households already have worse self-reported health problems than the wider population (Bines 1994). Specifically, the very poor quality and social environment of this type of accommodation are believed by residents to make their mental and physical needs worse. We deal with issue extensively in the following chapter.

How many people live in unsupported temporary accommodation?

It is difficult to reach a precise figure for the number of people living in unsupported temporary accommodation, which includes single homeless adults and childless couples living in unsupported temporary accommodation, B&Bs and private hostels. There is no statistical data on who and where these residents are because:

- There is no requirement for local authorities to count single homeless people beyond applications and decisions, unless prevention activity is involved.

- There is no register of B&Bs or private rented establishments used for homeless people, beyond local registers of licensed houses in multiple occupation (HMOs).
- There is no requirement for the Department for Work and Pensions or housing authorities to count the numbers using unsupported temporary accommodation, despite housing benefit being the main source of funding for it.

Significant numbers of people are denied full support for finding settled housing at the point of application. In the financial year 2013/14, 21,000 people were found to be homeless but not in priority need (DCLG 2014 B), and, apart from having to record numbers presenting as homeless,⁸ the destinations of homeless households who are ineligible for full local authority support are largely unknown to them.

Within these figures, the numbers in unsupported temporary accommodation are likely to be substantial, as their ranks include:

- People moving into unofficial and unsupported temporary accommodation after finding that no legal duty to house them applies. Local governments or other agencies may have directed them to (rather than placed them in) guesthouses (such as B&Bs), private hostels and HMOs, where short assured tenancies are generally not available.
- People self-referring into equivalent accommodation, having known of it or heard about it from others.

As Sheila Spencer summarises:

'[There is a] lack of clarity about whether a stay in temporary accommodation is classed as homeless or not – most temporary accommodation for families and others in priority need is offered on the basis that they have been accepted as being in priority need and therefore are owed a duty which is likely to result in an offer of settled housing. By contrast, for single people, the accommodation may be offered as the solution itself, even though it is only temporary (albeit often theoretically available for up to two years).'

Spencer 2013

Past research has shown the extent of the disjunction between official counts of various types of homelessness, and a wider interpretation of homelessness. For instance, in the third quarter of 1996, there were 4,160 households placed in B&B accommodation by local authorities. At that time, Shelter reported that the total number of local authority boarders was 7,660. However, this is not the full picture, for there were 72,550 people living in B&B accommodation, claiming housing benefit, who were private tenants. These private tenants were either self-placed or referred by another agency, such as the prison service (Carter 1997).

More recent research by the New Policy Institute combining survey work with administrative data estimated that, in 2002, there were 50,000 people living in B&B accommodation and a further 25,000 in supported housing such as hostels, shelters or YMCAs (Kenway and Palmer 2004).⁹ These estimates were much higher than the official figures at the time, which suggested that only 12,000–13,000 households had been placed in B&Bs by local authorities. As both reports are more than a decade old, a revised estimate is long overdue.

8 And activities intended to prevent homelessness outside of the statutory framework, such as assistance to remain in their own home – see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/homelessness-prevention-and-relief-england-2013-to-2014>

9 The fuller categories of the Kenway and Palmer analysis are useful in defining what unsupported temporary accommodation is *not*. For instance, included in their broader definition of 'single homelessness' are rough sleepers, those sharing overcrowded accommodation and those facing eviction. Intuitively, these people would not fall into the category of 'being in unsupported temporary accommodation', but most would count nevertheless as being 'single homeless'.

While data on this group is not collected in a systematic manner, it is more straightforward to identify the types of property residents will inhabit, because they have a fairly narrow range of housing market options open to them.

Unsupported accommodation property types

It is relatively clear what unsupported temporary accommodation is not: it is not a secure social tenancy and (in the vast majority of cases) is not an assured shorthold tenancy in the private rented sector. There may be only limited access to private rented properties with assured shorthold tenancies for someone without a reference or deposit, or with a history of antisocial or criminal activity or substance abuse – and these may also act as barriers for people to access properties held by registered social landlords (RSLs) or local authorities.¹⁰

This leaves only a limited range of options, mostly in the private sector:

- B&Bs, guesthouses, and other board and lodgings accommodation
- HMOs
- hostels or refuges.

How residents find their way into these properties will differ from case to case. Some will have been turned away from the local council because they failed to overcome the policy hurdles (or believed they would fail). Some will have been signposted by agencies, such as probation; others will have self-referred. Some may even have been placed into unsupported temporary accommodation by the local authority, only to find that the support to move on is limited by local housing market pressures or because they have exhausted all other housing options – for example, on account of their behavioural or criminal history. Before considering how individuals have accessed unsupported temporary accommodation, it is worth looking in more detail at the characteristics of these common destinations.

B&Bs and other board and lodgings accommodation

This is a common category of unsupported temporary accommodation. Residents, for housing benefit purposes, may be defined as boarders, which means ‘a person who pays a charge for his accommodation and at least some cooked or prepared meals, which are both prepared and consumed in that accommodation or associated premises’.¹¹ The accommodation itself may be converted from traditional large family housing, with some food services offered, and often they are former guesthouses. The conditions of this type of B&B may not be good, even where the local authority owes a duty, and a degree of quality control is required. For instance, DCLG’s guidance on accommodation suitability states that:

‘B&B accommodation caters for very short-term stays only and generally will afford residents only limited privacy and may lack certain important amenities, such as cooking and laundry facilities.’

DCLG 2006

Those used by housing authorities are often not appropriate for long-term stays:

‘Most B&Bs used by the council are not like hotel accommodation. They are often businesses run only for people who are homeless. You may get a private bedroom, but it’s possible that you will have to share bathroom facilities. There are usually no cooking facilities, so you may have to rely on takeaway food. If there’s a kitchen, you may have to share it with

¹⁰ Access to social stock will depend on local housing waiting list conditions and the operation of the choice-based lettings model in different areas. Constraints in the local housing market, such as the supply of one-bedroom properties, will also be a factor.

¹¹ According to the Housing Benefit (General) Regulations 1987.

others. Some bed & breakfasts don't allow residents to stay in their rooms during the day.'

Shelter 2014a

However, B&Bs used by local authorities for households in priority need are subject to some quality assurances. The unsupported temporary accommodation (B&Bs) used by homeless households who are not placed by local authorities will most often be of a worse standard.

HMOs

Typically, HMOs are distinguished from guesthouses by providing shared facilities but not board to their tenants. Legally, HMOs are defined by building specification and the number of residents: a HMO has at least three tenants, forming more than one household, who share toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities with other tenants. A properties is a 'large HMO' if it is at least three storeys high and at least five tenants live there, forming more than one household.

Sufficient concern has been created by conditions in HMOs, such as their increased fire risk, for government to take licensing action (the effectiveness of these actions is discussed in chapter 4). Many hostels and B&Bs meet the HMO criteria, and will be subject to the licensing rules for HMOs. However, only larger HMOs are covered by the licensing regime, and therefore some properties that are equally problematic and ought to be bound by the licensing regime in reality end up exempt.

While HMOs are a common destination for those taking unsupported accommodation, sharing premises with other homeless households is not ideal for tenants who are looking to manage mental or physical health problems, or drug and alcohol addictions.

Hostels and refuges

These properties are defined, for housing benefit terms, as follows (VOA 2014):

'A building with domestic accommodation, other than separate and self-contained accommodation, where board or facilities for the preparation of food are provided and which is—

- *Managed or owned by a registered housing association or*
- *Run on a non-commercial basis with some central or local government funding or*
- *Managed by a voluntary organisation/charity providing care, support or supervision assisting people being rehabilitated or resettled¹² within the community.'*

There are a variety of hostels used by the homeless, including night shelters (where stays are on a night-by-night basis) and direct-access short-stay hostels. While housing benefit will cover the cost of most hostel accommodation, they are not a place of permanent residence, and charges, as with B&Bs, often occur for the provision of food and laundry services (Shelter 2014a).

Summary

For some homeless households, accessing settled accommodation can be difficult, and those who do not qualify for full assistance will often be left to fend to themselves. What is available to this group is frequently substandard, with little or no support to identify and access secure tenancies and support services.

Because of their status, monitoring of where these people end up living, and with whom, is often very limited, and the few statistics that aid in identifying the scale of the problem are fragmented across a range of government and non-governmental databases.

12 At this point in time, our research does not include people in this group.

It is essential that we should know more about the lives of people living in unsupported temporary accommodation. Many are extremely vulnerable, as we will illustrate in the following chapter, and living in conditions deemed unfit for anyone else. Nonetheless, they are left to choose between from among a range of poor housing options, because they have been rejected by the mainstream housing market, neither being eligible for immediate access to social housing nor having the references or backstories that most private landlords would accept.

These arrangements are often expensive too, for both tenants and taxpayers. Housing benefit payments support people living in these arrangements, and usually the maximum local housing allowance (LHA) rate is charged – that is to say, the top rate of housing benefit is used to meet the rent. Often, additional charges are added on top for services such as food, utilities and use of laundry. Tenants are expected to meet the additional costs of their stay where that exceeds the level of LHA, out of their remaining benefits, such as jobseekers allowance and employment support allowance, if they receive them. As is made clear in the next chapter, these charges often consume a significant proportion of tenants' incomes. Beyond this, the impact of this type of accommodation on people's lives has spill-over costs for other services: concerns relating to health, wellbeing and personal security inevitably create pressures on, for example, the NHS and police.

This is an urgent problem that demands policy action, but to tackle it properly requires a much clearer picture of all these factors – it requires us to define unsupported temporary accommodation and, in doing so, to grasp its full scale.

3.

LIFE IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Life in temporary accommodation can be miserable, and is often damaging. It is evident from the data that we present here and from earlier studies that the insecurity of tenure, conditions, management, system and others who surround them impact negatively on tenants' wellbeing in the short and medium term, and potentially in long term too.

Existing studies

There are issues with both the type and quality of properties available to support priority need and non-priority need households. In 2004, Shelter released a report which looked at some of the specific detrimental effects of living in council-sanctioned temporary accommodation, which found that it contributed to the:

'...development of mental health problems, such as depression, and physical health problems resulting from housing conditions. Families also discussed how and why existing physical and mental health problems had worsened, often as a result of them having no control over their circumstances and no knowledge of what was going to happen to them, or when.'

Credland 2004

Shelter's survey of 431 households who had experienced temporary accommodation revealed a perception that their health was worsening as a result of being in temporary accommodation, and that this perception often worsened the longer tenants had been living there.

Table 3.1

Perceived impact of living in temporary accommodation on health

Length of stay in temporary accommodation	Perceived change in health			N
	Better (%)	Same (%)	Worse (%)	
< 3 months	24	34	42	96
3 months–1 year	26	38	36	104
> 1 year	20	38	42	208

Source: Credland 2004

This data is focussed on households to whom councils had a duty to act and who had, therefore, a clear and legally defined route out of their current dwelling. For those who do not overcome the necessary hurdles to gain a route through and out of temporary accommodation, it is possible that the effects are worse – not only because they risk living in temporary conditions in perpetuity, without the hope or expectation of moving to settled accommodation, but also because the general conditions outlined are potentially much more hazardous (as is illustrated in the following section).

For instance, Spencer and Corkhill (2013) identified a number of specific negative factors from their research in the North East region, which looked at the conditions experienced by single non-priority homeless residents of B&Bs and HMOs.

Unacceptable standards of premises management

- Inadequate security of buildings and individual rooms, leading to personal possessions being stolen, and allowing anyone to come in to the building (including drug dealers).
- Bed linen and towels not being laundered at least weekly, when this service is being charged for.
- Basic building maintenance and repairs not being carried out.
- Buildings being divided into multiple units with flimsy and poorly decorated dividing walls.
- Shower and toilet facilities being out of order for protracted periods.
- Smoke detectors being disabled by residents, followed by no effective response by building managers.
- Insufficient heating of premises.
- Repeated incidents of drug dealing and drug-related violence on the premises, some involving managers of the premises.

Abusive management practice and behaviour

- People having cash cards or benefits books 'confiscated' by proprietors, which was sometimes presented as a way of helping residents to control problem drinking.
- People being required to carry out unpaid work for proprietors, under threat of eviction should they refuse.
- Sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable residents and on occasions vulnerable visitors (such as individuals staying in nearby supported housing).
- People being required to share rooms with strangers, without any prior notice or any reduction in rent payable.
- Access to shared kitchen facilities being refused, where this is part of the paid for service (and in some cases, no kitchen facilities despite the label 'hotel').
- Breakfasts being charged for but not provided.
- People being illegally evicted, sometimes under threats of violence.
- People being locked out of premises from early morning until late evening.
- Sale of alcohol to residents with alcohol problems (sometimes without a licence).

Spencer and Corkhill 2013

Original qualitative research

To build on these existing studies, IPPR's project is monitoring the lives of those living in unsupported temporary accommodation. Participants have been engaged via Justlife, an organisation offering services to support single homeless people living in unsupported temporary accommodation. Through one-to-one interviews, focus groups and encouraging participants to write daily journals, the project is recording their experiences and the impact that their living situations have on their health and wellbeing.

To date, 35 people have participated in the research, which includes 50 in-depth interviews, each 25–60 minutes in length, as well as four focus groups; eight are recording their experiences in a journal. All participants are Justlife service users and therefore have an existing relationship with the organisation. They live in two separate locations in England, one in the north west and one in the south east. All interviews and focus groups take place at a Justlife centre or drop-in service, or at a convenient location, such as a public café. Interviews and focus groups have followed a semi-structured format, meaning that the depth to which participants speak on various aspects of their lives varies significantly.

The following section sets out common experiences of project participants, illustrated wherever possible in their own words.

Personal views on life in temporary accommodation

Moving into unsupported temporary accommodation

Participants move into unsupported temporary accommodation for various reasons, and from a variety of previous situations.

The majority of our research participants arrived in unsupported temporary accommodation without having been placed by their local authority. Fourteen of our interviewees either referred themselves or had help from a friend to secure them a place. Public agencies were also involved in directing people to unsupported temporary accommodation; among our group, six were placed by services such as prisons, probation, health services and voluntary sector organisations.

However, local authorities were involved – either actively or passively – in directing people into unsupported temporary accommodation. Among our group, 11 were placed by their local authority, where the homeless duty was owed. However, these individuals were without alternative accommodation, were not transferred to settled accommodation, and were offered limited support to do so. A further four participants were not actively placed but were signposted to temporary guesthouses and HMOs. Local authorities may, for instance, offer homeless people a list of potential properties that will provide ‘emergency accommodation’.

Prior to arrival, nine of the participants had been living on the streets. Many of these people conveyed their gratitude for a roof over their head and commented on how their health had improved since being ‘warm and dry’. However, as illustrated in the ensuing sections, their experiences are not all positive.

Six of the participants were discharged from hospital into temporary accommodation. Although, on the whole, their physical health improved during their stay – because they were recuperating from illness or injury, they were on a trajectory of improvement anyway – it is clear that in some cases their recuperation was hampered by their living circumstances.

Where the participants’ circumstances were stable prior to arriving in temporary accommodation, their experience of the accommodation and how it impacted on their lives is often negative. Table 3.2 provides a break-down of participants’ accommodation immediately prior to living in temporary housing. This, however, does not show the whole picture, as many people have spent time moving between two or more of these.

Table 3.2

Accommodation of research participants prior to living in unsupported temporary accommodation

Type of accommodation immediately prior to arrival	Number
Nightshelter	3
Sofa surfing – staying with family or friends on a temporary basis (common reasons given: relationship breakdown, release from prison)	7
Prison	3
Street homeless (common reasons given: release from prison, relationship breakdown)	9
Settled accommodation (common reasons given for this ending: relationship breakdown, bereavement)	7
Hospital	6

As is evident from this table, it is common for people to arrive in unsupported temporary accommodation from circumstances that are already challenging, after being ejected from supported accommodation, being released from prison, recovering in hospital, or sleeping on the streets. It also serves to explain why the concentration of people with complex needs in unsupported temporary accommodation is so high.

Getting into and out of the system

In 2008, New Philanthropy Capital published a report highlighting that there were approximately 260,000 people in England living on the streets or in temporary accommodation, plus many more who were sofa surfing or living in overcrowded homes. The total estimate is around 560,000 (Blake et al 2008).

But trying to record numbers for any category of homelessness is a complex job.

'Our snapshot estimates do not fully capture the often chaotic flows through the different categories of homelessness. Someone living in council-arranged accommodation may have been living in a concealed household in overcrowded conditions three months ago, and may be sleeping rough in six weeks' time. The flow through homelessness is neither progressive nor predictable.'

Blake et al 2008

This chaotic housing history is a reflection of often-complex issues, including substance misuse and alcohol dependency, multiple relationship breakdowns and chronic health problems. People can also be forced to move by rent arrears, criminal activity, landlord interventions and management crackdowns, and lack of secure tenure.

This is reflected in our research. Of 35 participants, only eight remained in the same unsupported temporary accommodation for the duration of the year (the first 12 months of our project, 2013–14). Seven lived in just one unsupported temporary accommodation property before moving into a more secure or supported tenancy. For over half of the participants, however, the story was quite different: 11 participants lived in at least two unsupported residences or had a period of time rough sleeping, sofa surfing or in some other kind of accommodation. Another nine made positive moves to supported accommodation, detox or other tenancy type after a period of being in and out of unsupported residences and moving between different forms of homelessness.

'When I am skint I go to my mum's, stay with her for a bit. But my housing benefit still goes to [the landlord], then I know I can come back.'

Overcrowding moved one participant between two unsupported residences; high top-up charges moved another. An abusive relationship caused one person to start rough sleeping (they have since moved back into unsupported temporary accommodation). These are just a few illustrations of why there is so much movement within the system.

Physical conditions

The physical condition of properties was cited as an issue for 32 out of 35 research participants. There are a range of very common complaints.

Damp...

'It was really dirty and violent, disgusting really, damp. I could even smell the damp, really, I couldn't breathe properly in the night.'

'We were sharing a room ... just a box room, single bed in it. Cold, damp everywhere.'

The lack of heating and basic appliances...

'I can say it is cold, very cold in my room. I have got no access to the kitchen, no fridge, no basic things that I need.'

'It is cold, especially with the window not being fixed. I can't close it.'

'In my old room the sink didn't work. They had had to cut the water off because the lad that lived right underneath me, he was getting leaks in his room.'

Poor hygiene and uncleanliness...

'It is a dump ... The quilt is just covered, soaked in blood. You have never seen anything like it. No heating. One person says [the landlord] has done nothing to maintain the place in 10 years. It is just so disgusting. I have been there just 24 hours and I am sleeping all in my clothes, my coat. Wrapped up and not touching anything. I have a scarf over my mouth so I don't breathe any disease in.'

'In the bathroom there is no window, a broken extractor fan, so the damp gets around a lot.'

'That's inside [pointing around the room] – scaffolding, pigeon droppings inside the room, the ventilation system that has been blocked up with a plastic bag, windows that have been sealed up with parcel tape. That is the wall of the shower room, filthy. That is the condition of the shower and this shower mat is fixed, disgusting. This is the toilet, though I had cleaned it. It was black to start with. The condition of the sink, inside the shower, above the shower and they wouldn't do anything ... dirt is embedded everywhere.'

Infestations...

'There are a couple of times I have found mice in my bedroom, coming up through the floorboards.'

'I have had fleas in my flat. I have got silverfish in my flat, in the bathroom ... I have had a cousin who lived on the third floor. He had bedbugs. They don't care about this shit, all they care about is the money.'

Although some landlords and management companies ensure properties are safe and secure for residents, there are many who let rooms with broken locks or none at all. In our group, 19 participants had no lock or a broken lock on their door for at least part of their stay.

'I haven't even got a front door key or a bedroom door key, so I just leave my bedroom window open. Anybody can walk in here and get my stuff. I have brought most of it here. It is all in that bag over there.'

'The room he give me had no lock on it. He said that he'd sort it all out ... I had to go and buy the new lock myself. Yeah, bought the lock myself, put the lock on myself, then they ask me for the keys.'

'I have got a lock on my door, but I can open it with just a nudge, so it's rubbish.'

'In the other B&B there is no toilet. That toilet was smashed and there was just a piece of a toilet. One toilet, a piece of a toilet.'

While many of these experiences speak to properties that would not meet the Decent Homes standard,¹³ there are also instances of more serious breaches of HMO regulations and health and safety standards, including breaches of fire safety regulations.

'And I don't know what is going on with [the landlord] and the council, but a council guy came and did a safety check. [The landlord] must have been notified because he ... put six fire extinguishers around. But as soon as [the council guy] had gone, the fire extinguishers were back in the van.'

'Where I am situated in the building there is a fire door, just outside my door, and it is nailed up. That is the fire exit and it is nailed up. The only exit after that is the front door. There was a fire in the building a couple of weeks ago, about 3 o'clock in the morning, and they never woke a single person up to tell them to get out.'

While not meeting aspects of the Decent Homes standard is common in the private sector (see Turley and Davies 2014), serious breaches of fire regulations are against the law and can lead to fines and the revocation of HMO licences.

Management practices and behaviour

In most cases, unsupported temporary accommodation residences are provided by private landlords. These individuals and organisations often house vulnerable individuals with multiple and complex needs, and are therefore meeting a need for accommodation for people who have found it difficult to access the mainstream residential market. Notwithstanding the testimony in this chapter, there are many individual landlords and management companies who make concerted efforts to keep properties up to an acceptable standard and try to provide adequate services to residents.

In addition to charging tenants rent, generally met via tenants' local housing allowance, landlords usually levy additional service charges, to cover varying costs including bills and rates (electricity, gas, water), breakfast and other meals, laundry services and cleaning.

Our research participants are charged £10–£35 per week, as shown in table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Additional service charges levied on research participants

Amount paid	
£35 per week	1
£30 per week	5
£25 per week	2
£20 per week, negotiated down from £30 per week	1
£20 per week	7
£10 per week, negotiated down from £20/£30 per week	3
£10 per week	13
£0 per week – refused to pay	3

Five of the residents refuse to pay all or part of the charge because they feel that the services promised, such as adequate food and hot water, are not provided. Two others negotiated with the landlord to pay a lower charge on the proviso that they would help the landlord with services, such as cleaning, shopping or preparing rooms for new tenants. Charges seem relatively arbitrary and the enforcement of this payment does not always happen, and appears not to reflect the quality of services offered.

¹³ See: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/decenthomes/whatis/>

'He brings beans, bread, eggs – but all cheap. The manager cooks. But he is charging people. People are coming into the building and he is charging people to have a meal who are not even living there. He is charging them £4. This is the food that is meant to be for the residents, so he is on the fiddle. But if they can make money out of you in there, they will.'

'He is not giving us food ... It is cheap bread – something like 15p ... and you have to go to the old guy's room, and he is giving you one egg, uncooked.'

There were different practices in the two locations, however. In the south-east England location, all participants pay £10 a week. This covers bills, or the tenant is given prepaid electric cards that they can use in their room and when using cooking facilities.

Consistently, residents reported poor management practices: 18 of 35 participants commented that they had had reported problems to landlords or managers and nothing had been done. Even more worryingly, 21 claimed that their landlord was breaking the law.

Several participants cited abuse of vulnerable tenants.

'And the old man upstairs, he is 70-odd years of age. He gets his rent taken off him by the landlord and someone else will come in and say "have you got your rent?" and he has just given it 10 minutes before, but instead of any trouble he will just pay his rent again ... I know that there are people being intimidated in all these blocks.'

'The landlords took the bank cards off them. Cashing their money, it is a disgrace. Saying, "oh I'll keep hold of your bank card". They are not seeing their money ... and the guy hasn't even got a blanket on his bed.'

'It is just money, money, money. He is not interested in anyone. All it is, just money.'

Others encountered threatening, intimidating and violent behaviour.

'If you haven't paid the money he comes in with blokes and starts threatening people. One guy, they battered him up.'

'I have been in prison ... I was treated the same as the worst prisoner the officers had ever experienced. We were all treated as if you were that prisoner. And the accommodation that I have had in B&Bs, hostels, whatever, it is on a par with that. You are treated like the worst resident that they have ever had.'

Participants reported that evictions by landlords or management companies were often arbitrary, underlining that their residence in this accommodation is not secure.

'[You are] miserable all the time, because you don't know if you are gonna get chucked out or not.'

'I got chucked out on the Thursday. He said that we made a load of complaints against him, because of all our rooms getting robbed, then [when] he threatened me with his family, I chucked him out the room, shut my door. Then he chucked me out.'

Experiences of the wider system

Life in unsupported temporary accommodation is coloured significantly by the system as a whole. The 'system' requires people to be referred by local authorities, agencies and services to move on from unsupported to supported accommodation. It is difficult to get a referral, and waiting lists are often long. It is difficult to access support to move on to other accommodation, and even if there is support, other types of accommodation – such as registered social landlord or private rented sector properties – are difficult to access; the former because of long waiting lists and the latter because many landlords do not accept benefits and require large deposits and references.

Our research participants consistently described finding themselves becoming reliant on overstretched and ineffectual services for help to move forward. Moreover, they reported a disconnection in communication between services, meaning that vulnerable people are put into even more vulnerable positions.

'So in the middle of October [after coming out of hospital] I went back to my [unsupported] place, then when I got there, there was a letter and I had been kicked out immediately ... Because they didn't know where I was for the whole week. So I had to call a doctor, the doctor called the council, and the council said "let him back in there". So that is why I am back.'

Another emerging theme of participant comments is the lack of control they feel while waiting for alternative housing to come available.

'I feel frustrated. I don't feel that I am in control of my destiny in there. All I can do is my very best. If I try my best I usually get somewhere because I am that type, I have a determined streak in me ... But I am finding that [in the accommodation] I am done, I am not. That is what is worrying me slightly, because all you can do is put your name down on the housing list, with housing associations, with councils, then it is up to someone to help you.'

'They say that they are all on top of it, but they don't know how long it is going to take. So I don't know. I don't know why I am staying there, eight months already.'

'I can't do anything without the help. For example, Justlife has arranged the appointment with Nacro [the crime reduction charity]. I don't think that I can do anything on my own.'

'Everyone you call says "come back tomorrow, just wait, not sure. You need to call back, see this person. Come back tomorrow." Always waiting, and no one can deal with your problem now. I am homeless, and they say come back tomorrow? Well, now it's tomorrow at 10am ... maybe she says, come back tomorrow.'

Other residents

Typically, residents of unsupported temporary accommodation have complex needs. Often, people have just been discharged from prison or have left their previous accommodation after the breakdown of a relationship, and many have been on the streets. In a survey of service users at Justlife in 2013, 94 per cent reported mental health issues, 70 per cent reported issues around offending behaviour, and 79 per cent reported needs related to substance misuse, including many with issues around both alcohol and illegal drugs.¹⁴ The residents themselves, and the close proximity of their complex lives, is one of the chief problems of these living arrangements.

14 Unpublished research conducted by Justlife, supplied to the authors.

These issues are reflected in the opinions and experiences of our research participants. It is difficult to trust anyone and to form friendships or relationships.

'The people, the other people, I can't trust them. Some people have been in prison, some not. Some people use drugs, and I don't know how they are going to react when they are on the drugs. I don't mix with them and don't trust them.'

'I greet them, but that is it. I am not their friend, I just stay in my room all the time. They are not my kind of people. I don't want to get involved in their habits. People go in their rooms, drinking or doing drugs, I just don't interfere.'

'I know all the people. I don't know how many. They are all alcoholics. All like a drink. I get on with them all, even the one who was lying in the door. He came banging on my door at 3.30 in the morning, kicking in my flat. He said a coloured guy had whacked him in the eye. I said I will whack you in the other eye. It is 3am. He started on me.'

'I reckon that I would be ok without all them mitherers ... You know, knocking on the door all the time, mithering you for something, getting at you. You can't live normal there. They should say, they should write it down when they advertise it, "Flats to let: bullies included." I can't live like that. I can't.'

Other residents can be disruptive and noisy at all hours of the day and night.

'It is difficult to live there, it is manic, everybody is all around in the middle of the night.'

'It is obviously not quiet over there. After 12 o'clock, prostitute is just fucking shouting. Fucking terrible.'

The behaviour of some residents is insanitary.

'He used to shit in his room in a bag and then he would come and try and pour it into the toilet. But obviously when he has poured it into the toilet now, obviously he is missing everything. You get me? It's disgusting.'

One resident was shocked at the level of depravity and the issues that people had who were living in his accommodation.

'I went to this place that I didn't know, and to a city which I didn't know, with people who I didn't know. And when I met them, I didn't want to know them anymore, because they are drug addicts, alcoholics, thieves, violent people. But I had no choice but to stay there, I had nowhere else to go.'

In these situations, the level of violence and crime is disproportionately high. Among our group, 15 admitted to being a victim of crime and 24 to having witnessed or experienced violence within unsupported temporary accommodation.

'The worst thing that makes me depressed most was not the buildings, not the state of the buildings, but the people around me, always stealing things. That made me angry first, then depressed after ... And then, second day, they attacked me and I landed in the hospital. My documents were stolen, my money was stolen.'

Mental health

Participants in our study have told us that they have clinically diagnosed mental health issues, including depression, personality disorder and psychosis. Five residents who had previously lived on the streets said that their mental health and stress had improved since arriving in temporary accommodation. On the other hand, 27 participants reported that their mental health had been negatively affected by their new circumstances.

The conditions of the premises are not conducive to improving the mental wellbeing of residents.

'It was really depressing to be honest, I never in my life lived in an environment like that before.'

'I just hate going back there, it makes me depressed.'

Stress is a common problem.

'Stressed. It is driving me mental. I went back to the doctors and had to get all my medication put up, all my antidepressants and what-not.'

'Really stressful. But you can't think about it. I would go out all day doing things. You have to. You can't think about it, you have to block it out ... If you let that situation reach you, then you are always gonna be down.'

The actions of other residents also have an impact on participants' mental health.

'It stresses me out living here. Yes. It stresses me out, people arguing and whatever. Then I end up getting stressed out and then I end up having a fit, then I end up in the hospital.'

So it is unsurprising that, over time, many perceived their mental health to have worsened.

'You know the longer I am in that place, the worse it is getting. The worse everything is getting.'

'It was alright, but it deteriorated in there. It seriously did. Just depression. It was horrible really. You are just existing really, you are not living are you? Just horrible.'

'Bad. I have never been as depressed in my life, and I suffer from depression. Just everyday is a struggle.'

Physical health

Of our 35 participants, 30 reported that their physical health was affected by the damp and poorly maintained conditions of temporary accommodation. Twenty-two felt that the food given or kitchen facilities available were inadequate to maintain a healthy diet. The physical health of participants was also affected by violence, conditions that hindered their recovery from injury or illness, and infestations.

'I was beaten or attacked ... I just woke up in the blood around my face. I called the police and I was taken to the hospital. My nose was broken ... my face was cut. I have stitches inside my face. I don't like my face anymore.'

'I have only just got over a broken back. And what he has done is put me in a room where I have to climb up two flights of stairs and come all the way round and down flights of stairs, which kills me.'

'I am weak. I feel really weak and vulnerable. I said there was no heating. Well, we have a fan heater. Everyone has them. But the heat is really dry, really dry, and it's either burning hot or freezing cold. It is bad for me. It makes my throat and chest really dry and I can't breathe properly. There is no warm water. Now it is cold outside, getting wintery, and it is freezing cold inside.'

'I had nits and fleas, nits from I don't know what. It is just dirty, but I have got rid of them now.'

Narcotics and alcohol appear to be common. Eight participants admitted to being active drug users, 23 to being alcohol dependent (six of whom depend on both drugs and alcohol). Most people said that they found it extremely easy to access drugs, even if they didn't want to. One participant commented on how the proliferation of alcohol and drug dependent people around him had caused his addictions to spiral.

'When I first went into the B&B I only used to drink at weekends because I was working. Then my daughter died, then I lost my job ... By that time I was over in that B&B. And everyone around me ... they all had a drink and all that, they're all drinking, drinking, drinking ... then they all took drugs, and then I just got worse and worse.'

Another, a recovered heroin user who had started using 'a bit again', spoke of his difficulties.

'It is so easy to get [the drugs]. There is always dealers outside, pushing them, promoting them: "Do you want my phone number? I have got the best stuff you can get. Here is my phone number." They don't care about you ... All they care about is that they want to trap you ... It's not just me who would say that, anyone would say that who lives there, they would tell you that there is a drug problem in there ... So I just happen to see a drug deal going through or someone injecting. That is giving an alcoholic a bottle of whisky and telling them not to drink it – "don't drink that, I will be back in three hours, I don't want you to drink a drop of that". He has got the shakes, and he is a real alcoholic. He's got a bottle of whisky in his hand, and he knows that if he drinks some of it he can stop all them uncomfortable feelings ... So it is very tempting, it is wrestling with his mind all the time.'

Living in close proximity with other people with addictions and complicated lives appears to be counterproductive, particularly for those attempting to escape substance addictions.

'With people in there, they don't know that I am not taking anything, but they are knocking on my door asking if I have got any paraphernalia or anything like that, tin foil. I don't have anything like that, but it is just a constant reminder every single day.'

'I don't want to see my room, I don't want to see my things when I have got no place. It is just a shell, my case, my stuff and the bags are there, I just don't want to see it, I want to be unconscious to see it ... I just want to forget about the showers, about the toilets. I am sick of that. Sick of that. I see this shit, when I see this shit I want to forget about this, and the best way is the drink.'

'It makes me drink, I drink a lot more when I am in there. It's a shithole.'

Relationships and friendships

The lifestyles of residents and the cycling in and out of temporary accommodation make it difficult to form the friendships and relationships that might support better mental health. However, a number of participants also reported that they found it difficult to maintain relationships with friends and family who lived outside of their new environment.

'Well, I wouldn't invite anybody in, wouldn't want them to see the conditions I was living in. But now I can bring anybody to my new place. But you didn't want people to see the conditions. You also never know who is gonna be in the room, in the place. Dangerous. There are no rules.'

'I have friends, but they are not allowed in. Part of that makes me really not very happy ... because no one is allowed, so I am always at my friend's house, that is why they got tired of me.'

Summary

For most of our research participants, life in unsupported temporary accommodation is difficult not just for one but for a range of the reasons outlined above. One resident summarised his experience as follows:

'There is just all bullying. I see it every single day in the building. Bullying, people getting bullied. Prostitution, there is prostitutes in and out the place all day long. It is a disgrace. It's manky, it leaks, the toilets are leaking. There is one shower for about 25 residents. Yeah and the tiles are falling off the wall and it is an absolute disgrace. Well, I am not supposed to drink really. But you know, when you are in there and I can't get a wink of sleep at night because of all the banging and running around ... I am stressed everyday about it.'

It appears that putting those with already complex lives into accommodation alongside other people facing their own complex problems is counterproductive. Whether it is the quality of accommodation and the social environments fostered by the residents, or the damp, or the fact that the heating is broken and the bathrooms are filthy, or the drug users, prostitutes and bullies, too often the conditions are unacceptable and damaging to the physical and mental health of inhabitants.

In a tacit recognition of how undesirable temporary accommodation is for priority need households, the government has statutory targets for how long a family with children should remain in such circumstances, but not for other resident groups.¹⁵ However, even statutory targets and the guidance that comes with them offer insufficient protection against poor property conditions, other tenants and poor management practices. Nor do they guarantee support for people to move on once temporary accommodation, 'officially' sanctioned or otherwise, has been secured. As a result, the conditions in unsupported temporary accommodation tend to be much worse, and paths onwards less clear. In part, this is down to the limitations of public policy in this area, to which our report now turns.

¹⁵ Temporary accommodation for families and households with children is not discussed in this paper. All examples and households are single or cohabiting homeless adults.

4.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY: DETERMINING SUPPORT AND REGULATING QUALITY

Many of these problems exist because the policy environment combines a limited understanding of the true extent of the problem, a limited homelessness net that captures too narrow a range of households, and a limited regulatory framework that cannot ensure the destination dwellings of those in unsupported temporary accommodation are of a sufficiently good standard to live in.

Specific standards for those where a duty is owed

Policy coverage is a core issue in tackling the conditions in unsupported temporary accommodation. In part, this is because policy coverage is constrained (not unlike priority need categories) to safeguard specific groups of people, notably, those where a legal duty to house applies, and consequently to ensure that temporary stays remain temporary and that basic property standards are met. The following requirements cover those living in accommodation where a duty is owed, but not those where no such duty applies.

Those accepted as homeless may be directed towards local authority authorised temporary accommodation, and a legal framework and guidance exist to ensure a degree of support for certain family types under the priority need umbrella. Typically these reforms have been addressed at families with children and under-18s.¹⁶ For instance, in 2002 the government announced its intention to outlaw the use of B&Bs except in emergencies, a move which resulted in the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) Order 2003. In particular, this order sought to end the use of B&Bs for periods longer than six weeks for families with children and households where a member is pregnant. No such guidance applies to those self-referring to unsupported temporary accommodation, irrespective of the human and financial costs incurred.

Further protections include annex 17 of the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (2006), which sets out what is and is not a sleeping space, how big sleeping spaces should be, how many people should occupy them, and the range of facilities that should be available to temporary tenants. Again, none of this applies to those not recognised as homeless. As Spencer and Corkhill argue, this is somewhat perverse:

'Annex 17 applies only to households which have been assessed as homeless and in priority need and provided with temporary accommodation under Part 7 of the Homelessness Act. However, as a guidance document it can provide a useful starting point to consider standards of B&B or hostel accommodation for anybody who is homeless and vulnerable. It can be argued that such standards are more important for non-statutory households, because they are less likely to move into more suitable and settled housing, within a reasonable time frame.'

Spencer and Corkhill 2013

¹⁶ For more detail, see Wilson 2014.

There is also a regulatory framework which pertains to local authorities' use of private rented sector properties as the settled accommodation option when resolving a duty to act. For instance, the Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order 2012 defines the circumstances in which such accommodation should not be regarded as suitable, based on five broad criteria: the physical condition of the property, health and safety, HMO licensing, landlord behaviour, and management.

Thus, for defined groups, some protections exist at least to ensure that a property is reasonably appropriate, and at most to set a limit on how long a local authority will be allowed to keep a household there.

These stipulations, however, cover only a narrow group of people. Even in council-sanctioned accommodation, stipulations on length of stay do not apply to groups of non-priority single homeless people. The local authority may recognise these households as homeless but also determine that no duty to house is owed. This effectively excludes them from the type of policy coverage described above and largely from meaningful support to secure housing (beyond, in some cases, being offered a list of potential landlords who *might* offer them accommodation). It is likely, however, that once they are staying in unsupported temporary accommodation, a single homeless person will not be regarded as homeless unless there is a reason for them having to leave the accommodation.

Guidance alone is not sufficient to ensure standards are upheld for supported households, let alone for those who are not.¹⁷ And the limited protections given to homeless people living in unsupported temporary accommodation are thus restricted to regulations covering the quality of the properties themselves.

Property standards for those where a duty is not owed

The quality of accommodation in England is patchy, but in theory there are regulatory measures in place to prevent the worst premises being let. Local government are responsible for ensuring local dwellings are up to legal minimum standards, outlined in various laws and regulations.¹⁸ The labyrinthine details of these regulations should protect the vulnerable from having to live in poor quality accommodation.¹⁹ However, legislation is only effective if it is fully applied and resourced.

Blanket coverage for all property is provided through the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), to ensure that housing across all sectors is not a risk for inhabitants, their neighbours or the wider community. For instance, the HHSRS guidance advises that:

'When local authority officers inspect a dwelling they will look for any risk of harm to an actual or potential occupier of a dwelling, which results from any deficiency that can give rise to a hazard. They will judge the severity of the risk by thinking about the likelihood of an occurrence that could cause harm over the next twelve months, and the range of harms that could result. The local authority officer will make these judgments by reference to those who, mostly based on age, would be most vulnerable to the hazard, even if people in these age groups may not actually be living in the property at the time.'

DCLG 2006

17 Shelter Scotland have provided their own updated guidance using annex 17 as a starting point. As our project continues, we will consider a range of options for improving standards and enforcement.

18 Including section 11 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, s4 Defective Premises Act 1972, s82 Environmental Protection Act 1990, part 1 of the Housing Act 2004 (the Housing Health and Safety Rating System) and the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, and a raft of HMO regulations applied since 2004.

19 Although the Communities and Local Government select committee (2013) has implied that the complexity of regulation may in fact be a part of the problem.

Powers include serving improvement notices, prohibition orders, hazard awareness notices, clearance orders, and even demolition orders. There are four rating classes, and councils have a duty to intervene in the most severe cases (category 1). In 2012, more than 20 per cent of privately rented homes had a category one hazard, meaning that the property was unsafe to inhabit; this is double the incidence seen in local authority housing, and three times that of housing association properties. The scale of this problem is a significant challenge for local governments: the English Housing Survey estimates that, of the 1.2 million private rented homes that are currently failing to pass the Decent Homes standards, 57 per cent (or 778,000 properties) are also not passing the HHSRS standards (DCLG 2014). Moreover, it is those on low incomes who are more prone to living in poor-quality properties. Just under 22 per cent of English homes do not meet the Decent Homes standards, and it is estimated that 24 per cent of the poorest quintile inhabit non-decent homes (ibid).

Despite the scale of the problem, and the propensity for people on low incomes to end up in the poorest properties, the enforcement of minimum standards is weak and, as a result of public spending cuts, council services are seldom sufficiently resourced to deploy their potential powers with the proactivity and vigour required to drive up standards. The charity Crisis, for instance, argues that environmental health teams are often too understaffed and under-resourced to make an impact on housing quality (Crisis 2014). A survey of local housing authorities by the Local Government Information Unit found that a lack of resources was the biggest barrier they faced to improving engagement with the private rented sector (Lucas et al 2013). Prosecutions against landlords are very rare: for instance, Shelter claims that in 2012 only 487 prosecutions were made, in an estimated population of 1.2 million landlords (CLG Select Committee 2013), leading them to claim that ‘the problem is not a lack of powers, but the willingness and ability of local authorities to enforce their existing powers’.

Further still, both the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and the Building Research Establishment (BRE) claim that efforts to ensure property standards is heavily reliant on tenants raising issues with their homes. Given that tenants on assured shorthold tenancies can be evicted at the end of their contract for no specific reason, both CAB and BRE have argued that this leads to ‘retaliatory evictions’, as landlords terminate the contract of a tenant known to have notified a problem rather than repair the problem they have complained about (ibid). In the absence of active, interventionist local authority property inspections, the burden and consequences fall on tenants. For those who have moved from being homeless into unsupported temporary accommodation, these risks are particularly acute.

Crucially, the incentives against enforcing standards in the few homes that are willing to house the most vulnerable and complex individuals are clear, rendering the already limited policy environment for people found not to meet the priority need criteria effectively irrelevant.

In addition to the HHSRS, specific additional regulation governs the quality of HMO properties. All HMOs are covered by requirements on the landlord or managing agent which cover provision of contact details, fire safety, structural safety, drainage and water supply, gas safety and certification, general state of repair, garden or grounds maintenance, general condition of living accommodation, and disposal of rubbish (see Wilson 2013).

Any failure to meet these requirements can lead to local authority action, and ultimately a fine of up to £5,000 (ibid). This level of fine appears disproportionately low, and may not be sufficiently prohibitive. A large HMO, fully let, will rent out rooms to at least five households. If each household is paying the current LHA average weekly award of £61.35 per week, the landlord’s annual income from the five tenants would be £15,950. In that perspective, the fines for not addressing local authority demands are small.

Large HMOs – those accommodating more than five households and at least three storeys high – are subject to more stringent regulations, and landlords need to secure a licence, which is issued (and can be revoked) by the local authority, for each individual property. The licence imposes a number of specific regulatory burdens, including an inspection to ensure that the property is fit to let and a ‘fit and proper’ person test, which determines whether the landlord or managing agent should be allowed to let the property, in light of a criminal record or other property-related breach of regulations. Even beyond the question of council resources, however, failing the ‘fit and proper’ test does not necessarily prevent a landlord from continuing to let the property, as a replacement managing agent may be appointed instead, such as a family member or associate. In reality, then, the test does not effectively weed out bad landlords (ibid). This conclusion is shared by the Pro Housing Alliance:

‘The infrequency with which Interim Management Orders are used indicates that licence applications are rarely refused. This means either all applicants are ‘fit and proper’ or else LHAs are taking too relaxed an approach, but also focussing on ‘easy’ cases.’

CLG Select Committee 2013

Local authorities may also request landlords to make specific adaptations or improvements in order to be granted their licence.

It is possible to regulate small HMOs to the same extent as large HMOs, including the licensing regime, however few local authorities have sought to introduce full coverage (by 2010, 16 councils had introduced additional, discretionary licensing on smaller HMOs). This means that in most areas councils have to be particularly proactive to identify poor-quality small HMO properties. Given, for example, Save the Children’s estimate that only around a fifth of HMOs are large enough to be covered by mandatory licensing – and therefore subject to tighter regulation and the ‘fit and proper’ test – this leaves a significant gap in coverage (CLG Select Committee 2013). It may be that the threshold defining a ‘large HMO’ is too high to provide even limited protection to the majority of tenants – including many of those in unsupported temporary accommodation – and that, in effect, anyone can become a landlord and be subject only to light-touch regulation if their property falls just below this threshold.

Summary

Ultimately, the public policy problem is a blend of coverage and application. On the coverage side, many homeless households who need support are excluded from the priority need umbrella, or are of a lower-level priority, that they are not able to access official temporary accommodation and support services to move them onto permanent homes. The inadequate coverage thus fails to identify the true scale of the homelessness problem and the scale of potential support needs, a failure which is underpinned by a narrow definition of homelessness within an archaic system for determining those who deserve support and those who do not.

Those outside the priority need umbrella are often left to, and in some cases signposted to, the worst private rented accommodation in the area. A complex regulatory environment has been built up to prevent poor-quality property being let, and inept or abusive landlords from providing them. However, understaffed, under-resourced and unwilling local authorities struggle to secure the quality of housing necessary to provide at least a safe and secure environment for homeless households. The most marginalised in society are most likely only to be able to access the poorest quality properties, and the regulatory regime is too haphazardly enforced to ensure that their welfare is not being adversely affected as a result.

5.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The precarious lives of those living in unsupported temporary accommodation are hidden away from public and political attention. The methods of allocating housing for those presenting as homeless in England are such that those not recognised as being in priority need will be turned away from official temporary and permanent accommodation. Often, these vulnerable people end up resorting to unofficial, unsupported temporary housing. This also means that they are not counted in wider temporary accommodation statistics. Even where people are referred, or directed to 'official' temporary accommodation on priority need grounds, if they are lower down the priority scale then there are fewer protections in place to prevent their destination property being insecure and poor quality – but nonetheless effectively 'permanent'.

The conditions in many unsupported temporary accommodation residences, such as HMOs and B&Bs, are appalling, unsafe and deeply counterproductive for individuals with complex and challenging needs. Drug-taking, crime, threatening behaviour, poor living conditions and disruptive residents often do further damage to the wellbeing of a group of people who may already have precarious lives, volatile relationships, addictions and health problems.

Public policy can and should help. Legislation governing the conditions of housing standards, especially HMOs, are already in place to prevent these kinds of conditions arising in temporary accommodation settings, but the regulatory regime is only effective if those responsible for monitoring it have the information, resources and will to fulfil it.

Notwithstanding this systemic weakness, the rules governing what support should be available to those living in unsupported temporary accommodation, and the evidence on what housing and services are effective for this group, are neither comprehensive nor adequately resourced.

This project has begun to outline some of the problems, and will continue to do so by tracking the lives of those living in unsupported temporary accommodation. Over the life of the project, the research will evaluate what housing and service combinations are most effective in turning around the lives of the hidden homeless and improving the quality of the accommodation in which they currently receive so little support. In the meantime, several reforms are necessary to clarify the picture of hidden homelessness in the UK.

First, working with local authorities, the **government must develop more accurate tools for measuring and monitoring the true extent of unsupported temporary accommodation in the UK**. The tracking data must combine information from multiple sources to track the lives of single homeless households turned away from housing support. Sources include local authority housing departments, housing benefit administration data, environmental health teams, fire and rescue services, homelessness recording tools, and referral agencies such as parole boards. Given that the local housing allowance is the main currency in the unsupported temporary accommodation market, bridging between different data systems should be funded by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Doing so will support a better understanding of latent demand for support services and secure accommodation. It will also present an opportunity to fully understand the scope for expanding both the coverage of the homeless duty and consequently the support services available to homeless people who do not overcome the statutory hurdles.

Second, as both landlords and market stewards, **local authorities must use their existing powers under HMO and housing health and safety regulations to full effect to tackle those landlords who are exploiting the most vulnerable in society.** Priority for property inspections and enforcement action where necessary should be given to the destinations of households turned away from homeless services.

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